

The Fall 964

Chapter 964: Missions

"This seems... ill-advised," Ra'Klid hesitated as he looked at the screen, but shook his head in helplessness upon seeing the expressions of those around him.

Ogras was barely listening as he tried to make sense of the readings his girl was spitting out, but there were others to deal with these kinds of matters.

"How so?" Vilari smiled, her gaze making the skittish chiefling swallow nervously.

"I mean..." Ra'Klid said as he waved at the weird gash in space and the huge frozen corpses floating around it.

"The beasts are quite dead, I assure you," Vilari said.

"That's not the problem," Ra'Klid said with a roll of his eyes. "Why are they out here, and what's with the wounds on their bodies? Something made these big bastards run for their lives, to the point they jumped through a spatial scar to escape."

"Those wounds might have come from passing through the hole in space," Ibtep shrugged. "We saw what happened to the moon the other day. To shreds in seconds."

"You are only furthering my point," Ra'Klid groaned. "Why would we enter such a place?"

"In search of opportunities, of course," Ogras snorted as he finally looked up from the readouts. "The space on the other side nurtured at least seven Beast Kings, which means the energy density is good. The atmosphere inside is also decently stable, and the readings indicate it's not too large. We can search the place within a week without splitting up."

"Multiple Beast Kings shared such a small region?" Rhuger said with surprise as he turned to Tom, one of the non-combat personnel who'd been brought along. "What's going on?"

Ogras looked over as well. Apparently, this human had been a scientist of some renown before Earth had been integrated. Ogras didn't understand what was so interesting about celestial objects; their heat made it impossible for most types of treasures to survive. And the few that were nurtured on the celestial objects were impossible to bring out even for most Hegemons.

However, Tom Nowak's pre-world knowledge had translated into a star-based class, and he had even managed to form a Dao Seed related to space. Armed with the powerful arrays of the Temptress, the flagship of their expedition, he'd been able to both prevent some beginner's mistakes and find small opportunities over the three months since they entered the Million Gates Territory.

This place was discovered by Tom as well, further proving these brainiacs were worth their weight in gold. Even better, they were mostly content exploring space and studying various phenomena. Apart from the occasional materials they wanted for experiments, they didn't cost a thing. They were even happy to pilot the ship without any pay.

"We're still running some tests, but I think I understand what's going on," Tom said. "It seems this gate is just a shard of a much-larger Mystic Realm. The real thing either collapsed or had this splinter shaved

off for some reason. Either case, this shard was set adrift and eventually closed in on this particular dimension.”

“So the beasts might have been wounded during the upheavals,” Ogras nodded. “And I’d also want to leave if the sky collapsed on my head.”

“Is it safe to enter?” Vilari asked.

“It’s stable for now, but it’s hard to tell for how long. I doubt a realm of this size can survive for much more than a month or two in this kind of chaotic environment, especially after colliding with a main dimension like this.” Tom said.

“Perfect,” Ogras grinned.

What made the Million Gates Territory so dangerous was also what made it so alluring. Its name was truly apt. A million gates invited travelers to the mysterious beyond at any moment, thanks to the spatial storms that had raged for innumerable years. On the other side, anything from ancient troves to deathtraps awaited. And if you were too slow, the storms would swallow or drag away your chance at riches.

“Perfect?” Ra’Klid groaned. “That thing can collapse anytime, and we’d be spat out into the Void.”

“Exactly. If this is a time-limited trove, all the more reason to hurry,” Ogras said.

“The captain is correct,” a rumbling voice echoed as the Zhix party entered the deck. They must have realized the ship had stopped and ended their cultivation session early. “We joined this expedition in search of opportunities to further ourselves. Those opportunities will not be found in easy-to-find or safe locations.”

“No wonder the scions of the Atwood Empire are progressing so quickly,” Ra’Klid said with resignation. “You people are lunatics.”

“So the Mavai are staying behind?” Vilari asked, a small smile playing on her face.

“Of course not,” Ra’Klid sighed. “I just felt there should be at least one voice of caution in this group of daredevils. That guy Carl seems to be the only one in this party without a death wish.”

“Alright, enough with your whining,” Ogras said with an annoyed wave as he closed the console. “Go get your shaman; his spells might be needed inside. That goes for the rest of you too. We’re entering in an hour after we’ve finished scanning the region and erecting the isolation arrays. Command group, let’s talk.”

The people in the deck sprung to action, their previous excursions to various asteroids and dead planets proving to be useful experience now that the stakes were higher. Everyone knew there were no safety nets out in space, no Lord Atwood to deal with the terrors in the dark.

Ogras entered a sealed chamber with Rhuger, Joanna, Vilari, and Rhubat in tow. The five of them were the only ones who knew of the covert mission of their outing, so Ogras had created a command group consisting of the five so that they could discuss the matter without raising suspicion.

“Is this it?” Ogras asked Vilari after the door closed behind them.

"I'm afraid not," Vilari said with a shake of her head.

"You were the one who said you felt a nudge in this direction," Ogras reminded. "From that ball of yours."

