

The Fall 683

Chapter 683: New Horizons

It felt extremely weird to stand suspended in space, but the discomfort was far overshadowed by the awe as Thea looked down upon the vast continent in the distance, its size breaking both comprehension and the laws of physics.

Just how big was that place? It was endless, and planets were nothing but small marbles that hovered around it. This was what she had dreamed about when listening to the explanations of the Tutorial pixies so long ago. Visiting mysterious faraway lands, walking paths that had never trod before. And now there was such a continent emitting an amazingly profound aura right in front of her.

If only the circumstances were a bit better.

“Where is this? And why have you taken me here?” Thea asked as she turned to the purple-robed woman next to her.

Mothers-in-law were usually a nightmare, but Leandra Atwood clearly took the trope to another level. Telling her that she was not worthy of her precious son before zapping her with lightning and kidnapping her. Thea had spent almost two months locked in some weird tank, with only her thoughts and an infuriating AI for company.

Now she found herself out here, looking out at some alien world. Seeing it was truthfully a bit exhilarating, but it also felt like another kick to the chin. It was a confirmation of what she had come to realize over the past months; her old life was gone.

She had railed at the AI, desperately tried to break out of the prison she had been put inside. She had cried and raged, angry at Zac, at his secretive family, angry at fate who seemingly kept toying with her. She even tried using her ultimate escape skill, only to find her Skill Fractals somehow locked.

Eventually, she had been wrung dry. She had simply let herself drift around in the viscous liquid for a month, her mind void of thought and direction. Now that she finally was free, part of her screamed at her to lash out, to strike at her captor with her ultimate skill. But a larger part of her was just a haze of helplessness and exhaustion.

“This is the Goldblade Continent, named after the Goldblade Divine Monarch. A brutal place full of danger and opportunity, away from the meddling machinations of the cursed System,” Leandra said. “Your new home.”

“Why did you take me here?” Thea sighed. “Why not just kill me and get it over with?”

“Why would I kill you? Your ‘death’ proved a great motivational tool for my children,” Leandra said.

“This is your reward. Thus, the law of balance is maintained and karmic entanglement avoided. Besides, odds are you will fall in this place, turning falsehood into truth.”

Law of balance my foot, Thea thought with exasperation.

How could sending her to a hostile continent be considered recompense for blasting her with tribulation lightning and faking her death?

"You know, Zac and my family have probably realized I'm not actually dead," Thea muttered in a feeble act of defiance, though she honestly wasn't so sure. "I'll eventually escape from this place or he'll find me one way or another. Either way, your plan will fail."

"Your understanding is flawed," Leandra said without raising a brow. "The heavens struck you down, you died as far as the System is concerned. It is the same for that little unstable Tool Spirit, it reopened your inheritance the day we left Earth. For them, you are well and truly dead."

Thea looked at the staid woman floating next to her, realizing that she really didn't have any secrets in front of her. Had this woman read her mind, or has she planted spies around her children since before the integration?

"...Why?" Thea eventually asked, which contained all the questions that had rattled around in her head over the past months.

Why kidnap her? Why would Leandra trick her children into hating her?

"I have lived for millions of years," Leandra slowly said as she looked out across the vast continent.

It wasn't what Thea had asked about, but it still made her eyes widen in shock. She knew that Zac's mom was powerful after seeing that metal monstrosity, but to this point? A million years was approaching the limit of a Monarch from what she had gathered, unless the monarch was a temporal cultivator or had found some special treasures to prolong their life even further.

Leandra Atwood was actually someone who had reached even further, someone who eclipsed all the elites of the whole Zecia sector?

"I have had over twenty Dao partners, the longest coupling lasting for three hundred thousand years. Do you know how that relationship ended? He tried to kill me for the materials in my body. He had been stuck at the peak of Monarchy so long, and he knew that I was about to step into Autarchy. It was his last chance to seize the opportunity for himself," Leandra smiled.

"Why are you telling me this?" Thea asked. "Are you afraid that I'd rob your son of his resources if I stayed on Earth?"

"No. You aren't qualified to rob my son with that paltry strength of yours, except his momentum. What I am saying is that your relationship was doomed from the start. I think you knew that as well. As it stands, the two of you are too different," Leandra said before she turned back toward the endless continent.

"His potential is limitless, and you are just an above-average talent of a backwater sector. You will not be able to follow him for long in your current state. You are already too far apart, and it will only get further away," Leandra said.

A spark of anger flared up in Thea's heart, but it was quickly extinguished. First of all, what was she going to do to this insanely powerful cultivator? That was just asking for a beating. Besides, she knew that her kidnapper was right.

She had been relentlessly training herself off for three years while Zac had been studying arrays and working on his soul, yet she wasn't any closer to reaching his level of power. Soon, he would explode forward with momentum again, just like when he returned from the Tower of Eternity.

