

The Fall 527

Chapter 527: The Next Step

"Shit, why is it so hard to get one's hands on some tokens? Or some other way to activate that big-ass crystal inland?" Smaug muttered in annoyance as he paced back and forth in his home-prison in Port Atwood.

Who would have thought that he would be put under house arrest and tasked with coming up with money-making schemes by that little blue devil? He had just tried to get a better understanding of the resources available to his new boss, and this was the thanks he got?

"Ai, the heavens are truly jealous of talent. To think I would be turned prisoner because I wanted to help out," Smaug lamented as he paced back and forth.

"What are you talking about, prisoner? You can still walk around in this neighborhood without getting impaled by those Amazons," Rima giggled. "And you wouldn't be in this predicament if you hadn't tried to infiltrate that shipyard. You knew that place was off-limits."

"I had to take the shot, stupid. That place is extremely suspicious, even more so than the Repository," Smaug snorted. "Those muscle-heads are busy now, and I need to get some things done before that man realizes how open-ended his orders were."

That was the good point of Lord Atwood; he wasn't a hands-on boss. He had told him to head to Port Atwood and listen to the little blue bastard. But it turned out that second-hand commands weren't actually binding under his contract. He had pretended that the little asshole's order to stay in the neighborhood was binding, but they were anything but.

He could leave anytime, as Lord Atwood only told him to go here and listen, not that he couldn't leave.

"Don't you have any decency?" Rima said with disdain. "Instead of thinking of ways of enriching yourself, you could actually do what was asked of you."

"Would me having decency help Earth survive this shitstorm?" Smaug countered. "No, right? So I might as well prepare for the off-chance we survive, or more likely if things go south here. What about you? How goes it with the sister? Do they have a way off this cursed rock?"

"She's never around," Rima muttered. "And besides, I don't want to get closer to MacKenzie for you, useless brother. She is the sister of Lord Atwood and a good friend of Ogras Azh'Rezak. She's even close to that manly Demon General."

"What would those three want with a useless brat?" Smaug snorted. "What do you bring to the table to those kinds of people?"

"Why would I need to be strong to become someone's wife?" Rima said with a roll of her eyes.

"Don't get too attached," Smaug muttered. "This planet's future is limited even if the great lord Atwood manages to deal with the most immediate mess. I've found out a few things. Even if we survive all this we'll just turn into some backwater planet at the edge of the universe, a place where even the birds won't shit."

"This again," Rima sighed.

"I am telling you. Our aim should be getting to some real human metropolis! There will be opportunities for advancement for me. And for you? Won't there be real geniuses to marry? People with family trees millions of years old, and pockets as deep as the Mariana Trench," Smaug said, his eyes glistening.

"Besides-" Smaug continued, but he was stopped in his tracks by a series of prompts that appeared in front of him.

He had actually done it. That wooden block had taken out the cultists.

"You see!" Rima said with glee. "He really is a prince charming. He's done more for this world than the rest of us combined. Perhaps he even has some time to settle down now. He's been single for a while now."

"That man has become addicted to becoming stronger already," Smaug muttered absentmindedly as he closed the screen that told him his rating was a measly D-Grade. "He won't be looking for romance anytime soon."

Rima snorted in response, but Smaug wasn't interested in having this debate once more. He was more interested in going through his licensed wares. He already knew that there were limitations to the items he could purchase because of the ongoing invasions, and his eyes glimmered when he saw two of the latest additions that had appeared now that the war was over.

[Goblin Honor – Temporarily ignore a contract erected by someone at Level 100 or below.]

[Stumpbugle Talisman – Teleport to Stumpbugle Headquarters for career opportunities!]

Going to a place called "Stumpbugle" wasn't really what he had in mind when he said he would strike out in a real metropolis, and he had no desire to meet the inventors of the weird treasures that were available for purchase. But it was also an undeniable fact that Earth was on the brink of destruction, even if they had dealt with the Incursion.

The weaker threat was gone, but what about that old monster who could appear at moment's notice?

Those zombie bastards had clearly known how to block teleportation arrays, so a peak D-Grade cultivator was probably able to do the same with just a wave of his arm. What if the whole planet got jammed the moment he arrived? Wouldn't that mean that he and Rima would be stuck here until they were turned into some sort of cultivation resource? Was he willing to bet everything on Zachary Atwood prevailing against those odds?

He wasn't.

The vast cloud of dust in a forgotten corner outside the Zecia Sector shuddered as it started spinning and condensing. Only by coming close would one be able to realize that these weren't particles of ice drifting about in space, but rather tens of millions of intricate machines lying dormant, soaking up the energies of the near-by irregularity.

The machines had soon congealed into a person, a woman freely floating about in the vast beyond. Her amber eyes opened for the first time in decades as she looked around with some confusion. It was too early. She immediately opened a screen to see what had dragged her out of the reverie.

Had something happened to the project?

However, he quickly learned she had been awoken due to her Talisman activating from scenario 18, and she sighed in relief. Tens of thousands of screens appeared in front of her, taking up thousands of square meters in front of her. All kinds of readings and snippets flittered across the screens with terrifying speed for a second before they dissolved to dust and returned to her body again.

“Hm? How curious. How was he able to evolve with his cursed constitution? Did we miss something back then?” Leandra muttered as she thoughtfully looked at the vast star in front of her. “Or is it another ploy by the System?”

In either case, it was good news. Her daughter should be safe with such a powerful protector now that the planet had withstood the Integration Trial. Her suggestions should remain in their depths, helping them stay alive even without her assistance. She really wanted to rush back, but she knew that she had to be careful. She was in no state of moving about.

