

## The Fall 754

### Chapter 754: Return

"It was you who maimed that lunatic!" the man exclaimed with surprise, but he quickly regained his composure. "Do you take our lord for a fool? Teaming up with an Imperial to fight an Imperial? What a joke."

"You should understand that the hidden conflicts beneath the surface of the Undead Empire are far greater than the small skirmishes with random factions here on the frontier," Zac snorted. "In either case, I don't need you to decide anything on your own. I just need you to relay my message."

Of course, what Zac wouldn't tell his captive was that the man's conclusion was spot on, except for the part of both him and Uona being Imperials. He had no real intention of teaming up with Ykrodas Havarok to take out Uona, at least not if he had anything to say about it. As far as he was concerned, those two could play their deadly games while he picked up the two remnants and got the hell out of this place.

But at the same time, if there was something he had learned over the past five years, it was that the System had a fondness for throwing lethal challenges at him. Zac still wasn't sure whether it was a result of his abnormally high Luck or because of his bloodline, but the fact was that trouble kept finding him one way or another.

Considering that Uona was as troublesome as they came, it seemed prudent to try and make some small preparations. Uona should also be one of the biggest thorns in Ykrodas Havarok's plans, no matter if it came to the contribution ladder or the larger schemes at play. If things came to blow, this simple message might provide a lifeline.

"... I will recount this meeting in full if given the chance," the man said after some hesitation.

"Good. I need some information, so let's get some things out of the way. I know there's a large-scale conflict taking place, where the Havarok Empire is on one side, and the Twilight Lord is on the other. Of course, the Twilight Lord is rather the human cultivator known as Alvod Jondir, or the Eveningtide Asura," Zac grunted, and he was elated to note there was no surprise on the captive's face.

It was finally time to get to the bottom of things.

"Our goal is to thwart the plans of the Eveningtide Asura, just as you said," the scout eventually said after some hesitation. "But I don't know the exact plans, and even if I did, I would not tell you. My squad was only stationed here to keep the area stabilized. We set out three days ago to investigate an aberration, but we ran into a mishap leaving only me behind."

Zac had a pretty good idea of what that aberration was, but he ignored it and pushed on.

"Why is your faction bothering with this matter? From what I'm told, Alvod is just a wandering Monarch from a frontier sector," Zac asked.

"He caused unimaginable losses to our Empire a long time ago. He even killed one of our ancestral princes," he said with fury in his eyes. "Now he wants to sacrifice one of our main commercial nodes of the frontier to defend his Dao and achieve Autarchy? We will never abide!"

Zac inwardly shuddered, realizing the situation was really as he had feared. He had figured the situation was bigger than Alvod simply wanting to evolve a Dao or something similar, and this proved it. Having an Autarch being pissed off at you was not a great way to live, and it only doubled Zac's desire to not get too bogged down in this mess.

"Well, taking that step here in the frontier... You might not need to do anything to get your wish," Zac shrugged as he feigned disinterest. "More importantly, where is everyone? I left seclusion a month ago, only to find that the chasm is sealed off and no elites in sight."

"We have sealed off the chasm," the man said. "Most wouldn't dare enter."

"I doubt Uona or the rankers would care about that message of yours," Zac said, opting to forgo divulging his deeds with the pillar. "I could easily make it through that array of yours if wanted to as well."

Zac had a strong suspicion that this man's wretched state was related to Zac's actions at the chasm, so he massaged the truth a bit. Admitting he was the reason his captives had been killed would put a real damper on the conversation, and there was still much he needed to figure out.

"We have our means," the scout said as he looked at Zac with suspicion. Zac could sense the man's aura fluctuate a bit, but it looked like the soldier reluctantly dropped the matter after a second. "But most have left for the inheritance."

"The what?" Zac asked with confusion.

"An ancient city appeared in the middle reaches of the Ocean three months ago. It's still sealed off from what I've heard, but people are flooding there from all over the trial in hopes that it'll open," the man said with yearning in his eyes. "Some believe it will automatically open its gates at a set time, others believe enough warriors need to gather before the trial starts."

"Ancient city? Trial within a trial? What?" Zac muttered, not having expected this piece of news at all. "I've never heard about something like that."

"Neither have the natives, but many believe it's a unique inheritance of the trial," the man said. "Perhaps something left behind from before this realm was created."

"It rather sounds like a trap," Zac said skeptically. "Is it something that the Radiant Temple or the Natives have set up?"

"We... Believe it might be something Alvod Jondir has dragged from the depths to distract us, but we might be wrong. Uona Noz'Valadir has been spotted in the vicinity, as has most of the rankers," the man said. "But something of that scale, we doubt E-grade warriors can conjure such a thing, unless someone has been working toward it for dozens of trials."

