

The Fall 767

Chapter 767: Depths of Madness

"I guess this is it," Catheya smiled as she walked up to Zac, or rather the golem that stood at the edge of the basin.

"Looks like it. Most people seem to agree," Zac nodded.

The whole city was abuzz from the changes, and tens of thousands of warriors streamed toward the four gates. Zac could spot dozens of energy eruptions in the settlements as well, signs of chaotic battles taking place.

The City of Ancients waking up was like a match setting the whole area ablaze, and order was fast crumbling. As things looked, the scene would turn into a full-on war unless something changed. Thankfully, they didn't need to wait for more than another minute before the gates began to swing open, prompting the trial takers to freeze in anticipation.

"No quest," Catheya commented. "At least not here."

"Is that a clue?" Zac asked.

"Increases the likelihood of this being a man-made event," Catheya explained. "If it had been a true ancient city appearing by itself, the Ruthless Heavens would be more likely to turn the event into a limited quest. Of course, with people clawing at the gates, the System might deem it unnecessary to increase the incentives."

Soon enough the doors were completely opened, but Zac still couldn't see what was going on inside. The entrance reminded Zac of a spatial gate, a shimmering wall giving no hints of what waited on the other side. That didn't stop those at the front line though, and thousands of people heedlessly rushed into the unknown, wanting to gain the first-mover advantage.

Others adopted a wait-and-see approach, hoping to use the first batch as an experiment to see what kind of dangers waited on the other side. Unfortunately, not a single one who entered emerged again, which almost certainly confirmed that the City of Ancient was sealed from the inside.

Even then, more and more people kept streaming inside, and hundreds of powerful auras started to descend toward the gates from the cliffs. It was the elites who had bided their time, hiding at the edge. Judging by some of the auras, there were more than a few who possessed Dao Branches. But even they were drawn by the dense energies and mysterious fluctuations coming from the city.

Zac's eyes turned toward the large Havarok encampment in the distance, and he saw how orderly lines of warriors had started pouring toward the gate closest to them as well. The dams had collapsed, and the Havarok had given up on keeping people away. Instead, they joined the fight, though Zac wasn't sure what their exact objectives inside would be.

The real Zac donned the distraction cloak and stepped out from the submersible for the first time in weeks, stowing away the golem who had been his eyes and ears. It was time to make his move. Zac's goals in this place differed from everyone else's, but he still was filled with some anxiety as he saw one warrior after another swimming through the gates into the unknown on the other side.

What if someone somehow managed to get their hands on his splinter and then left?

“Be careful,” Zac said to Catheya as he started to slowly infuse [Abyssal Phase] with Miasma. “Don’t worry about whether I have left or not if things get out of hand. Just exit the trial. I’ll figure something out.”

“Aren’t you sweet,” Catheya smiled as she patted his arm. “And don’t worry. I’ll be fine, as will your followers. Who knows, you might have another planet waiting for you by the time you return home.”

Zac smiled weakly in response, once more filled with urgency. He didn’t know what he could do to help out his people back home, but that didn’t lessen his desire to return.

“Here, use this while you approach,” Catheya said as she handed him an ice shard. “It’ll obscure you, just in case.”

Zac looked at it curiously as he infused it with some Miasma. The ice crystal immediately started expelling motes of ice all around him, hiding him in a shimmering nebula.

“Thank you for all your help,” Zac sighed. “I’ll convey your message to your ancestor as quickly as I can.”

“I have an idea if you’re willing. I can proactively reach out to the Ambassadors, explain your situation, and convey that you are friendly and can be an asset to the Empire. As long as I get the message to representatives of the empire, not even my master would dare make a move on you,” Catheya said. “At least it would give you a window to prepare, no matter what response the empire has. I’ll try to send you a message somehow as well, if I’m in a position to do so.”

Zac slowly nodded, feeling the idea made sense. He had already reconciled with the fact that his secret would be exposed soon enough. If not the moment Catheya left the trial, then at least by the time she returned home. And she was right. It was probably better to reach out to the empire preemptively, rather than leave his secret to a declining clan desperate to regain its glory.

Even if Catheya and possibly her father wanted to befriend him, what about the other elders?

“Alright, I trust your instincts,” Zac smiled. “Get me a good deal, alright? I wouldn’t mind visiting the Abyssal Shores in the future.”

“Gods help us,” Catheya laughed.

