

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 347 - Answers

Jake was stunned for a brief moment by the bomb that the old alien had just dropped, but he recovered immediately. There wasn't much left to surprise him after all he had endured in that Ordeal.

Treading on an asteroid? Check. Being eaten alive multiple times? Check. Drowning? Check. Camping in the magma chamber of a volcano? Check. Exterminate a tribe of man-eating aliens? Check...

Meet their primordial god or ancestor? At this point, he had already become insensitive. His amazement came simply from the fact that it was unexpected for him that this alien had taken the trouble to save him. After all, Jake had exterminated an entire tribe of his descendants. In contrast, the fact that such an individual knew his name was not so strange.

Xion Zolvhur looked like the Silver Zhorion woman he had met after plundering the Chaos Tribe, but considerably older. The alien was about 1.7 meters tall and had a slightly arched back. His skin, streaked with wrinkles, betrayed his great age. Despite the sluggishness of his gestures, his eyes sparkled with vitality and benevolence. However, an extreme melancholy sometimes shone through, betraying the alien's mental exhaustion.

'It saddens me indeed, but just as the Oracle Players aren't really dead, these Zhorions are also very much alive.' Xion Zolvhur said calmly, guessing what was bothering him.

Jake nodded, accepting this explanation. It made sense or it would have been totally unfair to these aliens.

‘Ahem, some of them seemed to have been living here for a long time. ‘Jake mentioned as he remembered the stalls and the town under the volcano. Most of the Zhorions here had been primitive civilians with limited combat capabilities.

‘That’s because their treatment is different from yours. ‘The Zhorion warrior who had reached this room before him answered the question this time.

‘After your Ordeal is over, the surviving Zhorions are not sent home. Only death would allow them to do so. Some choose to settle here because life is easier here. Their presence also serves the interests of other influential Zhorions outside.’

The Ancient Designer cracked a faint smile when he heard this short explanation, but he didn’t contradict it, signalling his approval. Nevertheless, a certain weariness was vaguely oozing out of him.

‘Enough joking. Our time is limited. ‘The old Zhorion suddenly clapped his hands and excitedly exclaimed. ‘Now that the last participant has arrived, it’s time for me to reward you and answer your questions. But before I do, I’d like to show you something. Follow me.’

Hakkrasha, who had been sleeping until then, brusquely opened his eyes and a solemn expression filled his usually relaxed face for the first time since Jake had met him. He was perfectly alert. The Zhorion participant also had his eyebrows knotted by intense concentration.

As the Ancient Designer began to move, Jake realized that the alien was not walking on the ground, but was silently levitating a few inches above it, taking great care not to touch anything.

Seeing how the metal slabs deformed slightly with each step he took, he realized that the old Zhorion was probably taking this precaution to avoid damaging the area. Like Jake, he was probably much heavier than he looked.

Seen from outside the greenish force field, the room shouldn't have been so big, but in the end they walked several hundred meters and passed through a number of automated doors before entering a laboratory equipped with all kinds of futuristic instruments and machines.

In the center of the room, there was a sort of raised platform covered with mysterious engravings and inscriptions. There were three empty sockets triangularly positioned in a similar way to the entrance doors of the Phantom Sanctuary. At first glance, it looked as if one of these doors had been laid flat on the ground.

Xion Zolvhur gave them no time to freely explore the rest of the laboratory and immediately drew their attention to this platform. For a brief moment, Jake thought he would ask them to each place a Soul Stone of the proper color, but this did not happen.

Instead, the old Zhorion unfurled his Spirit Body about a meter in length as if he wanted to perform a demonstration for them. Whether it was Jake, the Zhorion warrior, or Hakkrasha, they were deeply shocked when they saw the manifestation of this mental strength.

The Ancient Designer's Spirit Body was solid. It looked like an indestructible multicolored crystal of extreme complexity. In the face of their amazement, the old Zhorion remained indifferent and three times the 'crystal' forming his Spirit Body changed color.

Each time the crystal stabilized, first red, then blue and green, a crackling sound was heard and a Soul Stone detached from it to insert itself perfectly into the dedicated empty socket.

The most confusing thing for Jake was that the aura contained by these Soul Stones were familiar to him. It had taken him a while to realize this, but he had recently realized that two identical Soul Stones did not always have exactly the same aura. But the unique aura of these Soul Stones, he had experienced it somewhere before.

Trying to remember every past action during this Ordeal, Jake easily identified where that familiar feeling came from: the huge NaeQuat deposit on the ocean floor that supported the entire island.

Despite the crazy theories that were running through his mind, he kept his questions to himself for later. The demonstration was not over.

Once the Soul Stones were in their place, Xion Zolvhur pushed a switch nearby and the inscriptions all over the platform lit up, producing a scorching heat that even Jake couldn't stand. Simultaneously, the three participants took several steps backwards, protecting their faces from the burning air.

