

## The Fall 726

### Chapter 726: Ventus Kalavan

Zac swam out of his hideout after making sure the King Eel was gone and he swiftly followed the tree trunk until he reached the canopy. It was extremely dense, to the point that Zac eventually had to cut a path through the shrubbery, making a 30-meter tunnel until he reached the other side of the tree crowns.

He left the muted world of the ocean depths behind as he was greeted by distant bird cries and a breath of fresh air.

It was a welcome change after having mostly inhaled the weird waters of the Twilight Ocean, only occasionally finding a dry cave where the air was stale. Zac looked around, and he had to admit the scene was a bit novel. The sky in the Greengrove Archipelago was completely blocked when looking at it from the ocean floor, but above the surface, there were thousands of islands made by the Greengrove Trees' canopies bunching together.

Meanwhile, the Twilight Ocean formed shallow seas and rivers between the islands, where shoals of small fish swam about. These rivers weren't actually connected to the ocean below, and he would have to cut through the densely bunched leaves to get back to the proper ocean. It was a bit weird to know he wasn't standing on land, but rather in a tree crown, as Zac could barely tell the islands weren't natural.

The ground was essentially a solid mix of leaves and soil that had drifted over from somewhere, and some branches of the Greengrove trees had continued to grow above the 'ground', turning into miniature trees of their own that reached a height of around ten meters.

Animal calls were coming from all directions, mostly that of birds who perhaps used the archipelago as a stopping point while traversing the vast ocean. None of the tree crowns grew more than five or six meters above the water surface, but Zac guessed the intermittent islands with the massive trunks beneath the surface had a calming effect on this part of the ocean, acting as natural wave breakers.

The low altitude of the islands made Zac's life easy as well since he instantly spotted a marker a few islands over. It almost looked like an incursion, except that it didn't contain any strong presence. There was also a line on top, simply saying "Temporary Settlement." It looked like whoever had set this place up, had come prepared.

It was no wonder someone had decided to put up a temporary settlement in this place. Most people were ultimately more comfortable staying above-water, but powerful storms usually raged above the surface, especially this deep into the Mystic Realm. Those storms could be even more lethal than the currents that passed through the waters, which was why most people simply stayed closer to the ocean bed.

Zac observed the surroundings for over an hour from the cover of his tunnel, but there was very little activity. He did spot two groups of cultivators surreptitiously moving toward the beacon, but there were no outbursts of energy indicating battles taking place. Only then did Zac start to make his way forward as well, swapping between using [Loamwalker] across the moats and swimming across the shallow seas.

A few hours later he reached his destination, an unusually large island. It was over five times the normal size of the surrounding islands, and it actually rose almost twenty meters above the surface. The Twilight Energy was actually denser than normal as well, making Zac wonder why the powerhouse had chosen this place to set up camp in such a weird spot.

“Welcome, 25 Twilight Fruits to enter,” a guard said, and Zac’s brows rose when he looked at the dozens of people inside.

He had hoped the entry fee to be in Nexus Coins or Nexus Crystals, but it looked like he was being too optimistic. There weren’t too many people who went this deep into the Mystic Realm, but with people coming and going, the base had to make a few hundred Twilight Fruits a day. Even if it was shared among the workers, it was still a massive haul.

“That much?” Zac couldn’t help but ask.

“Well, you can stay up to a week for that price,” the guard shrugged. “And with the leader’s purification array, it’s definitely worth it. The chance to expel all the accumulated gunk from your body in return for a few thousand E-grade Nexus Coins?”

“Fine,” Zac grunted and handed over the entrance fee, along with a few extra to the guard. “Any tips you have to share?”

Alea was still happily eating any Twilight Fruits that he threw her way, but he still had a few hundred left after his rampage in the mountains. A small bribe to create some goodwill wasn’t too expensive in exchange for getting some information.

“Thank you. Only one rule to follow. Don’t cause a ruckus and don’t exert too much energy. Otherwise, everyone here will attack you,” the guard said.

“Why would people attack me just from exerting some energy?” Zac asked.

“Well, this place has a guardian beast,” the man grinned. “No one wants you to wake it up.”

“What?” Zac repeated with confusion.

“You saw how big this island is. It’s not a coincidence. This town is sitting right on top of the den a Raksha Shrimp King,” the man explained. “That’s why there’s the rule about limiting energy outbursts. No one wants to wake the slumbering beast below.”

“There’s a beast king right below us?!” Zac exclaimed, keeping his voice low even though the clamor of the town. “That’s impossible.”

“You can go below if you want to check things out yourself,” the man shrugged. “A few have. But you should know that everyone will attack you if you return with a bunch of shrimp underlings in tow. Better turn you into an offering than let the beasts come over.”