The next moment Zac was gone, turned into an abyssal wraith. The world slowed down once more as Zac shot toward the City of Ancients. However, he didn’t go for the closest one, but rather the one to the east. The eastern gate was opposite of the one the Havarok Army was heading toward, which would hopefully minimize his interactions with those people.

They had sent out that olive branch, but Zac wouldn’t trust his life on it.

The ancient city came closer and closer, as Zac moved with blazing speed, but he noted that dozens of the cultivators descending from the ledges could match his pace. He even spotted three that were moving slightly quicker than him, most likely talents who had Dexterity as their main attribute.

Luckily, this was not a race, and Zac didn’t rush into the portal when he landed at the edge of the mob waiting right outside. He immediately started walking through the crowd at random to avoid having

someone focusing on him. Honestly, though, Zac doubted his distraction cloak was even needed judging by how intently most people were staring at the shimmering barrier that hid the insides of the ancient city.

Not a single warrior who had entered had made it back outside, but neither did Zac sense any battles or suspicious fluctuations within the walls. It was completely tranquil, providing no clues as to what waited inside. Zac hesitated a bit as he circuitously came closer and closer to the gate. Should he really enter? It seemed like a pretty deadly event, and he hadn't even confirmed if Uona or the splinter was inside.

But suddenly, a shudder rippled through his mind – it was there.

It was distant and obscured, but he had felt a weak hint of oblivion from the depths of the city. Zac hesitated no longer, and with one leap, he entered the City of Ancients.

A thick haze immediately greeted him on the other side, completely robbing him of any visibility. He couldn't even see the axe that had appeared in his hand, and his Draugr Vision didn't do anything to help him either. The only thing he could sense was what he could touch, and that was the cobblestone street he walked on.

Zac started to make his way forward, his nerves taut in preparation for an ambush. However, what met his gaze was not an army of spectral cultivators or Uona. It was a normal dilapidated street party covered in the ever-present haze. He turned around toward where he came from, but the way back was completely obscured.

He guessed it was a powerful confusion array running along the wall, preventing anyone from leaving. It might be possible to brute force his way out of there, but he had no interest in trying that out right now. He could still sense the splinter, and it felt much closer than before. It was so familiar. The impression was weak, but it reminded him of how it had felt when he had just found himself stuck with the first splinter.

Zac shook his head as he stepped onto the path, his brows scrunching together into a frown.

That god-damned vampire. Zac grit his teeth as he looked around at the ghastly surroundings. Even now that the haze wasn't as dense, he could barely see more than fifty meters ahead. It was all her fault. She had forced him into this cursed place, when he could have been back in Port Atwood by now.

It was her fault that his people had set out on such a dangerous mission without him, invading a world without his protection. Who knew how many deaths it would lead to? Annoyance turned to fury as he continued forward, the knuckles on his right hand whitening as he saw the faces of those back home. He had already lost so many, and Uona had made him lose even more.

A sudden fluctuation in the air made him turn toward the left with a snarl, where a human drenched in blood appeared through the haze, his eyes tinted with madness and suffused with killing intent to the point that the white haze had turned red around him. That suited Zac just fine as he felt in urgent need of some release, and he actually stowed away his axe before he grabbed the man with his bare hands.

The human roared in anger as he tried to rip Zac to pieces, but Zac simply sneered as the four chains of [Love's Bond] blocked his attacks. Zac's own two hands gripped hard and started to pull apart, and the man only had a chance to wail with pain before he was ripped in two. The rain of blood looked so

beautiful as it painted the walls red, and Zac was lost in revelry for a moment. The mists in half the street had gained a rogue tint by now, and Zac felt like the world suddenly was more beautiful.

If he could only find a few more people and complete the imagery...

A sharp pang of pain erupted from his mind as the Shard of Creation slammed against the tunnel, prompting a few new cracks to appear. Zac shuddered as his mind cleared up, and he hurriedly erected the cage around the remnant again. Only then did he look down at his sanguine hands with incomprehension.

What the hell had just happened?

That sense of rage was so familiar. The splinter in Uona's possession, could it really affect him from this far away? It had completely consumed him even if he had felt something was amiss for a few seconds. Or was the splinter in his mind somehow exerting pressure on him now that its brother was closeby? Zac frowned as he looked down at the corpse. Neither felt right.

The haze?

