

The Fall 466

Chapter 466: War

“He made it to the 72nd floor after all!” Balios said to his uncle. “He might even make it the whole way.”

“He’s almost out of time. There was less than a day remaining when he finally managed to pass the 71st level. Even if he defeats the guardian now he will be exhausted and most likely wounded,” Ubrok answered, but there were clear signs of hesitation on his face.

“Still,” Balios whispered. “Perhaps we should stay out of this? Even lord Beradan only made it to the 65th floor. No matter if he passes or not he’s still someone we shouldn’t get involved with. We’re just sticking our necks out while the real lords will reap the eventual rewards. The promised payment for assistance is not worth our lives.”

“You are right. Let’s back away,” Ubrok finally relented. “We cannot get involved with the second coming of the Eveningtide Asura, our force will not be able to withstand the fallout no matter which side stands victorious. Let’s back away and enjoy the apparition in peace. I might even be able to improve my Dao Seed after all these years.”

Balios hurriedly nodded in agreement and their group of 8 started making their way back across the square. They weren’t alone in choosing retreat over the quest reward and the private bounties provided by a few scions. The heated competition for the front-row seats of the square had quickly died down as Zac Piker had knocked down one level after another, eclipsing all the sector's geniuses for the past hundreds of thousands of years.

Things had calmed down as Mr. Piker, or rather Lord Piker, found himself stuck on the 71st level for almost a week, but the moment he’d reached the final level of the 8th floor people started to worry. Some had already backed away, and there were not many willing to take the place of the deserters.

A million years had passed, but the lessons that the Eveningtide Asura had engraved into the souls of the people of the Zecia Sector were still vividly remembered. Opening yourself and your family up to that level of vengeance was not worth the potential prize or remuneration. However, the group only managed to retreat a hundred meters before a commotion broke out across the square.

“73!” a cultivator screamed with shock, immediately causing some panic to finally appear even in the eyes of the staunchest of warriors.

A few still remained, clearly intent on betting it all, but most people started running for their lives. However, the fleeing cultivators stopped just a few seconds later because the tower started releasing an immense pressure as waves of power radiated across the whole town, far beyond what anyone had ever seen before.

Greed fought with fear, but the allure was too great. Witnessing a 9th-floor apparition from a front-row seat was too enticing to give up, and the whole square sat down on the ground as if they were of one mind. Balios froze in hesitation, unsure whether he should flee further or join the others. The hesitation only lasted for a fraction of a second as he hurriedly took out his prepared mat as he gazed up at the sky.

The pressure emitted from the tower kept accumulating, and fewer and fewer managed to hold their backs straight. A few even started bleeding from their ears from the immense aura of the Tower of Eternity. It was as though the Heavens themselves had descended upon the Base Town, standing in judgment.

But the pressure was suddenly gone, and Balios's eyes widened in shock as the tower flickered before it suddenly disappeared as well. Taking its place was a stone plaque whose size was a match to the Tower of Eternity. Balios's eyes were drawn toward the mysterious scars covering its surface, and his mind turned blank the next moment.

It was only sometime later he woke up from his trance, but he was shocked to realize he couldn't remember a thing, not even how much time had passed. But something had changed inside his body, and it felt like his blood had been replaced by fire. The drums of war echoed in his mind and his arms bulged as he subconsciously dragged out [Skylark], his azure blue Azrathir Spirit Tool.

The sword hummed in response, seemingly influenced by the odd state of its master.

The teleportation array lit up, and the whole square collectively held their breath as the man they had been waiting for the past day reappeared. However, this was not a hero's exit, but rather that of a beggar. The man's aura seemed strong and stable, but he was completely covered in still-wet blood. He was also decked out in odd jewelry that made him look like a robber who had absconded with a maiden's jewelry box.

His rough state wasn't surprising, as he had passed to the 73rd floor at the last possible moment. He was probably putting up a brave front, and he quickly sat down and closed his eyes, enjoying the protection of the array. Zac Piker had overtaxed himself, forgetting that there was another trial waiting for him outside.

Balios's eyes were slowly turning bloodshot, and a wordless agreement passed between him and his uncle. The group no longer had any interest in retreating, but instead slowly made their way back toward their position.

"The quest! It changed!" another man suddenly shouted.

The flames of war were already drowning out most of Balios's thoughts, but curiosity overcame bloodthirst and he slowly looked away from the blood-drenched man to instead check out the changes of the quest.

Fatebreaker (Unique, Limited): Kill Zac Piker within the time limit. Reward: Ten free levels in the Tower of Eternity. [00:01:00]

Balios's eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets as he read the reward. What was going on? If the previous reward had been unprecedented, then the current one was beyond comprehension. Had Lord Piker spent his whole climb cursing the Heavens, and this was his retribution?

The whole square was like a kettle that threatened to boil over at any second, and Balios's eyes were locked at the humanoid treasure trove. A few minutes passed and Balios almost lashed out at his neighbors in a bloodthirsty rage, his muscles shuddering as he tried to keep his impulses in check.

But finally, the man stood up and turned toward the square.

"I-" Lord Piker said, but he stopped when the protective array suddenly winked out like it just ran out of power.

Everyone gaped in incomprehension for a second, but chaos took hold of the square the next moment.

Zac appeared on the teleportation array, and he relaxed when he saw that the defensive array was still up and running. He needed to quickly consolidate his gains, so he sat down on the ground after nodding at Ogras and Galau who were mutely staring at him with eyes as wide as saucers.