“That... is something else,” Zac eventually sighed. “The big boss of this place is pretty smart. Who is it?”

“His name is Ventus Kalavan,” the guard said.

“Not a local?” Zac asked with a small frown, not recognizing the name.

“No, but he’s not a stuck-up bastard like some of the Imperials. He’s from the Radiant Temple, and he actually seems to have a few invites,” the man said with longing in his eyes.

Zac could understand the man’s desire. Many natives of Twilight Harbor had a complicated relationship with the foreign factions. They partly despised them because of how they came to the Zervereth Sector and robbed it of most of its top-tier cultivation resources. But they also dreamed of being discovered, to be taken to the supreme cultivation havens that B-grade factions no doubt possessed. A simple word from this Ventus Kalavan could completely change the trajectory of someone’s life.

Having invites also gave some indication of the standing of this Kalavan guy. Catheya only had one token to the Undead Empire, and that was mostly because of her master. The Radiant Temple was notoriously picky as well, so having multiple invites meant that he must hold significant status among the younger generations.

Still, it made him a bit hesitant hearing there was another Radiant Temple elite in this area, apart from the guy who had made his haunt in the Hollowtongue Mountains. Was it a coincidence, or was it something more?

“Do you know what ranking the young master has?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“No idea,” the guard sighed. “His contribution value is actually 0, but his strength can’t be too low. There was a raid a week ago and ten people attacked. They were powerful, but the young master appeared and simply ripped them apart like they were trash.”

Zac nodded in understanding. It was a shame that the ladder only appeared once a month, and it only showed the top 100. He wasn’t on the list, so he could be anything a powerhouse that was just short of entering the ladder, to someone at rock bottom. Of course, he could also be someone completely uninterested in the Trial since his Daos didn’t seem to be related to Life or Death.

He might instead be targeting the Fate-Plucking ladder considering the entrance fee. It didn’t matter much to Zac though. He was in a new persona known to no one at the moment, and the struggles between the big shots were far beyond him. He was more interested in gathering information and updating his [Ocean Chart].

The latter was easy as there was a building specifically designed for that very purpose, and Zac immediately headed over after saying his thanks to the guard. However, he stopped again after just taking a few steps as over 80% of the Twilight Energy around him was suddenly replaced by Cosmic Energy.

The effect was the same as Catheya’s array, but it looked like it spanned the whole settlement. The settlement might only be a walled compound, a square, and some temporary structures thrown up, but the cost to purify such a large area had to be pretty extravagant. This Ventus Calavan was clearly burning massive amounts of Nexus Coins to harvest more Twilight Fruits.

“How do you perform trades here?” Zac asked as he entered the store designated to update your mapper.

“We do straight trades of completion for free, with 0.2% margin. You can also buy 1% completion for 8 Twilight Fruits. We also sell a complete copy for 40 Twilight Fruits.”

“What rate are you currently at?” Zac asked.

“8.84%,” the shopkeeper said with some pride. “Including 1.3% that’s deeper than this current depth. Buying the full copy is definitely a good deal.”

Zac whistled, actually a bit impressed. It wasn't too different from Zac's own [Ocean Chart] that was currently at 3.47% after the trade the other day, but there were only so many routes that led to the Greengrove Archipelago this early in the trial. For them to fill up almost a tenth of the trial in just over 4 months was no small feat.

As for whether the full price was a good deal or not, Zac wasn't so certain. Part of the completion probably contained the Life Pulse Route, along with early sections of the trial that were of no use for Zac.

Still, he wasn't lacking fruits, and he would keep getting more as time passed. Zac ultimately doubted Alea was truly insatiable, just like how Verun only wanted a limited amount of blood from each type of source.

“I'll just take a copy,” Zac muttered and handed over another 40 Twilight Fruits. “Your boss must be making money left and right.”

“My granny always said my face would bring great fortune, and I guess it's true,” a smooth and melodic voice emerged from the entrance, and Zac turned over to see a man standing in the entrance.

“Boss!” the attendant hurriedly said as he stood up a bit straighter, which prompted Zac to make a double-take.

If the Tal-Eladar were elf-like creatures with jagged teeth and some other bestial features, then Ventus Kalavan looked like a proper high elf. Zac had never seen that kind of species in the Base Town or while traveling the Zecia sector, making him believe it was either a regional race or one that simply wasn't represented in Zecia. After all, while humans were everywhere, many other races were not.

Ventus had half a head to Zac's height, but Zac wouldn't be surprised if the elf only weighed two-thirds of what he did. Zac's whole frame had become a brutish bulk of chiseled muscles, while Ventus was extremely lean, though in a refined rather than emaciated way. He didn't give off the aura of a warrior at all, but rather of a scholar.