Even after all she had encountered, she barely made it to the start of the sixth floor. Even that was largely thanks to Zac sparing no expense in terms of Array Breakers, talismans, and pills to push her as far as possible. Yet he had made it to the ninth floor, a feat hundreds of times more difficult. And he had fought off half the sector the moment he got out, like an invincible god of war.

The corpse tree outside the Tower of Eternity was still imprinted in her mind, like a part of Zac she never understood. It was easy to forget that the slightly awkward guy she dated was known as the Deviant Asura, one of the most renowned youths of the Sector.

"More importantly, neither of you held trust in the other. You never told him you're not a pure human. You never told him of how you felt trapped on his little island. He never told you of me, nor did he tell you about the undead armies he nurtures in the shadows. You don't know the truth of his power. Both of you had one foot out the door," Leandra said. "You dying was the most beneficial conclusion of your Karma. Look for love when you've given up on the Dao."

"His what?" Thea blurted with shock, but she quickly calmed down again. He had already hidden the fact that he had a robot goddess for a mother, what did it matter now if he kept some revenants? "So, you're telling me to just give up on my past and live on this faraway Continent?"

"The situation here is far more brutal than integrated space. Murder for resources is as common as breathing, and everyone who rises to Hegemony here has walked a path far bloodier than what you can imagine. That is your opportunity. Enter this world, and be baptized and reborn through slaughter. That is your best chance to become a true pillar for your tribe. To walk in step with my son," Leandra said.

"Though I suspect... Even if you gain the power required to make it back, you two will long have forgotten about each other by that point. After all, the Dao is your foremost love."

Thea gave her kidnapper another glare for good measure before she turned back to the continent. An enormous mountain larger than a planet stood in the core, and there were eighteen layers of clouds as large as nebulae swirling around it. There were vast forests so lush that it could be seen from space, endless oceans, and even topographies that she couldn't understand in the slightest.

She was not sure what to think. Her future had been stolen, forcibly replaced with what sounded like a hellish meatgrinder. From the sound of it, she would be lucky if she survived a year in this place, let alone long enough for her to return to her family. All those people she had grown up with, would she ever see them again?

Why did she feel so free?

"One day I'll make it out of this place, if just to prove you wrong."

Minutes turned to hours and hours turned to days as Zac was shot through the Void out of the Zecia sector. Even the teleportation on his previous off-world sojourns had only taken up to thirty minutes before he reappeared, which made it all the more telling just how vast the distances he was dealing with were.

It was like traveling between two galaxies rather than between two star systems in a galaxy. Zac eventually let his mind drift since there wasn't much else he could do. Vilari was probably somewhere close, but it was not like they could communicate mid-teleportation. There was nothing to look at either since teleporters moved you through some hidden dimensional layer.

But on the 12th day, the wait was finally over as darkness turned to light.

"Welcome travelers," a harsh voice said as Zac tried to orient himself. "Oh, Imperials?"

Zac frowned at the tone, but he relaxed when he looked up to see the source. It was a massive Corpse-lord, his jaws replaced by a maw that had to have been taken from some beast. The fact that he could form words at all was pretty impressive, so there was no point in reading into the tone. The second comment was more worrying.

"Is that a problem?" Zac asked with a neutral voice as he helped an unsteady Vilari get back on her feet.

"Haw haw! Hardly," the Corpse-lord laughed. "Twilight Harbor welcomes all. In fact, you Imperials are an important income source for us. But be warned, the rules and hierarchies of the Empire do not hold sway here. No matter what title you have back home, you're simply an honored guest in the Twilight Harbor."

"Hm," Zac only said non-committally.

The Corpse-lord's words were a relief, as it seemed quite normal that people from the Undead Empire came here for opportunities or other purposes. Zac being a Draugr shouldn't stick out too much, though he wanted to see how things looked out on the streets before taking off the mask he wore to block his race.

Zac knew that the Corpse-lord's words came with caveats as well; power trumps all. His warning might be true for most guests, but Zac guessed that if some Empire Princeling came to this remote base, they could probably run rampant while the rulers had to grit their teeth and smile.

He had learned as much as he could about the Undead Empire over the past few years, causing Triv to suffer innumerable backlashes, and its hierarchy was quite simple. The local chapter of the Undead Empire in the Zecia sector was a peak force there, but it was ultimately just regarded as a Province. Its actual name was the Kavriel Province after the ruling clan, though most of the living didn't bother with making such a distinction.

Undead Provinces could be weak or strong, but they were always led by a C-Grade force. The Undead Province in the Zecia sector was definitely on the weaker side, just like Zecia was one of the weaker C-Grade Sectors. However, true Undead Kingdoms always had B-Grade Cultivators at the top. One such kingdom could directly or indirectly control dozens, or perhaps even hundreds of C-Grade Sectors the size of Zecia.

Finally, lording over the large number of kingdoms were the Undead Heartlands, the true core of the Undead Empire. This was the cultivation mecca of all undead. Apparently, there were a number of unusually powerful Kingdoms inside the Heartlands, along with the core where the Undead Princes, and perhaps even the Primo, resided.

