

## The Fall 769

### Chapter 769: Sneaking Inside

"Time to go, Number 7," Zac muttered, and he was answered by a bestial roar.

The chains of [Love's Bond] rattled as the Corpselord completely consumed by rage tried to break free for the hundredth time. Zac didn't even register the clamor any longer as he nicked the thigh of the struggling warrior, prompting a small stream of black blood to fall toward the ground.

The ichor was snatched up by the pull before it even had time to land, proving that he had made great progress even though it sometimes didn't feel like it. He flashed forward, immediately entering the haze and leaving the deathly husks of ancient trees behind. Soon enough he appeared in another section, this one thankfully the edge of the forest he had spent the last three hours inside.

He had appeared between two trees in a line that delineated the park, and on the other side of a cobblestone road stood an intricately carved wall leading into what Zac assumed was one of the inner mansions of the City of Ancients. There were no enemies in this one either, and Zac sighed in relief before he closed his eyes.

The last battle had been pretty rough, with Zac being pushed hard by a warrior who wielded two Peak Fragments. Normally, Zac wouldn't have been too worried about such an opponent, but there were so many special restrictions in place here. He had been pushed to fight twice as hard just to avoid getting wounded, and any lapse in concentration led to the shard in his mind desperately trying to break out.

Meanwhile, that warrior had lost his rationality to the environment of the inner regions of the city. He was consumed by his killing intent to the point that he even used life force in his attacks, but not to the point that he forgot how to use skills. Only by whittling him down with his Inexorable Stance had Zac managed to exhaust, trap, and then kill the warrior without wasting too much energy or opening himself up to the madness.

The screams of murder were almost deafening here in the heart of the city, and it felt like the slightest nudge could push him over the edge. For now, his willpower and hidden nodes were enough to make do. But unfortunately the same couldn't be said for Number 7.

Inhuman gurgling sounds echoed out from his captive, and Zac looked over with a sigh. Opening this path was the limits of this Corpselord by the looks of it. His muscles were twisting and turning like a dozen snakes inhabited his body. Any more and he would share the same fate as Compass and Number 2.

"Good luck," Zac muttered as he sprinkled some Calming Dust he had looted from another warrior on the Corpselord before throwing him into the haze.

Zac shook his head and started walking toward the gate leading into the mansion, hoping to find some loot while waiting for the array to reset. He had been so full of momentum two days ago when entering this place, with anger and urgency pushing him forward. But the nature of the City of Ancients constantly sapped him of his momentum, and he just felt mentally exhausted by this point.

The first lesson after parting with the mentalist Revenant was that you couldn't wait too long after following the blood trail. He had wanted to see the result of getting wounded, but that had given the weird array enough time to reset, sending him further away from the core.

From there, he had made pretty quick progress by capturing a warrior who had completely lost his mind already. Since he wasn't in any state to introduce himself, Zac had simply called him Compass, since that was what he would be used as. Compass had provided him with a lot more insights.

First of all, the blood wasn't leading the way. It was opening the path. If too little blood was sacrificed, the paths the blood indicated weren't any better than taking a path at random.

Secondly, you could only advance between three and five zones in a row before being forced to stop for around twenty minutes. Any faster, and you'd get stuck in the haze for half an hour until you were spat out further back than when you started. Zac had eventually figured out when to stop by observing his remnants, but that was only after he had been stuck in the haze four times, wasting quite a bit of time.

Third, you could only be instilled with so much madness before things turned messy. Zac had a small mountain of healing pills by now, and he had simply shifted between bleeding the first man he caught and restoring his blood with pills to make rapid progress. But he had been stopped after being trapped the first time around.

Compass had suddenly exploded, resulting in a massive eruption of blood that had almost managed to drag Zac into madness as well. He had been bled too much, allowing the weird array to reach a critical mass inside his body. The whole section had been turned red upon the eruption, and Zac had been forced to escape down a random path.

The same fate, unfortunately, befell Number 2, another warrior deep into the throes of madness by the point Zac ran into her. She had already killed her enemies and her allies by the time Zac found her, and she became proof that people could only get bled so many times before the accumulated toxins became too much to bear, even if you gave it some time in-between.

Now, Zac simply captured any blood-crazed person he ran into and borrowed their blood before letting them go. After helping himself to their Cosmos Sacks, of course. If they survived or not after that would be up to their luck.

He had hoped Number 7 would be able to take him the final stretch, but he found himself stranded once more. At least he could feel he was extremely close by now. The splinter's presence was palpable, and this was the second park he had passed through. There were only so many of them in the City of Ancients, and he guessed that the castle would be coming up any time now.