"Another complication, just what I need," Zac muttered.

Zac kept questioning the man about the general state of affairs of the trial for a while longer. Thankfully, the Havarok soldier, who was named Trakodles, was more than willing to rat on any faction except his own, especially the Radiant Temple. After just a few minutes Zac knew more about that faction than after meeting Ventus Kalavan.

He also added Trakodles's charted territories to his own [Ocean Chart], massively expanding his map.

"Alright," Zac eventually said. "As I said, I am willing to work together with your leader to take down Uona Noz'Valadir. The stage has been set, and an opportunity to discuss this further will present itself at the gates of that city. Until then, I hope we can stay out of each other's way. I know Ykrodas might be eyeing my bounty, but I urge him to remember his mission, unless he is prepared to lose everything. Now, it's time for you to take a nap."

"What?" Trakodles blurted, only to have a pill shoved into his mouth.

Trakodles's eyes rolled up into his head as Zac started to push the man deeper and deeper into the soil. He stopped at thirty meters beneath the surface, after which he surrounded the warrior in Supreme Divine Crystals and an illusion array.

The crystals would absorb some of the energy from the surroundings, helping combat the atmosphere. The array wasn't really for the man's protection, but rather for him to be a bit harder to locate. He had almost missed it, but Trakodles had sent out some sort of signal by cracking a talisman the moment they crashed into the coral reef.

Zac only pretended to not notice in hopes that his captive would keep talking in an attempt to delay. Back-up was no doubt on their way, though it would take them a few hours to reach this place. With his preparations, they would hopefully waste a couple of hours pinpointing their ally's position as well, giving Zac more time to gain a head-start.

The corals turned into a kaleidoscopic blur as Zac rushed to create some distance. Only after having swum tens of thousands of meters did he take out an escape talisman and crush it. Zac appeared dozens of kilometers away, and he quickly oriented himself before setting off again, making a wide berth around the settlement.

The [Ocean Chart] of the Havarok warrior had provided Zac with everything he needed to make it back to the middle reaches. It even detailed the location of the Death Pulse, saving Zac the need to capture an undead warrior as well. However, he didn't head toward the Death Pulse, but rather a current somewhat poetically called the River of Broken Ambition.

The name came from the fact that it was one of the few currents that could take warriors from the core regions of the Twilight Ocean all the way to the far safer waters in the beginning. Most of the currents, including the Death Pulse, rather streamed in the direction of the Twilight Chasm, making them unsuitable for his purposes.

He would eventually have to head for the Death Pulse to find Catheya, but traveling against its current would waste months comparing to hitching a ride to the River of Broken Ambition.

Zac kept a frantic pace over the next week, not even stopping for a quick rest, as he pushed toward the next danger zone. It was a massive maelstrom that had made a vast swathe of the inner ocean extremely precarious to traverse. The energy density was a lot higher compared to outside the turbulent waters as well, which was why some considered it a testing ground for those who considered going to the chasm but weren't sure they could handle it.

For Zac, who had survived weeks in the depths of the Twilight Chasm, it could barely be considered a challenge, and he cut through the chaotic waters like an arrow, saving over a week on his route. Hopefully, this had also thrown off any potential pursuit, though Zac hadn't sensed any signs of such a thing taking place.

The moment the waters stabilized, he took out one of his submersibles and set out, using the vessel to hide his identity from any curious onlookers. From there, Zac's journey became a lot more tranquil. It took him a week to reach the current, at which point his speed more than doubled.

The following week, Zac mostly rested and consolidated his gains. The ambient energy had already become too sparse for him to use his Soul Strengthening Manual, not that he dared use them while traveling. The ship usually sailed itself, but he occasionally had to take over to avoid beasts or greedy cultivators.

More than once did Zac encounter ambushes by people trying to snatch the riches of those fleeing from the inner ocean in defeat. These attacks invariably ended in wholesale slaughter this time around since Zac couldn't have his whereabouts spread. At least those short and bloody encounters allowed him to confirm and sometimes expand on what he learned from Trakodles.

The Havarok Warrior had pretty much spoken the truth, though he had failed to mention that the Havarok was clearly targeting the ancient city that had popped up. Ykrodas had gathered most of his forces to stand guard outside its gates, and their presence on the other areas of the trial was mostly skeleton crews like the one Trakodles had been a part of.

Soon enough a month had passed along the River of Broken Ambition, at which point Zac finally detached his vessel from the current and set a new course. He was at the edge between what was generally considered the middle and inner section of the ocean, meaning it was time for him to start looking for Catheya.

