

The Fall 966

Chapter 966: Shadewar

“Brats, you think you can keep us out forever?!” the six-meter golem roared as he swung his hammer in their direction.

With the swing, dozens of earthen spears tore out of the ground and shot toward them, but earth rose to meet earth as a supercondensed stone exploded forth with far greater ferocity. It shattered the spears without losing momentum before slamming into the Dao-infused hammer. Both hammer and golem were thrown over fifty meters away, and it was hard to tell whether he was still alive.

It was Rhubat who had launched yet another ruthless strike, and his even stare cowed any further attempts at breaking through their perimeter. By the boundless killing intent radiating from his body, the Anointed might very well be ready to wage a solitary war against the hundreds of pirates who had gathered up and sealed off their escape.

For now, Rhubat held himself in check, and thank god for that. Carl could tell these people weren’t any sort of top-tier individuals, but they were ruthless, crazy, and most had weird items that bordered or downright embraced the unorthodox. Even if their squad could win the battle, the risk of casualties was high.

And who were the most likely candidates to become a sacrifice to this madness? The top-tier elites of the Atwood Empire with stockpiles of marvelous treasures provided by their mad Emperor, or the grunts filling up the numbers? Considering his wife was also here, Carl said a silent prayer for peace. But in his heart of hearts, he knew it was just a matter of time.

The apple didn’t fall far from the tree, and the fruits grown from Lord Atwood’s nurturing were all rotten.

“More incoming! Hegemons!” Carl transmitted to the others from his lookout atop the pillar.

They were just dots on the horizon, but Carl inwardly swore when he saw the radiating waves of energy around them. They came from five directions, most likely the other entrances of the realm. It looked like the realm seal had finally weakened to the point the bigshots could make their way inside. With everyone having gathered at this spot after weeks of looting, they didn’t even bother with the other treasure mountains.

Carl glanced back at the odd rotund structure behind them. It was hard to believe this thing was just the base of an array tower rather than some ancient fort. It was over ten thousand meters across, large enough to hold a whole city. Now, it just stood one hundred meters tall, a far cry from when it pierced the sky.

Even more terrifying was the ancient sword aura that lingered at the edge where the whole thing had been cut off, the tower itself collapsed and turned into a mountain range. That sword aura was beyond anything Carl had ever seen, and it didn’t feel like something that should exist on the Frontier. Only a shadow of the original intent lingered, yet it bent reality itself, conjuring those sword servants across the whole Mystic Realm.

And the worst of it was no doubt inside that confusing maze of oversized circuitry. Carl couldn't fathom how that scatterbrained Zhix would survive in that place. Vilari, he could understand. That girl was a menace, scattering sword servants left and right with a glare. But what was Ibtep to do? Treat the illusory swords to those, admittedly delicious, critters of his?

And why the hell did the rest of them have to stay outside while those two went inside to search for god knows what? Why did they need to defend the entrance with their lives?

This was different from the various excursions over the past months. It felt shady, troublesome. And not only because this was one of the few outings where multiple forces had appeared to contend for the riches. The ancient array tower, the sword aura, the sneaky glances between the members of the command group. Carl knew a conspiracy when he saw one.

He simultaneously wanted to know the truth and stay clear. It smelled of trouble. It smelled of the crazy Lord Atwood and his machinations.

Luckily, these pirates treasured their lives and had no trust in each other. Annihilating the few who stepped out first had been enough to cow the rest into a passive state, but that would only work until the Hegemons appeared.

"The vice-captains are coming," another golem snickered, seemingly uncaring his buddy had been thrown away like a piece of trash. "We'll have fun with you bastards then. Your fancy ship can't save you in here."

Like on a hidden signal, the dozen-odd crews moved further back, giving the Atwood crew and the sole entrance to the broken Array Tower a wide berth. Left were the 25 warriors who guarded the gates, led by their increasingly reckless demon captain.

Unfortunately, few others seemed to share his concern over the suspicious behavior of Captain Azh'Rezak. Even his former comrade-in-arms Ra'Klid had lost his way and was now looking at the surrounding army with anticipation as he gripped his axe and shield. Gone were the words of caution, replaced by an insatiable desire for trouble. And he wasn't the only one.

"We should attack, weaken their strength before the leaders arrive," Rhubat rumbled while the other two Zhix looked ready to throw away their lives. "We cannot let anyone disturb the two."

Ogras didn't immediately answer, instead opting to turn toward Carl. "How many?"

"Eight that I saw," Carl said as he jumped down. "But more might be coming."

"Anyone from the direction of our gate?"

"None," Carl said.

"Well, that's good," Joanna said. "Those drones are worth every penny."

"They can't fight an armada alone, though," Carl hesitated.

"It's fine," Ogras said. "Those two have already been inside for a day. It shouldn't be much longer. Let's wait for our guests to arrive. That way, we can deal with them all at once."

“Do you have a plan, Shadewar?” Rhubat asked, looking down at the much-smaller demon.

“I figured it was time I tried out the thing I’ve been working on,” Ogras shrugged. “I’ll see if I can deal with all the Hegemons. They shouldn’t be too powerful going by their underlings. You just follow behind me and fill up the gaps.”

“What gaps?” Joanna said with confusion.