Zac looted the gatehouse of the mansion with practiced ease, but he was barred from entering the proper structure by a wall of haze. Any further, and he'd end up somewhere random again. Normally, he would have been extremely annoyed at not being able to enter the core sections of the mansion, but he had encountered this situation over a dozen times already.

Only open spaces were included in the maze that the Eidolon and Uona had crafted, with just the edges of the communal spaces and mansions being accessible. He had looted over fifty houses of some random crystals and treasures already, but he still hadn't found a single trove worthy of its name so far.

Time passed, and Zac started to hesitate about what to do. There was nothing else except the edge of the park and the gatehouse. He could dismantle the wall itself, but it was made from some common E-grade stone that wasn't worth more than a few E-grade coins.

He had been forced to backtrack and lose over two hours' progress to find Number 7, and now he was even further into the maze. Only a handful had the ability to get this far, and none of them would be an easy target to capture and bleed. Zac looked in the direction of the splinter again, finally coming to a decision.

He'd roll the dice. The splinter felt so close that he could almost touch it, and going by the vast wall enclosing the mansion, it had to be one of the buildings neighboring the castle itself. Still, he did have some misconceptions about sacrificing some of his blood.

Hopefully, his solution would work.

He took a steadying breath before weakening the cage to the shard, causing a flood of Creation energy to course through his body. The remnant was veritably vibrating by this point, and Zac wasn't sure he'd be able to keep it contain it with Mental Energy much longer. It was clearly gearing up for war, each shudder squeezing out a little bit more Creation Energy in anticipation.

Zac only released a small bit of what he had captured in the prison, but it was enough to almost overwhelm him. The whispers of mayhem were immediately drowned out by the whispers of possibility, but Zac forcefully kept his mind blank before he cut a small before pricking his finger with [Verun's Bite], and a drop of pure darkness appeared.

Just as the ichor was about to get dragged off to god-knows-where, a surge of Creation entered it on Zac's command. The drop flew toward the left for a few seconds before it turned into a small firefly that swung its pitch-black wings a few times before exploding. A surge of killing intent filled him, but it was immediately doused in the clamor of the rampaging Creation.

Zac immediately flashed away from the reddening mists and toward the direction the drop indicated, and he immediately pushed on the wound to squeeze out a stream of blood before it closed. A storm of Creation entered his ichor this time as well, but it only shuddered as Zac tried to keep the energy contained.

The ichor entered the white mist, and Zac sensed the small shift that confirmed the path had opened. He flashed forward, but he swore when he appeared in another small section of the City of Ancients rather than inside the castle. Zac's anger only lasted a second before he quelled his mind, but it was still enough to conjure a massive gate out of gold in front of him.

A pained grimace appeared on Zac's face over the loss of life force, but at least there was some good news to go with the bad. It wasn't a random occurrence that an opulent gate had appeared from his expenditure of creation. Another one could barely be discerned within the mist at the other side of the area, this one even larger than the one he had created.

In fact, he didn't see the top of the gate, or the wall it was attached to, even though the visibility reached over fifty meters in the air. Even the ostentatiously decorated wall in the previous section was only ten meters high or so, indicating he might just have found his goal. If this wasn't the wall leading to the castle in the middle, then what was?

The gate was barely visible with most of it swallowed by the mist, and Zac walked back and forth with a frown wondering just what the best course of action was. He punched the towering wall to see if breaking through was feasible, but it only ended with a painful rebound hurting his knuckles, while not as much as a crack appeared on the brick he had targeted.

Zac's abyssal eyes widened in shock. He hadn't infused his Dao or full power into the attack, but there was almost thirty thousand effective Strength behind the punch. It was enough to turn a small mountain into gravel, yet he hadn't even left a mark on this stone? It wasn't like he had sensed any array or barrier blocking his attack either.

Just how sturdy was this material?

Zac tried to break the stone with his axe as well, but even a high-powered swing only left a surface mark rather than a scar. Zac looked at the enormous wall, and an almost impossible thought crossed his mind. Had someone actually used a D-grade material to build a wall as big as this? Were there cultivators this disgustingly wealthy?

His brain almost short-circuited at the thought of the costs involved for such an undertaking. There were no doubt many ancient clans in the Multiverse heartlands who could do something like this without a care, but this was ultimately the Frontier. From what he had heard, there were quite a few Monarchs in the Frontier that hadn't even seen C-grade materials their whole lives.

Even the well-off Monarchs from established forces considered C-grade materials as priceless treasures, perhaps only getting their hands on a handful during their whole lives. After all, C-grade materials were simply too slow to come into being. If it took a million years to nurture a Monarch, then it might take ten times that for a C-grade herb to come into being unless some special circumstance was speeding the process along.

