

The Fall 1043

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Kruta's decision made sense. There was no point in sticking around when the opportunities had dried up. Even breaking through early made sense in some cases, where you traded perfection for momentum.

"I'll do my best to come over," Kruta said, his eyes gleaming with ferocity. "I'll show those heart curse cultivators what's what."

"I'm looking forward to it," Zac laughed.

The two set up a line of communication in case Kruta managed to reach Zecia, similar to his relay with Catheya. Kruta also provided Zac with a teleportation token that would take him to his tribe, though it would only work while on the Ralphi Continent. He'd also gathered all the intelligence he could remember of the Seven Heavens onto an information crystal.

Unfortunately, besides general knowledge, Kruta didn't have much intelligence about the other Heavens. He knew a bit more about the Fourth, which the Luaris Dynasty controlled. However, the barbarian did share some pieces of intelligence and rumors that people generally didn't dare speak about loudly.

For one, Zac had long known that one of the Imperial Dynasties had already fallen; the Dianthis Dynasty that once controlled the Third Heaven. It happened soon after the Imperial Clans reemerged after the System awoke. According to Kruta, there were many indications that the Third Heaven had actually been invaded by all the other families.

Too much time had passed, and outsiders had no way of knowing the details, but the general belief was that it was related to the Limitless Empire. The seven clans had looted the inheritance of their masters in the chaotic aftermath of the System's birth, before hiding in secluded corners of the Multiverse during the Dark Ages.

When they emerged, they created the Seven Heavens and set themselves up as the Imperial Dynasties that stood to this day. But perhaps, the Dianthis Clan had managed to get something too tantalizing from the vaults of the Limitless Empire. Some even believed that it was the Dianthis Clan who seized the method to create the Heavens.

If that were the case, the betrayal made some sense. The Heavens were the foundation of the imperial clans' influence and might. If one of the seven held the key to creating more Heavens or even destroying those of the others, the imperial clans would always have a threat looming over their heads.

So the Dianthis Dynasty was strangled in its infancy, and there simply was no Third Heaven. The Seventh, Tobrial Dynasty's Heaven and his foremost competition in the upcoming trial, could also be considered the sixth. Kruta had no idea why they retained their current numbering, though.

The fate of the Third Heaven was just an interesting tidbit. More useful was the information about the dynamics of the remaining six. On the outside, they seemed like a powerful and solid alliance, where the imperials stood as one against outside pressures. Eons of intermarriage between the dynasties had kept their families close.

In reality, there were turbulent currents hiding under the calm surface. According to Kruta, the First Heaven had essentially become the informal leader of the six after they gained a sudden burst of power in the distant past. He and Kruta now realized it was likely related to the First Heaven seizing the Second Pillar when it emerged.

Since then, there had been a hidden struggle for dominance. The Second Heaven was reportedly under the Planur Dynasty's thumb, and the goal of the First was to improve their position even further. Perhaps to even turn the other five into outright subjects. Of course, the other Heavens wanted wasn't just going to let that happen. An outright war would weaken both sides too much, but hidden struggles for resources and power were a constant.

The Fifth Pillar was a chance for the other Heavens to gain an Eternal Heritage of their own. Zac could only imagine what would happen if a faction got its hands on Ultom and managed to extract that amazing energy from within. No wonder the First Heaven tried everything to get Ultom for themselves, with Vastermal going so far as to break into the Perennial Vastness.

Perhaps they could use that information to their advantage in the future.

Zac stayed for another two hours, not to plan or scheme but to have a feast.

"My friend, meeting you here was my greatest fortune," Kruta said as he shook Zac's hand in goodbye. "We'll see each other soon."

"Likewise. Take care," Zac nodded. "Don't force it if you can't reach the Frontier. Don't let the imperials find you."

Zac emerged from Kruta's storefront, sending out a message as he set course for the Teleportation Square. Since he'd emerged from seclusion, he might as well knock another goal off his list. Zac stopped in a secluded street not far from the square, and he only needed to wait ten minutes before the shadows stirred.

"The brute is gone?" Ogras said as he stepped out of the darkness.

"Well, secluded anyway," Zac said. "Don't know why you were so against meeting with him. It would have been good for our cooperation to go through a mission together."

"There'll be time for that if he manages to reach Zecia," Ogras said. "Until then, I felt it best if some of us kept a distance. With his mouth unsealed, there's just no way of telling what'll happen."

"I know, I know, I'm a big-mouthed fool," Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

"And we all suffer for it," Ogras said with a melodramatic expression, though his face soon lit up. "So, you ready to put in some work?"

"Let's go," Zac laughed. "I'm curious to see what kind of nightmare you plan to cram into your body."

"You know what? I'm actually not that curious," Zac muttered as his axe tore through a bend in reality.

A powerful wave of Dao shredded the anomaly, and an eerie laugh echoed through the region before reality stabilized. Gone was the twisted face spewing out nightmares, replaced with some shrubbery. Of course, the action would only delay the inevitable. The world was stirring, and the ambient energies were rising fast. They only had an hour at best before a great reset swept through the area.