He was relieved to see that all the defensive treasures he had equipped before exiting were still there, as was the valuable Spatial Ring that had belonged to the mentalist. He was pretty certain at this point that all the loot he had snatched from other climbers was still in his possession, though the same probably didn't hold true for the other valuables he picked up during the climb.

The other two didn't say a word as Zac closed his eyes, and he could understand their stunned expressions.

Not even he had really expected to pass the 7th floor, let alone the 8th. But all that could wait until later as he needed to focus on the vision he had just witnessed. It felt as though he had sat right next to that man for tens of thousands of years, appreciating the stone stele and its mysteries. Just looking at it had filled him with a desire for conquest, a bit like when he used [Hatchetman's Rage].

The runes spoke of the survival of the fittest, about the need for conflict. Through battle the weaker sides would get cleansed, or 'weakness leaving the hive' as the Zhix would call it. The strong would get stronger, and the universe would benefit as a whole. It was evolution, continuous betterment by discarding what didn't perform.

Zac wasn't sure what concept the rune represented, but he felt that it was either a Dao of Conflict or a Dao of War. The man in the vision had leaned toward the latter, but he had also been colored by his past experiences as a general. The man only grasped a snippet of the truths the stele contained, but that part alone had turned him into a terrifying powerhouse that made him break through multiple grades without any other assistance.

The main takeaway for Zac was the connection between battle and creation; war always had a purpose. It might be held to protect your beliefs or to punish evil. War might erupt over resources, or to take out a hated enemy. It might just simply be the pursuit of strength. Purpose and conviction were what separated a warrior and a beast or a madman.

This meant that the concept engraved upon the stele wasn't based on Oblivion, as it was not mindless destruction. It was creation through destruction, where you built your future through conflict. It felt like one of the most fundamental fusions of the two peak concept after looking at the ancient runes, but the Dao Fragment it resonated with most was his Fragment of the Axe. Perhaps all weapon-related Daos were children of the Dao of War.

A swing empowered by your conviction would move faster and hit harder than an empty attack. As long as he fought for what he believed in he would be able to push himself much further than if he fought

with hesitation or reluctance in his heart. He had combined many aspects of heaviness and sharpness into the Fragment of the Axe, such as sharpness through speed and heaviness from momentum.

But he now added the reason for swinging his axe into his Dao.

Energy surged around him as he felt his insight coalesce, and his body was flush with power in an instant. He opened his eyes and immediately opened his Dao screen to see the result, and he was extremely satisfied with the results.

Fragment of the Axe (Middle): All attributes +20, Strength +225, Dexterity +120, Endurance +15, Wisdom +50. Effectiveness of Strength +10%.

It was a massive boost, though Zac looked at the additional all attributes with mixed emotions. He had hoped to maintain his massive lead in Luck against general cultivators, but it looked like deep insights into the Dao would be able to bridge some of the gap. Of course, he would still maintain a commanding lead thanks to his large number of titles that improved upon his base Luck.

Perhaps he shouldn't be too surprised about the increased Luck stemming from a deeper understanding of the Dao. Gaining Dao Seeds and Dao Fragments was just forming a stronger connection with the heavens, which in turn should improve one's fate.

The evolution of his Fragment of the Axe wasn't the only thing that he had gained from the vision. The stone stele had almost been all-encompassing, and he felt like he had created a foundation for improving both his other Fragments as well. Both the Fragment of the Coffin and the Fragment of the Bodhi were at the lowest possible level until now, but Zac now had something to build upon when he came back.

Taking the first step forward toward an upgrade had always been the hardest for him, but upgrading the two Fragments was only a matter of time now. It wasn't to the point that he felt one week of meditation would do the trick, but he still believed that he would be able to take the next step within a few months even if he didn't enter any life and death battles.

Unfortunately, he couldn't revel in his latest gains at the moment, as there were some pressing issues to deal with.

"Are you okay?" Ogras asked with a hoarse voice as Zac stood up, and Zac noted a slightly manic look in the eyes behind the mask he wore to cover his features.

"Not my blood," Zac shrugged. "I'm in perfect condition, I killed the guardian over twelve hours ago. What's going on?"

"People started to leave, but then the apparition appeared and the quest changed. We're in deep shit," Ogras growled.

"It changed?" Zac exclaimed with shock. "I'll deal with this. Stay behind me if I can't convince them to back away. I'll activate a defensive treasure I found."

He turned toward the square, and he immediately understood what Ogras meant. The field in front of the tower only half-filled with cultivators from all sorts of races, but people were rushing toward the center square from every direction.

“I-“ Zac said with a carrying voice, but he was cut short as the shield in front of him suddenly disappeared.

His mind blanked out as he found himself exposed to a whole army waiting to kill him. He had hoped to work out a diplomatic resolution, but he realized that was a fool's dream as a collective roar spread across the square. His eyes widened in alarm, and his danger sense was already going off the charts.

The Spectral Forest of [Hatchetman's Spirit] appeared in an instant, and [Nature's Barrier] followed right after. He infused the Fragment of the Bodhi into the leaves without hesitation and spread it to cover his two companions as well. The two of them backed away as far as they possibly could, each of them erecting a few layers of defenses of their own.

He didn't understand what was going on. It felt like he and the System had struck an accord earlier, and it had even gone so far as to help him out by directly speaking to him. But then it followed it up with dialing up the bounty on his head to the point that it made these people froth at the mouth.

Was the System unhappy with his choice?