Problem was, how often could a stretch in the forest remain untouched for ten million years, even in a secluded Mystic Realm? Natural calamities, beasts fighting for territory, greedy cultivators looting the herb while it still was E- or D-grade. The spots these herbs could appear in the Frontier were scarce enough, and it wasn't like these places would be left untouched for the time required.

That's why D-grade materials were the base resource for Frontier Monarchs to progress as well, where they replaced quality with quantity. They swallowed mountains of resources just to maintain their cultivation, constantly scratching their heads on how to gather enough money to progress as well.

For them to build a simple fortification purely from D-grade materials? Inconceivable.

The scene far surpassed his earlier estimation of what kind of town this was. It had to be an exceedingly wealthy Monarch who had once lived here. A Divine Monarch, probably, who had less use for D-grade materials. Perhaps... Even someone greater.

Zac's heart hammered as he considered the possibility of looting an Autarch's residence. Even if it was just an Autarch's outhouse, it was probably worth as much as a small kingdom in the Zecia sector going by the extravagance of the outer wall. But Zac forcibly calmed his mind and refocused on the task at hand.

Cutting his way through the wall was out of the question. The only method he saw would work was if he either expelled an Annihilation Sphere to blow a hole, or large amounts of Creation energy to turn the stone into something else. Problem was, the wall was probably way too thick to blow up even with all the Oblivion Energy he had accumulated. And who knew how much lifespan would be required to transmute solid D-grade stone?

The wall was completely airtight as well, making it impossible to make use of [Abyssal Phase]. Zac looked around with hesitation before he released a small creation-infused droplet of ichor again. As expected, it shot into the wall rather than into one of the side passages.

Eventually, Zac walked over to the arch of the gate, trying to peer around its edge. Finally, there was some good news, as Zac could see that there wasn't a door in the way. It might have rotted off, or it might be some sort of drop-down gate. In either case, he could barely make out a tunnel of unknown depth.

He couldn't see the other side at all as it was covered in an extremely thick layer of mist. But that was enough for him, and a plan had already formed in Zac's mind. A bottle appeared in his hand, and a small river of blood started pouring out onto the ground some distance from the gate. Even this close to the core of the City of Ancients, the 'dead' blood wasn't dragged away, but rather formed a pool on the ground before it slipped between the cobblestones.

The whole area darkened as the extremely condensed clouds started absorbing the blood, and Zac felt his whole vision turning red. That didn't stop Zac though as he kept pouring out blood, and he was elated to see that his plan worked.

It almost looked like a strong draft affected the tunnel as haze kept streaming out from the gate, heading straight for the still-growing pool of blood. Previously, the tunnel had been completely filled, and Zac knew from experience that passing through in a situation like that would get him all turned around until he appeared god-knows-where in the city.

But now, the haze had thinned out, though it still was a bit iffy whether it was enough. Zac grit his teeth and crushed the bottle, prompting a cascade of blood to come crashing out. Tens of thousands of liters created a gory tsunami, making it look like he was under attack by Uona.

Zac was absolutely drenched in blood, and he felt his vision swim for a bit as his mind grew muddled. But the pain from a series of clashes between creation and bloodlust in his body kept him sane enough to remember what he needed to do. The chains of [Love's Bond] rushed into the tunnel, which now had a space over fifteen centimeters wide void of any haze.

He was finally able to see the end of the tunnel, allowing him to latch two of the chains to the wall on the other side, while another two kept him in place to the outer wall. With this, he was firmly attached to the wall, and it shouldn't be possible for him to be dragged away by the confusion array.

The environment was quickly becoming unbearable where he was, so Zac wasted no time putting his plan to practice. Two of the chains extended while the other two retracted, which dragged Zac through the tunnel like he was attached to a conveyor belt.

The haze was all around him, making any sense of direction impossible, but he kept pushing himself through until he suddenly found himself on the other side of the tunnel. It felt like he had finally

escaped a nightmare where he kept running in place as the small snippets surrounded by obscuring clouds had been replaced by a grand view of a huge castle reaching toward the sky.

He had made it.

However, a wave of killing intent reminded him that he had just completed the easy part of his mission. This killing intent didn't come from some array this time, but rather a small army of red-eyed cultivators surrounded by swirls of blood. They looked a bit surprised by his appearance, but that was about it.

"Our mistress was wondering if you would show up," one of the leaders said as dozens of powerful auras were released. "She will be delighted to learn of your presence."

"So much for sneaking," Zac muttered as a huge jagged edge appeared in front of [Verun's Bite].