

The Fall 766

Chapter 766: Incursion Owner

"What in the heavens, 5,053 D-grade Nexus Coins?" Catheya said with shock, her eyes as wide as saucers. "Are your followers trying to crush the natives under mountains of wealth? Even if they seize the planet, it will be a long, long time before you turn a profit. Knowing Zecia, it might not even be possible."

"That's what you think I'm worried about?" Zac said with exasperation. "Why the hell has an incursion started up without my knowledge?"

"What, you didn't know?" Catheya asked with interest.

"How would I know? I've been stuck in here for the last two years," Zac said as he waved at the ocean outside the submersible.

"Just how powerful is your fate?" Catheya laughed. "You accidentally became an incursion owner? Is that even possible?"

"Be serious," Zac groaned. "Can I stop this?"

"Stop it? Why would you want to?" Catheya countered with confusion written all over her face. "It looks like they have things in hand, and you seem to have the capital to endure their spending."

"Have things in hand? They just endured the integration five years ago, and now they want to unleash that kind of suffering on others?" Zac said with a frown.

"That's up to your followers isn't it?" Catheya shrugged. "You should know their characters, no? Are they the kind of people who wantonly slaughter the innocent for power?"

"No, but.." Zac muttered.

"Well, there you go. Would you rather the slot go to my empire or those body-snatching cultists you mentioned in the Tower of Eternity? For all you know, your followers might be the saviors that save the lives of billions," Catheya shrugged. "There's more than one way to conquer a planet."

"Still though," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"Perhaps if they didn't have such a monstrous leader who kept rushing between causing trouble and falling into piles of wealth they wouldn't be pushing themselves to risk their lives like this. But you should know that your rate of improvement is terrifying. Your strength has what, doubled, since appearing in the Twilight Ocean? How long until your faction can no longer contain your fate?"

"I know," Zac muttered. "But there is no need for them to go this far..."

"It's like the people outside," Catheya said. "Everyone has their dreams and aspirations. Few of those who have truly embarked on the path of cultivation are content with simply becoming average. Trust in your people that they know what they are doing."

"I just wish I could be there to help him," Zac muttered, but he knew it was impossible.

Even if he left right now, he would be far too late. The closest exit was over a week's travel away, and it took close to two weeks to pass through the void when teleporting between sectors. By the time he reached Earth, the members of Port Atwood would long have entered the incursion and connection would be cut for at least three months.

And that didn't even factor in that leaving the Twilight Ocean now would cripple his cultivation, and possibly even kill him because of the imbalance between Creation and Oblivion.

"Well, help me make sense of the text at least if you can," Zac sighed.

"Which part?" Catheya asked. "The Maximum level is the soft limit of entry. Going above that level tacks on a massive surcharge, and that surcharge doubles for every additional level."

"Wait, that means that putting a level 110 through the incursion is a thousand times more expensive than a level 101?" Zac exclaimed.

"Exactly. And sending a level 101 is roughly a thousand times more expensive than sending one within the soft limit. Below that, the price difference is not quite as steep. However, you'd most likely be able to send over a hundred peak F-grade warriors for every level 90 warrior," Catheya explained. "Most likely, some of the generals or captains in the invasion are the reason for the exorbitant price."

Zac slowly nodded, believing that might be the case. The three undead of the Einherjar should all be within level 100, especially Vilari who might not even have Evolved by now. Of course, the fact that she had taken the mantle of general over Joanna indicated the mentalist most likely had evolved by this point.

As for Joanna, he wasn't as sure. She had been around level 95 when he set off for Twilight Harbor, and gaining another 5 levels were well within reason even if she didn't push herself. Most likely, she was a good few levels above 100 by now, considering the items he had sent back home for the Valkyries to enjoy.

The same was true for Ilvere, who was already at peak F-grade upon reaching Earth. He had entered E-grade just a few months after the Origin Dao ran out. The last two, Zac didn't remember. Ciru was one of the gemlings of the younger generation, but Zac barely knew him apart from him being very talented in both combat and crafting.

It was no wonder that clans like Azh'Rezak refused to send a single E-grade through the Incursion. Azh'Rezak was barely scraping by to nurture a couple of Hegemons. For them to spend hundreds of D-grade Nexus Coins to let a level 77 pass through was impossible, especially considering they'd be restricted by the System anyways.

"Are the slots negotiable as well? And what's included in this fee?" Zac asked.

"Your force was provided ten thousand slots, and they filled them all. You can send more people, but the cost gets steeper for every additional warrior that gets teleported," Catheya explained. "The surcharge is for approved arrays, gear, and the warriors themselves. For comparison, I had 5,000 warriors and a cost of 629 D-grade Nexus Coins when I led my incursion at 17. And a good part of that cost was for the terraforming array."

"I remember a friend mentioning that the warriors in his clan could spend money to increase their strength even further?" Zac asked.

"I'm not sure about that," Catheya slowly said. "Is his faction on the more poverty-stricken side? I guess some clans have their warriors pay their way to some degree. Another feature you can pay for is to unlock more of your strength upon arrival, but it's not worth doing so past a certain point."