Zac quickly closed his pores and ate a general antidote pill, but it barely helped against the murderous impulses at all. He could quickly confirm that the effect wasn't really medicinal in nature. He closed his eyes and stabilized his mind, moving away from the corpse, or more importantly the pool of blood that seemed to react with the mist.

However, he still felt weird murderous tendencies assail him even after avoiding both red and white mist for a while. It was like the very air was filled with condensed killing intent or something similar, some manner of tainted Mental Energy that couldn't be seen or sensed. [Purity of the Void] was thankfully fast at work purifying the red mist that had already entered his body, but the biggest contributor to his mental state recovering was actually the wild shard in his Soul Aperture.

The air was filled with pervasive killing intent, and it entered his body completely unseen. But the moment the murderous intent came in contact with Creation it mostly fell apart, through his body took some damage from what was created in its stead. Some wounds were a small price to pay though, since the transformations didn't seem to cost him his life span.

The foreign energy that had slipped into his body had paid the price of Creation all on its own, perhaps thanks to having a will. It resulted in weird wounds filled with toxic goop forming in his body. Normally, Zac would have simply cut his arm and exsanguinated some of the impurities to speed up the process, but there was something weird going on with blood in this place as well.

It looked like Ventus' predictions were right on the money. The City of Ancients contained a layered trap of soul and blood. The area itself nurtured and magnified your murderous impulses, perhaps even with the help of the Splinter of Oblivion. Next, blood interacted with the mist and supercharged it into something that provided all of the madness but none of the strength of items like the [Rageroot Oak Seed].

Now that he had realized the danger, Zac didn't feel the threat was too big. At least not for now. His mental state had been in a bad spot because of the stress from the shard and the incursion, allowing him to fall for a trap that normally wasn't nearly strong enough to take someone like him out. As long as

he kept his mind guarded and his mental state stable, he should be able to withstand this place easily enough.

A sloshing sound drew Zac out of his musings, and he looked on with a mix of confusion and disgust as the pool of blood around the corpse started to congeal into small rivers that ran off into the mist, like they were called from the distance. Oddly enough, they didn't move along the main road that should lead toward the heart of the city, but rather down one of the alleys and into the haze.

Zac hesitated for a moment before he shook his head and stayed on the main route, walking down the road and into the darkness. Once more, he found himself shrouded in the haze, but this time he was more cognizant of the risks.

He still heard the whispers, but he steeled his mind as he walked, forcibly keeping the anger at bay. Soon enough, he emerged from the haze, but something was wrong. The street, the buildings, the layout. It didn't fit with the section he had walked through just a few seconds ago. Had he been teleported?

Or was the whole town covered in a confusion array, rather than just the edges? Zac was pretty sure that was the case. It didn't look like he was getting closer to the splinter, even if he had walked toward it in a straight line.

A door suddenly exploded as two bloodied warriors tumbled out, both of them fighting for their lives in a ruthless melee. One of them was an undead warrior using a sword made from ice, and the other was a human holding a staff. But the wizard had clearly gone mad, using his weapon to bash in the swordsman's head rather than conjuring spells.

The outcome of the fight was predictable, with the swordsman skewering the mage, the attack rapidly freezing him into a block of ice. However, the human seemed to have regained a sense of self at the brink of death, and a dozen massive wooden spears teeming with life sprung up from the ground, impaling the ice warrior a dozen times over.

The fight had ended in mutual destruction, and Zac looked on with a frown as the whole street around the two combatants became shrouded in a red mist. The mist only lasted for half a minute before dissipating, and Zac walked over, his eyes on the pool of black blood that had formed beneath the Revenant.

As expected, the ichor started moving soon enough, flowing in a certain direction for around twenty meters before it sunk beneath the cobblestones. Zac immediately followed, entering a side passage. If he couldn't trust his eyes or his sense of direction, he could either choose a path at random or follow the direction of the blood in hopes that it would lead him the right way.

Soon enough he emerged, and a victorious smile covered his face when he sensed that the splinter was a bit closer compared to before. However, just as his sense of the splinter had grown stronger, so had the haze and the whispers of mayhem in the back of his mind.

A dying warrior was lying on the ground right in front of him, and Zac didn't waste any time as he followed the blood that poured out from the man's body. He appeared at another crossroads a moment later. This place was empty of crazed warriors, but it still confirmed his suspicions. The mental oppression was once more marginally stronger, as was the haze.

He would have to delve into the depths of madness if he wanted to find what he was looking for.