"I do, but this tear seems to be unrelated. What's calling me is further beyond," the mentalist explained.

"Fate cannot be rushed, Shadewar," Rhubat said. "What will be, will be."

"Told you I'm not a fan of that name," Ogras muttered, but the Zhix paid him no mind. "Alright, I guess we're lucky this isn't it. That way, we won't need to go overboard on our first real mission. Let's use this as a chance to integrate our forces into one unit."

The Command Group went over the details for another ten minutes before they went about their preparations. An hour later, a group of 20 had gathered in the Temptress's hangar. With so few expedition members, each outing was essentially a full mobilization, where only the non-combatants and a skeleton crew were left behind to deal with surprises.

"Alright, let's not waste any time," Ogras said as the door to the small shuttle opened. "We know very little about what's on the other side. We move together, and remember your roles. Never deactivate the protective talismans, and never stray outside the War Array on your own. We're in the wild now, and we're definitely not the apex predators in this place."

The shuttle flew out from the gate in hull a moment later, and Ogras nodded upon seeing the six satellites already surrounding the area. They were part of the kit of the Drone ship in his Spatial Ring rather than the Starflash model, but they could be used in limited numbers with all the Creator Models.

Their use was simple; to hide the area and make spatial phasing difficult to impossible. If someone were passing by this dimensional region, their arrays would find this particular dimension turbulent, which was incredibly common in the Million Gates Territory. Unless they actually knew about the gate, they'd move on to calmer waters.

The shuttle reached the spatial gash in no time. Everyone inside didn't dare so much as breathe as the ship slowly passed through to the other side, but the craftsmanship of the Creators was something else. Only a small shudder rippled through the vessel before they were through. What came next was much worse.

"Brace!" Joanna screamed as she desperately veered, but the ship was still rocked as blinding red lights passed through the cockpit.

A cascade of defensive fields from the Valkyries and the Mavai Shaman clashed with the raging red, and the foreign energy was quenched before it managed to cause any damage.

"What the hell was that?" Ogras grunted, and he got his answer a moment later when the knocked-out scanning arrays woke up again.

The world they'd entered was one dominated by giants; giant trees as large as cities reaching toward the sky, their sprawling branches wide enough to hold whole ecosystems. But it was clearly a kingdom in decline, with flames raging across vast swathes of the Mystic Realm. Other trees had been toppled by other forces, most likely massive earthquakes judging by the deep scars that ran through the ground.

The scene was impressive, considering each one of the Trees seemed to be D-grade Spiritual Plants, with a large number of lesser herbs growing on their massive bodies. But Ogras was more concerned by the commotion on the other side of the Mystic Realm, the source of the red energy that had almost shot down their vessel.

It looked like a hauntingly beautiful yet dangerous flower hundreds of meters tall, with innumerable petals and pistils made from arcs of pure red energy. It swayed back and forth erratically as though buffeted by invisible winds. What had hit them was just the edge of a wayward streak of energy, having crossed almost the whole realm to slap them silly.

Of course, it wasn't actually a flower. The scene seemed to result from something incredibly energy-rich going haywire on the ground.

"What the hell is that?" Joanna muttered from her pilot's seat.

"No idea, but the energy lashes radiate upward, barely damaging the ground. Hide behind one of the big guys for now," Ogras said.

"One second," Joanna said as she rapidly pushed a series of buttons before the shuttle dove for the forest below.

"What's wrong?" Ogras asked, and the others looked over curiously from the hold.

"I thought I saw something; look at this," Joanna said, and a magnified image appeared a moment later.

It was the base of the energy flower. Most of it was covered by the trees, but you could barely make out a broken dome the lights seemed to emerge from.

"A structure?" Ogras whistled, his heart skipping a beat.

"Looks like ruins," Rhuger commented, the excitement in his turquoise eyes mirroring Ogras's own. "It might be a treasure's emanations."

"Or some old failing array going haywire, to the point a Mystic Realm broke apart," Joanna said as she turned to Ogras. "This seems like a pretty big risk. What do you think?"

"Taking risks is the only way to rise against the river of fate," Ogras said, adding under his breath. "And I refuse to sink."

"It's even more pitiful than I imagined," Yselio Tobrial sighed as they stepped out through the gate. "It's like you can barely breathe. To think one of the Pillars is in such a region of space."

"Only worse from here on out, kid," Ylvin grunted as he waved over his subordinate, who'd arrived ahead of time. "This region is still not technically considered the Frontier."

"General," the captain said with a bow before turning to Yselio with another bow. "Lord Vindicator."

"What did you find?" Ylvin asked as they walked out from the Alliance Teleporter toward the closest square, where a vessel was already waiting.

Normally, the capitals of empires were no-fly zones. But rules were man-made prisons, and they were never absolute. There were ranges of encroachment that would go unpunished, and even greater transgressions would often lead to bigger gains than losses. In this case, the issue was simply solved by having the right surname.

“There are no direct routes, but arrangements have been made,” the soldier said and handed over two crystals. “We didn’t dare choose the destination, so we’ve made preparations for both. We await your decision.”