"The Ruthless Heavens are already matching your strength with the natives, and your restricted power is meant to unlock at roughly the same pace as the natives can improve if they make the most of the opportunity. Unlock too much of your strength, and you might be harming yourself. After all, there aren't many insights to be had if you simply slaughter all the natives like they were ants," Catheya said.

"Then why allow it at all?" Zac asked with confusion.

"If a faction is willing to pay more than a planet is worth to send some younglings there, why would the Heavens not abide? It's all about balance. It would be more than happy to send a Hegemon through an incursion since the revenue that would generate could pay for the cost of integrating one hundred other worlds," Catheya said. "Thus increasing the odds of nurturing powerhouses."

"The Ruthless Heavens indeed," Zac sighed, but he still infused his will into the 'Accept?' button, giving his tacit blessing to the madness.

The screen disappeared, and a glance at his Status Screen indicated that the System had already charged him for the cost. He could only pray that they knew what they were doing when preparing everything. Between the Demons, Abby, and his other elites, they would hopefully have come up with a plan with a high degree of success.

Even then, Zac knew there would be casualties, perhaps even more than when Earth's Integration took place. After all, back then he had been involved with closing almost all the incursions. If he had sent his armies instead of going himself, the loss of life would have been catastrophic after having closed 2-3 of them.

It took him over an hour to calm his nerves, where he frantically kept trying to figure out a way to help his people. Unfortunately, it really looked like there was nothing he could do. Thankfully, Vilari had long returned with the resources from Twilight Harbor, and the foundations of his followers should have improved considerably by now.

Along with the vast wealth at his disposal, Port Atwood would probably be even better prepared than most C-grade clans. It wasn't that these ancient factions couldn't provide the resources, but rather that they wouldn't. An incursion was a risky investment, with both the natives and other factions contending for the planet.

For most, it ended up as a training trip for the young generation, where they stayed for a year or two to enjoy the Origin Dao and hunt for rare herbs before returning. Few factions were willing to spend thousands of D-grade Nexus Coins on a couple of F-grade juniors who hadn't even proven themselves.

That alone helped Zac calm down quite a bit. Being agitated did him more harm than good, considering how it exposed him to the shard in his head. The low susurrus of 'helpful' suggestions had grown considerably louder since the screen had popped up, making him barely able to think clearly.

He had even felt a sudden urge to pierce the void and create a Space Gate between his location and Earth. That was a solution to his predicament that might actually 'work', but Zac was certain he would run out of lifespan long before managing to create something like that. He quickly pushed the urge down and emptied his mind again.

However, the equanimity was eventually broken again almost eight hours later. It wasn't due to the fact the incursion should start any moment now, though. A sudden ripple made Zac's eyes shoot open from his meditation, and the golem next to him immediately rushed out of the submersible. From there, Zac could see the huge upheavals that were taking place in the City of Ancients.

Catheya had been right, there was no doubt about it. The city was completely obscured by thick churning clouds now, and not even the castle in the middle was visible any longer. The grey haze had essentially looked like a solid wall by this point. However, it was still clear that the city was waking up from its slumber as it radiated enormous amounts of energy.

Not only that, but previously invisible inscriptions had appeared on the fortifications, forming some sort of powerful array. One by one they awakened, and the aura the city emitted grew with every breath. The thing didn't feel like an uninviting weaponized fortress though. Its aura wasn't that of bloodshed, but one of ancient mystery.

Zac's mind was occupied elsewhere, but even he couldn't help but become moved by possibilities the place held. More importantly, it meant it was finally time for him to get going. Between the splinter being snatched from under his nose and his followers risking their lives on some unknown world, he held a belly full of anger.

He almost looked forward to running into Uona by this point.

"The ocean has shifted," Faebloom Monarch sighed as a handful of leaves on his head turned white and dropped from his crown. "The last spirit is exposed."

A stir rippled through the room, as this no doubt meant the schemes of the outsiders no doubt had succeeded inside the E-grade trial. A surge of anger filled Rhodium's heart as he gazed across the room. Vassal factions like Karabas Clan no doubt held most of the blame for divulging the secrets of the ocean, which was why they all were absent from this meeting.

However, many of the clans here today had no doubt given up some findings of their own over the years to reap some benefits. Otherwise, something like this simply wasn't possible.

His own clan, Yrvar-Las-Eseru, had held a chair at the council for six million years, yet they only knew of some fragmented rumors about the city that once belonged to that ancient Autarch. But some outsiders had not only managed to locate it, but even modify it before bringing it to the surface? How could that possibly be possible without multiple council members selling out core secrets of the Harbor?

"Is there truly nothing we can do?" Rhodium sighed as he turned to the Faebloom Monarch.

The ancient treant slowly opened his eyes, his expression downcast as he shook his head, causing the leaves in his crown to flutter with the Dao of Nature.