Catheya's Clan was from one of these Heartland Kingdoms by the sounds of it, which made her identity quite elevated among the undead. However, Zac guessed that most 'Imperials' that visited Twilight Harbor actually came from one of the outer Kingdoms unless Twilight Harbor was situated close to some wormhole that somehow connected to the Heartlands.

The Corpselord actually seemed a bit relieved at Zac's reaction, further proving Zac's hypothesis of there being some unruly visitors from the empire. He took out two small tokens next and handed them over to Zac.

"This is the Twilight Token. Seeing as you were invited by the Eldritch Archivals, they have already filled it with 1 months' worth of occupancy fees. If you want to prolong your stay, you'll have to go through them," the guard added.

"Thank you," Zac said and threw the Guardian a couple of D-Grade Miasma Crystals as thanks.

His eyes lit up and he immediately stashed them away, which gave Zac some clues as well. The Corpselord guard was either a decently strong High E-Grade Cultivator or an average Peak E-Grade warrior. But his eyes lit up at a few D-grade crystals, proving that his economic situation wasn't all that impressive.

This was actually not that big a surprise, as Zac had been shocked to learn that most cultivators in the multiverse were pretty poor, often downright broke. Zac had figured that most people would be trillionaires after accumulating their gains over decades, but the reality wasn't so nice.

It all came down to the monopolization of resources and the high cost of living. If Zac wanted to make a few million Nexus Coins he would just kill a few thousand E-grade beasts and sell their bodies, alternatively kill one early D-grade beast. But what if all the forests were controlled by powerful clans, clans who charged exorbitant fees to enter the hunting grounds, and even more exorbitant fees to stay in their town for protection?

Everything of value was long divvied up and taken by the powerful factions, with wandering cultivators generally living a pretty wretched life. They had to pay through their nose for every step forward in their cultivation, often to the point that they had to indenture themselves to the local forces. All that money then went to the D- or C-Grade powerhouses on the top, who were essentially black holes when it came to money.

"Ah, one tip, if the young master would be interested. I guess you are here for the Twilight Ascent. You should join the event through the Eldritch Archivals even if your power will allow you to do so by yourself. The Archivals have seeded slots with better starting positions," the guard said.

Zac didn't even know who the Eldritch Archivals was, let alone the Twilight Ascent, but he still nodded in thanks as he led Vilari out from the teleportation house.

"How are you doing?" Zac asked with a low voice, knowing that teleporters did a number on most people.

"I'll adjust in a minute," Vilari said. "These Eldritch Archivals..."

"We'll deal with it as it comes," Zac shrugged. "Let's take a look at this place."

Outside was a vast square full of people, but Zac wasn't focused on that as he looked around in awe. He didn't exactly know what he had expected when thinking of the name Twilight Harbor, but it wasn't this.

Zac could only shake his head when thinking back to his conversation with Catheya all those years ago. She had made it sound like Twilight Harbor was just a little hamlet at a border sector, but the grandeur he witnessed was almost beyond his comprehension.

This was a true metropolis.

The Twilight Harbor was actually not placed on a planet from the looks of it, but rather a large number of gargantuan plateaus floating about in a cosmic cloud. Some of the plateaus were clearly earmarked for the undead, with miasmic clouds swirling around enormous spires that stretched tens of thousands of meters into the air. Conversely, some platforms were teeming with life, made for the living inhabitants.

In fact, one of the smaller plateaus just had a single huge tree planted, its canopy stretching across a distance measured in hundreds of miles. It was not quite at the level of the Lifebringer Tree he had seen in his Dao visions, but it was far beyond the [Avar World Trees] whose seed Kenzie had used in her evolution attempt.

There were hundreds of plateaus altogether, with most of them having a clear alignment of either life and death, but there were a handful that seemed to house both. These platforms were as large as a dozen of the smaller ones, and they looked like proper continents with mountains, forests, and hundreds of cities strewn along its surface.

Amazingly, these platforms all formed a multi-layered sphere around a mysterious light that seemed to be radiating with life one moment, and the chill of death the next. Zac first thought it was an attuned sun, but it didn't look like it. It almost looked alive since it pulsed with what seemed like a heartbeat, and it continuously spewed out those energy-rich clouds that suffused the whole area.

The platforms all seemed to have a gravity of their own as he could see mountains pointing down toward him from a platform right above him, and there were platforms in the distance that stood at a 90-degree angle to properly bask in the radiance of the mysterious light source. It almost looked like the hundreds of platforms were the broken pieces of an impossibly large planet, and the anomaly was the world core that once held it all together.

Zac was almost frozen in place from the scene, and he couldn't believe how freely and seemingly effortlessly Life and Death comingled in this place. If he couldn't find any clues to dealing with Earth's dual affinities or his cultivation here, then he might as well give up.