He kept her token in his hand as he sailed toward the Death Pulse, but the communicator didn't show any sign of activating during the sixteen days until he reached the pulse. The Death Pulse itself was just like he imagined, a massive, kilometer-wide current of condensed death. He had felt the environment change even hours before reaching it, the difference was palpable now that his submersible was only a few thousand meters away.

It felt like he was enclosed in a warm embrace, in contrast to the poisonous environment of the Life Pulse. The feeling was a poignant reminder of just how unnatural this realm was, with its corrupted energy constantly burrowing into his body. It made him long for the days when he could leave this place, but he soon refocused and passed right beneath the current, continuing on the other side.

Zac kept steering his vessel in a zig-zag pattern over the next 20 days along both sides of the Death Pulse. He was trying to get close enough to Catheya for the tracker to activate, and one day his efforts finally paid off. He looked down at the array disk with a mix of anticipation and hesitation as he put away his submersible and entered a dense forest beneath him.

He understood all-too-well how much chaos he had created, and he wasn't sure what kind of reception awaited him. He even considered turning around and leaving. Then again, since he could see that Catheya was nearby, then the Draugr scion had probably sensed his approach since a few hours ago.

There was no point to his hesitation. He had decided to put his trust in his Draugr associate, in the fact that she had not decided to throw him under the bus to protect herself. Of course, that didn't mean that he would just blindly go in without some preparations since there was some risk that she had been captured by his pursuers.

A thorough scan of the surroundings exposed some of the usual wildlife, but no cultivators either living or undead. The spot Catheya had chosen was really desolate, and the area didn't seem to have much in the way of valuable plants. There were no suspicious energy fluctuations either, and his Danger Sense was completely quiet.

If there was a trap waiting, then it was extremely well-hidden.

Even if there was some risk involved, Zac still swam toward the place his beacon indicated, a small chain of mountains sitting in the middle of the forest. As expected, when he got within 100 meters of a sheer wall, a gate appeared out of thin air and soundlessly opened. Zac steeled himself as he swam inside, both his axe and his coffin at the ready in case of ambush.

Past the hidden gate was a roughly carved tunnel leading into a small chamber no more than five by five meters. Its walls and ceiling were filled with small holes, and looking into them gave Zac an ominous feeling. The three small skeletons of [Profane Exponents] appeared behind his back, protecting him in case something nasty came flying out from those trapholes.

"Hello?" Zac eventually shouted as the seconds passed, and only then did another hidden door open.

Zac flashed inside, and he immediately found himself face to face with three familiar figures in the other room. Catheya sat on an ice crystal crafted into a high-backed chair, and her two followers stood behind her. He breathed out in relief upon seeing they were fine. He hadn't heard anything about the three since setting out, and their situation had been a constant weight on his shoulders.

But in fact, it seemed like they were more than fine. Just over a year had passed since they met last time, but Zac sensed that they all had made pretty impressive gains to match his own, Catheya most of all. Her aura had always been one of an elite, but it was much deeper now. Not only that, but over her head a bounty of [750-1,000] soon appeared, proving her improved aura wasn't just empty bluster.

Her increase in bounty was proof that her Death-aspected Dao had become a Peak Fragment, but Zac was certain it wasn't the only Dao she had improved. Her bounty wasn't too high, but the cold aura she exuded easily surpassed that of someone with a simple Peak Fragment, which meant she probably had formed some ice-related Dao Branch.

Qirai's aura had become deeper as well, even if her bounty was still a pitiful [0-250]. It was no surprise, considering she probably had a combat-oriented Dao, possibly coupled with a Soul-oriented one. Even Varo felt a bit stronger, though Zac noted that he had ultimately lost his badly mangled arm. An empty sleeve now hung to his side.

It wasn't the end of the world though. Catheya's master, or her clan if Va Tapek turned out to be a traitor, shouldn't have too much trouble regrowing an E-grade cultivator's appendage. And even if that failed, there was the Corpse-lord route that was open to the undead. Of course, Varo could also do just fine without the use of a second arm as evidenced by people like Ogras.

Zac was feeling excited to finally link up with his old allies, but the oppressive feeling in the room was making him a bit unsure whether the feeling was mutual. Catheya and her two companions didn't say anything for a few seconds, instead opting to mete out even stares that spoke volumes on their own.

"Uh, long time no see. How have you all been?" Zac said with a small smile, trying to lighten the mood since the pressure of Catheya's gaze was starting to get a bit suffocating.

"What was the last thing I asked of you before we split up?" Catheya finally said, her voice shaking with barely contained fury as the room turned into a freezing hellscape.

Right then and there, Zac felt he might be better off facing another turtle monster than this enraged trio.