"All our efforts to block the currents of fate have been a failure. The second facet of the Realm Spirit has already dispersed, meaning that the avatar in the E-grade trial is the only one still standing," Faebloom sighed. "Even if it remains to the end of the trial, I think the Twilight Lord will be able to supplant its will and take control."

The fact that the D-grade trial had ended in defeat was ultimately not too surprising. With the advantage of better results across three full grades and far superior equipment, the power discrepancy between the elite and the frontier Hegemons was just too big. However, they had held out some hope that quantity would beat out quality inside the E-grade trial, where they had hundreds of thousands of people working for them.

"It's only one of two, and that man has already seized the core chamber. Besides, they are simply too old," Heryes of the Necromancer's Guild agreed. "They remained hidden for too long, and it's working against us. If they had succumbed to the river of time a few million years ago, a new spirit would have been born by now, one properly in tune with the new realm. That way the Twilight Lord would never have been able to do something like this."

"There's no point in lamenting that right now," Rhodium said. "It looks like we are out of options. We will have to proceed with our final gambit."

"Should we strike now?" Artolo, a Corpselord Monarch, ventured with some anticipation in his eyes.

"It wouldn't work," Heryes grimaced. "That bastard is hiding in the folds between the trial dimensions like its nexus. We might actually be helping him if we strike now."

"What about the Havarok?" a Revenant monarch asked. "Have they answered our call?"

"They have assured us they have the situation under control, but their goal is ultimately not the same as ours. For them, the only thing that matters is killing the impostor and preventing a hostile Autarch from ascending. Ruining our lifeline to make that happen is a small price to pay," Rhodium frowned.

The room once more turned silent, and Rhodium looked around the chamber with lamentation. Twenty-four Monarchs, the weakest of them at the end of the middle stage. Yet they were filled with impotence as fate pushed forward like a tsunami. A tsunami that would swallow their homes and cut off their path of cultivation.

Certainly, none of them were in mortal danger. They could leave at any moment and look for another place to call home. But the price for doing so was too steep. Their current accumulations were thanks to their predecessors' hard work for tens of thousands of generations and the unique environment provided by the Twilight Ocean.

With both gone, they could simply give up on refining their inner worlds any further. Most would no doubt lose a stage or two without the Twilight Rivers providing them with a constant stream of pure energy. Their creations weren't stable enough to withstand the drought of the Frontier for too long.

But there simply weren't too many sanctuaries at the edge of the Multiverse, places where the Dao was clear and the energy dense enough to keep them going.

The few continents that could support a handful of Monarchs had entrenched powers that would fight tooth and nail to keep any rootless clans from settling in. Uprooting the locals would cost too much,

further weakening their already damaged foundations. And joining the greater factions, after rebuffing their inquiries for millions of years?

They'd be lucky to become cannon fodder at some front line in the hopes that their descendants might get to live the life of commoners rather than slaves.

"We can't just wait around," Ovo, one of the two Rox'At Elementals present at the meeting, said as six golden blades appeared behind their back. "Rebirth through death."

Murmurs of agreement echoed through the hall.

"Lady Heryes is right. It is not the right time," Faebloom slowly said.

"It's never the right time with your kind," Artolo growled. "You and the other cowards have prevented any concerted action for months now while the situation grows more and more chaotic. We've spent exorbitant sums setting up those nasty spears, yet they're collecting dust while Alvod Jontun gets closer to his goal."

The treant only grunted in response as space opened up above his crown, depicting the scene in the distance.

A vast ocean of blood churned above the entrance to the Twilight Ocean, stretching for hundreds of kilometers in each direction as it blocked out the spatial anomaly from above. Sitting on top of it was a small island where three warriors emitted tremendous auras. Any one of them would be a match for any of the councilors, but the hooded being in the middle was in a league of his own.

He was shrouded in sinister darkness, and his aura was not only that of a Divine Monarch but one right at the threshold of ascension. They still didn't know his identity, but even a fool would know that he was here to snatch the opportunity for himself.

If the Eternal Clan guarded the Twilight Ocean from above, then the Eidolon guarded it from below. One million crystals formed a shockingly complex set of arrays, thousands of them interwoven with such complexity that they still couldn't make heads or tails of the situation. They hadn't even managed to pinpoint which one of the crystals that housed the Divine Monarch the spectrals had sent.

As if that wasn't enough, there was even a vast nebula slowly rotating around the two guardians, tens of thousands of stars that formed an ever-changing pattern. It did not only provide an outer barrier to stall any sabotage of theirs, but it even blocked out most of their long-prepared methods to influence the trials. If not for the System's warning, none of the Trial Takers would have made it out of that triangle of death.

Artolo snorted when he saw the scene, but his fighting spirit had clearly waned a bit. Taking on not only the Undead Empire, but also the Radiant Temple, was a bit much even for the battle-crazed Corpselord.

"Let us wait a bit longer. The Tarramak Vault will open quite soon. At that point, those three will not be able to act so domineering, and an opportunity should present itself," Rhodium said, and the others nodded. "For now, let us finalize the lances."

"Interesting, interesting," Artolo snickered as he phased out of the chamber. "I've never killed a whole realm before."