"Eight hours, and you already want to pack it in?" Ogras grinned, but he knew he was just trying to hide his own unease.

Even as someone who treads the line between real and imaginary, he felt this realm decidedly unsettling. It wasn't natural, walking inside the dream of an unknown creature. A creature that possibly wasn't even alive, going by how warped and unstable the dream had become. It felt like they could get twisted and bent from a moment's carelessness. Or worse, what if the creature woke up?

Would it turn its dream, and them with it, into a figment of its imagination? But what other choice did they have? The Shifting Dreamgeist was the most suitable beast he could find after scouring hundreds of scrolls and intelligence reports. Meanwhile, Zac needed something from the Peak of Fantasy for his weird hammer. Win-win, provided you survive.

"You sure about this?" Zac asked as he kept enforcing his Dao to quell the surging surroundings.

"The missives were clear on this," Ogras grunted as he extended his shadow network through the ground. "If we don't anchor ourselves for the dream shifts, then we'll get dragged Heavens knows where. Could be the beginning, could be one of the unstable regions. But this shouldn't be too bad. You should be able to tide things over with your Mana and Dao alone this far from the center."

"That doesn't mean you can slack off," Zac commented.

"I know that," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "Just you watch as I bend this world to my will."

Time was running out, so Ogras stopped his shadow Tendrils when they'd stretched three hundred meters in every direction. It was for the best; he already felt himself growing hollow. It was sometimes easy to forget that the shadows weren't a Bloodline Ability or something that could be fueled with Cosmic Energy.

The shadows were his actual body, thanks to getting Asshole fused with his body and then practicing the [Spiritlock Physique]. He only had so many shadows to go around, and he couldn't accumulate more beyond a certain point. Still, three hundred meters should be more than enough to create a safe harbor in the upcoming storm.

His Branch of the False Truth spread through his tendrils, anchoring the world to his vision. Ogras shut out all distractions as he pictured the scene, and he felt his Dao slowly form a resonance with the surroundings. Minutes passed, then it came like a tidal wave.

Ogras felt his mind being assaulted by hundreds of foreign impressions, and the mental world he'd crafted distorted from the influence. But it wasn't to a point where he couldn't fight back. Ogras furiously quenched the unfamiliar images and stole their essence to stabilize his illusion. Every impression he subverted stabilized his own, and the resonance between Dao and world converged until they were one.

A minute passed and the dream shift was gone. Ogras could tell it was a success. The shift hadn't managed to fuse their auras with the dreamworld, making it impossible to teleport them away. Ogras had even managed to influence the dream and remold it to his liking, and he opened his eyes with anticipation. But the grin turned crooked as he saw his creation.

What he imagined was mostly there, but the details were wrong. Decidedly wrong. It felt like he had stepped into his own nightmare as he narrowly dodged a toxic spittle from a scantily clad devil with a snake's head.

"What the hell?" Zac swore as he suddenly found himself grappling with a courtesan's empty silk dress.

Meanwhile, six dancing bottles released a toxic plume that rapidly filled the small chamber that had sprung up around them.

"Don't breathe the perfume! Let's go!" Ogras urged, and the two crashed through a door.

On the other side, a mad feast was taking place with hundreds of guests. Nightmarish courtesans, faceless patrons, and animated tools of the four arts created a surreal atmosphere full of debauchery, joy, and horror. Ogras could feel the wordless reproach in his companion's eyes, and he coughed as he started clearing a path toward what he hoped was the exit.

"Well, the information packages said that the better you could envision the harbor, the stronger it would resist the dream shift," Ogras explained. "And I spent a lot of time in the Fragrant Orchid Teahouse in my youth."

"And how much time did you spend memorizing the interiors?" Zac countered as he peppered the aggressive patrons with a storm of fractal leaves. "Why does it seem like you wanted to see if you could dream up a harem?"

"Yeah, well. Now we know that doesn't work," Ogras said, unable to hide his disappointment. "Unless your tastes veer into the bizarre."

"Things didn't work out with that Hissa girl?" Zac commented.

"The lass from the Primal Council?" Ogras said. "They worked fine, but those brutes are so territorial. Some meatheads started grumbling, and she wanted me to fight them. Stake my claim, prove myself, you know? Too much of a headache."

"So now you're resorting to creating a literal dreamgirl? Using a brothel as a model?" Zac sighed.

"Genius, right?" Ogras laughed as he shredded the final nightmare courtesan blocking their path.

"Whatever, let's go."

Unfortunately, more chambers and distorted guests waited on the other side of the screen door. It took them ten minutes to fight their way out of the bizzarro teahouse, and the two mutely looked on as it dissipated soon after they emerged. The dream would always revert to its natural state without outside influence powering and reinforcing the change.

"No more teahouses," Zac muttered as he turned toward the dream's center.

"Fine," Ogras shrugged. "Though I doubt my other harbors will be much better."

Four days passed, and the dream and its denizens grew increasingly intense. Ogras even began pitying the creature whose mind they'd entered. What kind of life had it led to be haunted by so many nightmares in its sleep? He'd lost count of the number of odd creatures they'd fought, how many insidious death zones they'd dismantled or avoided.