Smmr fr aqqfouzafi dmzhu dauit ursuimnut ovu nifodmzq, arlpifoare ovuq dzmq ovu aqqurlu ouqnuzfopzu. Tvu iaevo arlatu ovu nifodmzq hmroarput om arourladw, opzrare dzmq f nfiu zut om f dauzw jvaou. Ogsampliw, ovu ouqnuzfopzu jfl loaii zalare.

When the light became so strong that they no longer dared to open their eyes, the Ancient Designer waved his hand and the radiation was immediately filtered by a kind of dark energy veil. Jake and the other two could then open their eyes again and discovered with bewilderment that the three stones were melting.

When a certain temperature and pressure was reached, the Flintium, Orxanium and NaeQuat were vaporized and a gas formed above the platform. The force field insulating them from the heat inside then began to shrink, forcing the gas to compress. Strange Aether Runes were grafted by billions to this gas, forming an infinitely complex Encoding.

A few seconds later, the luminous gas liquefied again and a silvery liquid floating in the air appeared in front of them. Although the color was different, this liquid looked just like the liquid alloy.

Hakkrasha squinted at the implications of such a display, but by far the most traumatized was the Zhorion warrior, whose short, rapid gasping breath betrayed intense distress, as if he were experiencing an existential crisis.

‘All right. I’m done with this demonstration,’ the Ancient Designer sighed wearily. He seemed a little leaner and more haggard than before. ‘I will now give you your rewards and answer your questions. To protect your secrets and identities, please follow my avatars.’

Before they could figure out what the alien meant, Xion Zolvhur’s body suddenly split into three identical clones, and one of them signaled Jake to follow him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hakkrasha and the warrior Zhorion following their respective clones. Hakkrasha was nonchalant, while the Zhorion was almost embarrassingly deferential.

Jake’s attitude was the most normal. Serious, but without being overly relaxed like Hakkrasha, nor abnormally tense and uptight like the Zhorion. However, he did not know which of these three behaviors was the most appropriate.

While following his own Xion Zolvhur, Jake heard the avatar guiding Hakkrasha mumbling in a bad mood. From the gibberish he heard the words ‘Jakam’ and ‘Lazy bastard’.

However, he didn’t get a chance to hear any more, as an automatic door closed behind them, isolating him perfectly from the sounds coming from the laboratory they had just left.

Tvu ruj zmmq jfl film f ifgmzfomzw jaov tfzc frt lofzc jfiil, hmrofarare fii lmzol md qfhvarul frt arlozpquro. Ir lmqu jfwl, lmqu md ovu qfhvarul zuqartut vaq md ovmlu vu vft luur ar ovu ifgmzfomzw md ovu Auovuzalo Cuco Mmepfz, gpo qmlo md ovuq juzu pouziw dmzuaer om vaq.

Once in the center of the room, Xion Zolvhur’s clone slowly turned towards him, with his hands clasped behind his back.

‘Rewards or answers first?’ The old man inquired politely, although from his amused look he appeared to already know the answer.

Without batting an eyelid, Jake answered, ‘Answers.’

The alien nodded unsurprisingly, but did not let him ask his questions. He simply began to speak, each word seeming to answer precisely the key points of his questions.

‘The Oracle and I are not enemies. But we are not friends either... I am called Ancient Designer because I was involved in the design of the first Oracle Devices and a number of their functions... This ship is indeed a prison, but one that I chose...’

With each revelation, the old Zhorion would pause as if he was thinking about his next answer, but each time he would anticipate the question burning his lips.

Jake was appalled to learn that the entire Elinor asteroid had formed over the crystallized Spirit Body of Xion Zolvhur and many other Zhorions who had given their lives to make this possible. The senseless Zhorion prisoners were just like the Ancient Designer, prisoners of this ship.

Once very powerful Evolvers of the A0 System, their consciousness had been gradually corrupted into the ferocious monsters they had become. The causes were multiple, but the main reason was the abusive mining of the Soul Stones deposits by the Zhorions themselves.

The Soul Stones of these powerful Zhorions were a key ingredient entering the composition of the liquid alloy composing the bracelets. Very few species were eligible to transmute their souls into this raw material. By harvesting Flintium, Orxanium and Naequat, it was the crystallized consciousness of these Zhorions that was consumed.

Tvu Zvmzamrl jaov ovu qmlo nmjuzdpi lnazaol juzu ulluroafiiw hfooiu.

Most shockingly, the Ancient Designer had accepted the onerous task of providing these Soul Stones in appropriate quantities, at the expense of his own Spirit Body and mental health. Out of the blue, Jake learned that their race was being punished because of a mistake he had made long before.

The Zhorions could not receive Oracle Devices for this reason. Nevertheless, by accepting to provide the Soul Stones, the Oracle had agreed to give his people a way out. This second Ordeal represented that chance.