That impression was only increased since he was actually holding a weird instrument in his hand, something resembling an abacus. But instead of wooden balls on rods, there were hundreds of small stone beads hovering in an array without anything keeping them in place. It was clearly something valuable as it emitted an aura that surpassed Zac's own weapons.

It was not necessarily higher quality, but it was definitely higher grade than his own Spirit Tools. The odd appearance of the Spirit Tool and the gentle appearance of the elf wasn't enough for Zac to put his guard down. He had already heard the warning from the sentry, and his instincts told him that this man was extremely powerful, no matter if his appearance and aura were almost that of a non-combat class.

Zac wasn't exactly sure how to deal with the sudden appearance of the big honcho himself, so he simply nodded in his direction as he mentally readied himself for battle just in case.

“Welcome to my little town, my friend,” Ventus smiled. “I have been waiting for you. I have a business proposal for you.”

“Waited for me? We don’t even know each other,” Zac countered as warning sirens went off in his mind.

“Then I guess we were simply fated,” the elf smiled in return as his fingers grazed a few of the gems on the abacus, prompting them to change their constellation.

“Come visit me when you are ready. It will be very beneficial for you as well. After all, aren’t you right at the precipice?” Ventus said with a wave before he left, leaving a befuddled Zac behind.

Zac tried to understand what was going on as he spied on the elf saunter back toward the walled-off area in the settlement, with all the resting cultivators quickly getting up on their feet to greet him. Zac had stayed nondescript since arriving, and his current identity didn’t have any interesting points. His array was currently inactive, but the bracer he got from Greatest should be enough to block any spying at the e-grade.

The situation was definitely suspicious.

“Boss has called a few people over since he set up shop here almost two months ago,” the attendant shrugged when he saw Zac’s inquiring look. “All of them left not long after. The longest stay was two hours. Some of them sported wounds, but they didn’t look disappointed. A few even had their bounties increase. You can ask anyone here, many even stay here longer than planned in hopes that the boss will call them over.”

Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he nodded and left. The elf had already entered his compound, but Zac didn't immediately follow. He instead walked through the small settlement, surreptitiously asking one cultivator after another for some information in exchange for Nexus Coins. After half an hour the situation was clear; either they all were under some sort of spell, or the attendant was telling the truth.

In fact, many had asked those who left the compound what happened, and it turned out that the elf was looking for suitable sparring partners and had supposedly built a sparring cage that was powered by Dao Treasures. Most tried to stall as long as possible so they could benefit as much as possible from the insanely exorbitant setup, but most fights only lasted for a moment before they failed to keep up with the boss.

A few actually managed to last long enough to reach a breakthrough of their own. Of course, some were also dreaming of being discovered by showcasing their skill during the sparring session.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds, but he eventually walked over toward the walled-off section. He had fallen just short of evolving his Fragment of the Bodhi before, and this seemed like a good opportunity. If this didn't work, he could always find a Beast King to pit his life against. A sparring session here would even allow him to save on his own Dao Treasures so that he could keep them for a rainy day.

Sparring with an elite from a B-grade faction would definitely be beneficial to his combat style as well. How was his Evolutionary Stance supposed to evolve if he didn’t seek out various powerful opponents? Still, he mentally prepared for a prison break in case the scion’s intentions weren’t quite as pure as advertised.

The gates to the mansion swung open as Zac approached, and they closed after he entered. The interiors were actually just a large garden, and Zac looked around with some confusion, realizing that none of the plants were spiritual in nature. Was the elf simply walking around with a pouch full of soil and flowers for situations like these?

“Oh, you’re finally here,” Ventus said as he looked up from a book he was reading.

“You could have saved me some trouble if you simply explained yourself,” Zac grunted as he scanned the area for hidden traps as best as he could.

“No need to be so tense,” Ventus laughed. “I have no designs on your life. You’ve seen my bounty. The amount of slaughter and destruction I would have to unleash to even gain a top 10,000 spot would be shocking. And even all that effort would just result in a Limited Title even worse than the ones I already have. What’s the point?”

“So why even come here?” Zac probed.

“Orders from above, can’t go into detail. However, my intuition tells me you have an idea of what I’m talking about,” Ventus smiled. “The Perennial Vastness Token is a happy surprise though.”

“You don’t have things like that in the Radiant Temple?” Zac asked, diverting the subject from what he did and didn’t know.

“Well, we do have a few similar opportunities, but nothing comes for free. If I can save decades' worth of Temple Points by snatching this opportunity for myself, I can use the points on unique treasures or other good stuff instead,” Ventus shrugged. “So, are you ready to spar? Let's help each other across the threshold.”