Ogras hated that almost nothing was real. He'd never realized what a great source of comfort the gift of the Ruthless Heaven was, the surge of energy that confirmed your enemy was well and truly dead. Certainly, there were many ways to enact revenge upon your killer from beyond the grave—life-linked arrays, karmic trails that would allow your clan to find the perpetrator, and so on.

But that was far preferable to not knowing whether you destroyed a dream denizen. Their bizarre appearances and abilities didn't help either, and many could reform. Ogras's nerves were constantly frayed, never knowing what was dangerous or safe.

The few dream residents who had formed a true soul were a great solace. Feeling that Kill Energy's surety when your spear pierced their heads didn't just confirm they were real. They reminded Ogras himself that he was as well. It came to the point he actively sought out anything possessing spirituality, turning into a reaper who destroyed the native motes of reality to fuel his own.

Still, the pressure mounted. Ogras eventually couldn't take it and glared at his companion as he methodically destroyed a flock of toothy balls of fur.

"How are you so damn calm?"

"Huh?" Zac said, looking over with that dull look of his.

"This place," Ogras waved with exasperation. "How is it not stressing you out? My nerves are on fire and I'm losing my mind."

"Really?" Zac said. "This place isn't too bad compared to some of the other zones I've visited over the past years. These dream beasts are on the weaker side, and I have you to deal with the shifts. We've eradicated the imperials, and the others are afraid to mess with us after the rampage inside Vastness City. I think things are pretty good right now."

"Why does it feel like you're cursing us when you say things like that?" Ogras muttered. "Asking for trouble."

His composure was aggravating, but Ogras had to admit the man had a point. The Undead Empire had become scapegoat and shield, and guests took a wide berth around Zac and his girl when they appeared. No one wanted to be the next one to appear on the Undead Empire's hit list. Even the powerful coalitions had opted to look the other way after the Undead Empire confirmed it was a matter between two warring factions.

Why get involved in that kind of mess?

Ogras continued, but he noticed Zac had stopped. Did he have something more to say? Or was it...? Ogras shuddered and prepared for the worst. Had this fate-touched bastard really brought down a

calamity on their heads with his words? He should have known better than to taunt the Heavens by this point.

But no sudden dream shift swept through the region, and no horror popped out to make their life miserable. Zac was simply staring into the distance with a small frown. Ogras glanced in the same direction, but there was nothing there. Apart from the rippling opalescent clouds that made up the ground and sky, there was just a small pond and a couple of trees.

As far as the Shifting Dream went, it was quite calm. Too calm, perhaps?

"What are you looking at?" Ogras asked with confusion.

"I... think we should go in that direction," Zac said, distractedly fiddling with his invisible beads.

Ogras laboriously held back a sour comment, opting for magnanimity over jealousy, even if that uncanny Luck was enough to ruin one's day. He had to focus on the positive. They were in his world now, and there was a good chance anything the Heavens threw Zac's way would end up in his pocket.

The two veered off their original course, just going by instinct. Both used every tool in their arsenal to find anything of interest. It took ten minutes, but then it finally paid off.

"Hmm," Ogras said, vaguely sensing some odd ripples far in the distance.

It was minute, to the point he wouldn't have given it a second look if not for his buddy's uncanny nose for treasure. But as things stood, it was worth investigating.

"Do you see something?" Zac asked.

"Might be nothing," Ogras said, hating the sense of defeat that had snuck into his voice.

"Let's go," Zac grinned.

Two hours later, Ogras blankly looked on as his buddy gleefully infused a shimmering wooden figurine into his hammer. He'd had been the one who had been almost driven mad unraveling the illusory layers protecting the thing, yet there wasn't even a stalk of grass he could use inside. He should have known that the Heavens wouldn't steer its chosen one off-course for the sake of someone else.

"Don't look at me like that," Zac said with that infuriating smile. "All the Fossilized Dreams for the quest will go to you. And isn't there that creature as well?"

Ogras slowly exhaled, steadying his mental state. "You're right. You're right. There's still the Dreamgeist."

The two continued into the realm, soon reaching depths neither would have reached alone. Zac would never have managed to stop the shifts, and he would never have been able to withstand the nightmarish onslaught that followed. Every figment was at the D-grade; the two had even sensed a Late D-grade aura far in the distance.

They soon managed to unearth one quest target after another. They were odd anomalies, dreams that had failed to form spirituality yet had become more than an illusion. Instead, they'd turned into rocklike formations that contained dense deposits of the Dao of Dreams. They couldn't quite be considered

Natural Treasures, but they held far greater truths than Dream Crystals. And there were quite a few of them.

The two spent two full weeks in the heart of the dream, fighting dozens of waves of beings brought from the depths of Ogras's mind and then twisted by the dream. Then, they finally found what they were looking for. What he was looking for, anyway. The two hid far in the distance to ensure they weren't discovered. Ogras felt his cheeks burn as Zac slowly turned toward him. He studiously avoided meeting Zac's gaze, but he could guess the kind of thoughts they held.

"That's... That's the thing you want to fuse with?"