A lot of sacrifices had been made to come this far, she couldn't ruin the efforts of her ancestors by being hasty.

There was also the oddity of someone using one of her backdoor keys on a merchant's vessel at the edge of integrated space. Had one of the children been sent on a mission by the cursed heavens? Such a quest was obviously not an accident, and annoyance flared up in her heart at the thought of her flesh and blood being manipulated to turn against her by that damned broken AI.

A slight pressure in her forehead dragged her out of her thoughts, and she quickly activated defensive measures to evade the tracking attempt on her soul.

“They still haven't given up,” Leandra muttered as she once more dissolved into motes that spread across space.

The last thing to dissolve was the two amber eyes, radiating an unshakeable conviction.

“There will be a reckoning one day. Those who moved against our family will all pay the price, even the heavens themselves.”

“Do you have it?” A'Feris asked, not without some interest as far as Io could tell.

He was glad to see some fire within the eyes of his old friend. Io knew his own limits had long been reached, but A'Feris still had a small chance to go further. However, he was losing his momentum, the most dangerous thing to lose in cultivation apart from one's life.

Perhaps this Zac Piker was the key.

The more he gathered the more he felt like this little demon was just what A'Feris needed. The young axeman's penchant for drawing ire from both his contemporaries and the Boundless Heavens itself almost seemed unmatched.

"I have it here," Io said, and one scene after another appeared.

It showed the utter destruction of a grand mansion by a square, and a bloodied man walking out of the rubble, holding a head in his hand. A young demonling appeared next to him, and they fled to a teleported, harried by hundreds of attacks.

It showed a hazy outline of how the Tower of Eternity changed into one of the Primordial Steles, and how it infected the minds of the children gathered in front of it. Finally, it culminated in a heated battle where one stood against many but prevailed.

"The Stele of Conflict?" A'Feris snorted. "The Zecia sector will become hectic as the ripples of war spread out from this enclosed dimension. That thing is like a mindplague."

"Conflicts will engulf the sector, and heroes will emerge from the flames," Io nodded.

"Axe, sharpness heaviness. Corpse? No, putrefaction? Interesting," A'Feris muttered, his eyes glistening as he looked on. "And echoes of the Sukhavati? Greedy boy."

"It might look greedy, but what if it works out?" Io said. "He is clearly on his way to forming a path of supremacy. With some guidance--"

"It's not that easy to walk the path of Life and Death," A'Feris sighed with a shake of his head. "He is too discordant right now. He is grasping for everything, trying to encompass the universe. It is an extremely unstable and dangerous state. Me or someone else stepping in now would only impede his path. He needs to form his own understanding and be the one to make the sacrifices."

"So you're not taking him in, after all?" Io asked. "Such a rare seedling, and with your path..."

"I didn't say that," A'Feris smiled. "I just said that it is too early now. He seems to have a few interesting challenges ahead. Let him deal with them by himself. If he can emerge alive he might be able to create a workable path from the experience. It's not too late to join a proper force by that point and benefit from some structured guidance. Have any of the old bastards claimed him?"

"Not at the moment," Io said. "Perhaps they are thinking in the same way."

"Are you saying I'm becoming like the old geezers?" A'Feris snorted. "I'm still pretty young for someone at my stage, you know."

Io smiled and shook his head before his eye turned back to the screen.

"He reminds me of you. I watched your struggle against the Foradine Covenant back on the Verokh Continent just like this. I hope he can become another pillar of our Sect some day in the future," Io said with reminiscence in his eyes.

"I was a lot more dashing, no doubt," A'Feris laughed. "But I agree. There is potential in him, and he's a gamble worthy to take. Well, unless he goes and does something stupid like joining the unorthodox."

He's a progenitor, right? We'll go pick him up after the shroud has been lifted. The quarantine should have been lifted by then. It was just an image of the Stele, after all, rather than the real thing."

A sigh escaped from Uld's lips as he kept infusing the altar with power. The fires danced in his eyes, but his gaze was locked on the unmoving form of Arkensau. Who knew that this bastard possessed something as valuable as a [Heaven's Intervention]?

If not for that, then he would have been interring the body and preparing it for sale. But now he was stuck nurturing this idiot back to health instead, while the Monarch-Select ran rampant across the planet. And now he was stuck here on this desolate rock.

"Orders from above, for your eyes only," Trovad said as his eyes turned to the altar. "Arrived just hours before the gate was closed. How is Inquisitor Arkensau?"

"With Heaven's blessing, he will be fine within a week or two. The seed burns strong within him," Uld said as he accepted the golden-inlaid crystal.

Uld touched the crystal with the sigil in his mind, and a mix of exhaustion and relief washed through him as the strict voice of Archbishop Vantes echoed in his mind.

Be wary of the local called the Super Brother-Man. We believe him to have appeared in the Tower of Eternity recently, causing a storm and conquering the eighth floor. The Church has never feared other forces of this remote Sector, but caution is needed.

The Dimensional Seed is of utmost importance, far eclipsing the value of any bodies. This mission will replace all the original goals. Keep the inquisitors in check, leave no weaknesses. Acquire the Seed and lock yourselves away in the Mystic Realm. We will be able to find you after the shroud of the heavens has been lifted. Your reward for a completed mission will far eclipse the cost of a hundred years.

Failure will likewise come at a great cost.

A wave of exhaustion buffeted his mind, but there was nothing Uld could do. The orders had been given so he could only comply.

"How did it go? Did the Monarch-Select fall?" Uld asked.

"Not even he should have survived the judgment," Trovad said with conviction. "We will know for sure in a day. The glory of the heavens still lingers, blocking our sight, but the recordings should arrive shortly."