Ylvin and Yselio took one crystal each, scanning its contents.

“Six months?” Yselio frowned. “We’re falling behind the competition.”

“Those Stillsun bastards playing favorites,” Ylvin snorted.

“It might also be the fact that my Royal Father and Uncles threw them out of the Heavenly Realm,” Yselio said with a wry smile.

“The Emperors were absolutely justified. If that Povan Stillsun was allowed to stay any longer, then an Eighth Heaven would emerge within a million years or so. That man is just too scary,” Ylvin shuddered. “With the Third already creating problems from the shadows and the Neural Network trying to sneak its way inside, we cannot abide another.”

“You’re right, of course, but it does put us in a bit of a bind,” Yselio said as he thoughtfully looked down at the two crystals. “Two routes, two very different paths.”

“The Edge of the Seventh Heaven picked you. You will have to choose the path,” Ylvin said.

“The Kan’Tanu,” Yselio said after some thought. “But send Captain Soha and five Adjudicators to Zecia. It might prove useful.”

“Right away, Lord,” the captain bowed.

“You’re curious,” Yselio smiled when he saw Ylvin’s look. “Why I picked the Black Heart offshoot, even though the trial seems to originate in Zecia.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m curious. I’m just here to make sure you don’t get yourself killed early. But if you’re willing to explain your thought process, I am willing to listen,” Ylvin shrugged.

“It’s amazing you’ve reached such a rank within the courts with your curt demeanor,” Yselio laughed as the two boarded the Cosmic Vessel, ignoring the local Monarchs who had come over to greet their arrival.

“Strong fist and strong backing,” Ylvin said.

The two walked in silence through the B-grade vessel, and neither spoke up until the ship rose from the square and silently moved into space.

“Well?” Ylvin eventually asked, prompting a smile from Yselio.

“I picked it because my gut told me it would be better.”

“Your gut? That’s it?” Ylvin said with a mix of disbelief and disgust. “This is a serious matter with wide ramifications. Only the First Heaven has managed to claim a Pillar so far.”

“I know that,” Yselio shrugged. “That’s exactly why I went with my instinct.”

Ylvin pretended to look disinterested, but a smile tugged at Yselio’s mouth. The adopted grandson of his uncle wore his emotions on his sleeve, and Yselio could tell his Monarch guardian was about to get annoyed. And as both he and his siblings had been made aware over the years, Ylvin did not care whether the target of his ire was a royal prince when he was in the mood to beat someone up.

“I’m strong, but Yrin is stronger. I’m smart, but Yzum is smarter. And that’s not even counting the scions of the Fourth and Sixth, who were both qualified to contend for the pillar. Yet the Heavens chose me. What does it come down to? Fate. For some reason, my fate with the Left Imperial Palace is the strongest, so I will listen to the whispers of fate for direction.”

“And it told you to choose Kan’Tanu,” Ylvin said with a thoughtful look.

“Now I just need to figure out why.”

The two watched the ship enter the Void, piercing toward the utmost edges of the incorporated universe. There was not much point using the wretched teleportation systems in this region. A proper vessel would move with roughly the same speed. There were no doubt some local vaults that could have sped up their journey, but they neither had the paths nor the keys.

“What you said is true, but you forgot to mention one thing,” Ylvin grunted after a minute of silence. “You’re far more devious and scheming than either of those little straight shooters. Don’t think the elders didn’t notice what you did to the other candidates.”

“There must be a misunderstanding,” Yselio smiled.

“Bah, what misunderstanding? You’re clever, but those old guys are fused with the realm itself. How can you hide from their gaze? But it’s fine, you kept it within their tolerance levels. Besides, we are heading into a chaotic struggle with unknown requirements and participants. We don’t need a hero. We need a devil.”

Yselio didn’t answer, but his smile grew wider. A devil, huh?

—————

How did it come to this?

Emily blankly looked out through the window of her small pod, the pain and sedatives preventing her from even moving as the healing arrays slowly mended broken bones and lacerated flesh. There was nothing but darkness on the horizon. Yet Emily knew the horrors that hid in that endless black.

So many dead.

She didn’t even know if Warsong had made it out alive, though she suspected he had. It seemed he and the other leaders had run for their lives before the ship was hit by that storm, only sparing her a single transmission before he was gone.

Then again, she couldn't complain. Not even Monarchs were safe in this place, and Warsong had no obligation to risk his life for her. His early warning had allowed her to jump into her personal life pod in time, while tens of thousands most likely died when the Cosmic Vessel was ripped apart.

They had set out with such vigor, but the Million Gates Territory quickly beat the sense of invincibility out of their bones. It was hard to pretend you were a master of the universe when you were just a speck in an angry and unforgiving sea. The advance army hadn't managed to find a single invader before a random spatial fluctuation put their grand ambitions to an abrupt end.

Sometimes she wondered if those who fell immediately were the lucky ones. Fifty days had passed since her pod was flung god-knows-where in the storm. Most systems were damaged, turning the pod into a coffin sailing through space. She was alone, helpless—a prisoner with only her thoughts for company.

She missed home.