Anyone who managed to reach the Ancient Designer could ask for a unique reward that only he could bestow. In addition to answering the questions these participants asked, successful Zhorions would receive their own Oracle Device, their past sins being forgiven.

The Silver Zhorions on the other hand, the aristocratic class from which Xion Zolvhur originated, were not allowed to participate in these Ordeals. For the Oracle, these elite Zhorions represented too great a danger.

To compensate for the lack of Oracle Devices, the Silver Zhorions had developed their own version of the bracelet using the knowledge left by Xion Zolvhur in their archives.

Alas, the dice were loaded and everything was done so that no Zhorion or participants could meet Xion Zolvhur. This last test was purely thought of as a Royal Battle, the bright arrows and locked doors being there only to give them the illusion that a final goal existed.

This left very little hope for his species, but the Ancient Designer had officially accepted such a deal, as it represented a slim hope. On the other hand, he had not abandoned the Silver Zhorions deprived of Ordeal.

Through the sacrificial altars of the three tribes, he had given them the opportunity to steal the liquid alloy from the other Players. In sufficient quantity, the metal could be offered to Xion Zolvhur and an Oracle Device would be granted to them.

The Oracle System turned a blind eye to this illegitimate action because the majority of the liquid alloy was in fact returned to it. In order to grant the most basic Oracle Device to his people, the Ancient Designer had to give away at least 100 tons of liquid alloy.

Cmrlatuzare ovfo ovu qfar arezutauro hfqu dzmq val mjr Snazao Bmtw, ovu mit Zvmzamr jfl iaouzfiw lfhzadahare val Impi om easu vmnu om ovu dpopzu euruzfoamrl. Ao dazlo, vu jmpit jaiiareiw qfcu oval lfhzadahu jaovmpo flcare dmz frwovare ar zuopzr, gpo zuhuroiw vu vft guur flcare dmz qmzu frt qmzu iaypat fiimw mdduzarel om nzusuro val tuhiaru. Fmz val tufov jmpit vfsu ouzzagiu hmrluypurhul ovfo usur ovu Ozfhiu jfl rmo zuftw om lvmpituz.

Regrettably, even with an Oracle Device, these Silver Zhorions were not treated like other Players. Their first Ordeal had a lethality rate of almost 100%. The immortality of the first four Ordeals was a privilege they did not have.

The Silver Zhorion woman Jake had met was naturally aware of this danger. Signing a Servant Contract with him was the solution she had found after weighing the pros and cons at length. Most Silver Zhorions were too proud to accept such humiliation, but recent events in the System A0 had convinced her to take such a risk.

With this contract, she would be treated by the Oracle System as Jake's property and would be treated under the same rules. Not only would she be able to participate in the same Ordeals as him, she would also be able to preserve her life during the first four Ordeals.

After a while, overwhelmed by the sheer weight of all these revelations, Jake couldn't stand it anymore, and rudely interrupted the old man to ask the question that the Ancient Designer had been avoiding all along.

'Why are you telling me all this?' Jake asked with a gloomy expression. 'My Oracle Rank is low. Everything I just heard seems to be top secret.'

Everything should be censored and I should only hear incomprehensible gibberish. The Oracle System can make me forget everything with a snap of its finger by frying my neurons. So why are you telling me all this ?‘

Far from being offended, Xion Zolvhur burst out laughing, his weariness replaced by a contemptuous pride.

‘What do you think the emerald force field around my ‘cell‘ is for ? ‘The old alien chuckled with a sinister expression. ‘The Oracle is forbidden in this place. Try to communicate with your Oracle AI. ‘

Jake changed drastically when he realized that Xi was not answering him. He could still feel her presence, but it was as if she had fallen into a deep sleep. The mental connection between them was blocked by something.

Jake understood the implications of such a development, and he welcomed it, but he couldn’t help but notice some anomalies. For example, once outside, the Oracle System would have no difficulty in knowing the content of their discussion by logging back into his memories. Moreover... it made him uneasy that Xi was being left out.

‘Don’t fret. When I want to hide the truth from the Oracle, there’s nothing it can do. ‘The Ancient Designer sneered. ‘That’s part of the deal. Only three of you have reached this ship, but I have many avatars. Billions of Second Ordeals take place every day. The Oracle System has neither the *désiré* nor the time to take care of each and every one of you. The Oracle’s motivations are not something you can understand at your level.‘

Xion Zolvhur appeared set to keep talking indefinitely when he suddenly stiffened, his avatar suddenly vanishing, then popping up again at high frequency like a malfunctioning TV before his figure stabilized again. His skin was sweaty and for a short second, a tortured expression filled his features before the old man regained his original composure.

‘Our time together is coming to an end.’The Ancient Designer said with a reassuring smile, yet the tone was actually pushy. ‘If you’re still alive the next time we meet, I’ll answer any Questions you still have.

‘Let’s move on to your reward.’