“You’ll see,” Ogras smiled. “For now, defend and prepare for an attack. Remember, our main goal isn’t to eradicate these people but to ensure Vilari and Ibtep aren’t interrupted before they return. Anyone that so much as looks at the entrance, kill them.”

Another twenty minutes passed until the eight powerful auras appeared above the pirate army almost simultaneously. Carl inwardly scoffed at the sight. They had obviously timed their arrivals, none wanting to arrive first and be the focus of attention.

The eight seemed to know each other, which wasn’t a surprise. Few low-tier pirate crews dared steer their run-down vessels through the larger gates that could move you across vast distances in the Million Gates Territory. They kept to their quadrant, waiting for opportunities to arrive, be it easy-to-grab resources or unlucky passers-by. Even better, none seemed able to cow the other seven with their reputation alone, which meant none of the local tyrants had arrived.

Eventually, one of the eight floated forward, looking down at them with a neutral expression. “A small party with surprising wealth and strength, but you are all young and untested by the dangers of the Million Gates Territory. I am guessing you are outsiders?”

“Outsiders? Like the invaders?”

“The forces of Zecia are outsiders here just as much as these invaders are,” the man said.

“You are newcomers, so making mistakes is normal. But you should understand there are rules,” the grey-skinned humanoid continued. “Rules to keep the harmony.”

“Rules? Harmony?” Ogras guffawed. “Are you really pirates?”

“We’re just people making a living in a rough and unforgiving world,” the humanoid countered. “It’s hard to survive out in the wild, so it’s better to make friends than enemies. We don’t ask for much. Fifty percent of what you looted from the surrounding mountains and free access to investigate this mysterious structure. In return, you will be free to leave, and we will not harm the two who have already entered.”

Oh no.

They asked for the captain’s loot. If there were any chances of reconciliation before, they were gone now. Carl almost wondered if the lack of resources had become a heart demon for their leader, pushing him ever harder in their outings. Or was it the result of being under a man whose talent to attract wealth was only second to his talent to attract trouble? Was greed contagious?

“Only fifty percent, huh?” Ogras said with an all-too-calm smile as his body started to grow. “Counter-offer. You fuck off right now, or I kill you all and take one hundred percent of your loot.”

Both sides were already primed for battle, and the demon's words became the signal for hundreds of skills to be launched toward them. Carl inwardly cried as his arrow array appeared behind his back, before dozens of shimmering bolts shot toward the core of the incoming attacks. Meanwhile, heavy shields slammed into the ground as the Valkyries activated the arrays, and a thick barrier sprung up in front of them.

The whole area shook as frenzied waves of energy slammed into the shield, but it blocked out the pirates' initial salvo. Some of the attacks went wide and hit the array tower instead, but nothing could leave so much as a scratch on that impossibly sturdy metal. Carl's heart beat like a drum as he returned fire, his arrows targeting those on the ground who had exhibited a greater penchant for ranged warfare.

The others similarly unleashed attacks from within their barrier, but there were just too few of them. These pirates were disorganized and weak, but there were hundreds of them and they were supported by eight Hegemons. Only a few attacks passed through the discordant shields they had erected, taking out a few of the most unlucky attackers.

Carl's eyes turned to their captain, waiting to see his response. But he wasn't there. Carl swore upon seeing that the lunatic had actually jumped out from the shield. Did he think he was the Lord? And what kind of skill was that? The demon was a demon no more – he had become a true devil.

Reaching almost ten meters, he had become a shadow creature brought out from one's deepest nightmares. Dozens of attacks had hit him the moment he stepped out, but even the Hegemons' attacks passed right through his intangible body. How was that possible? Even spectral cultivators would be affected when struck by a Dao, but Ogras seemed completely unruffled as he took in the battlefield.

In one hand, Ogras held a black spear seemingly wrought from the night sky. In the other, a thin flag that made Carl's hair stand on end. The banner itself didn't seem to be made out of fabric, but rather hundreds of anguished faces that moved in a repellent way, creating a band of suffering stretching down to the ground.

Carl vaguely heard Ogras mutter something, like he was talking with the flag, which made Carl's heart drop even further. Was the demon really losing his mind? This was no time for a psychological evaluation, though. They needed to be ready to support whatever move their captain was about to unleash.

Ogras swung the spear, and it was almost like their surroundings had become a punctured balloon as all light was drained. But even if their captain had somehow drenched the world in dour anthracite, Carl could still see their enemies just fine. The pirates didn't seem to have the same luxury, looking back and forth with fear on their faces. A few were running already, heedless of their bosses being right there.

Most took up defensive positions, fearing an attack was coming their way. And they were absolutely right.

A terrifying cackle echoed through the battlefield as Ogras swung the flag. Over a hundred spectral creatures appeared in the darkness. Most were indistinct ghost types, but Carl swore when he actually recognized a few of the forms. Two were the assassins who had tried to sneak aboard their ship and steal it a few months back. The bastards who killed John. A few others were opponents felled by the demon in the battle inside the treasure moon.

Now, they looked like mindless spectral cultivators as they rushed for the unwitting pirates like a tide rising from the netherworld. Ogras joined in as his form expanded even further, turning into a huge maw that seemed ready to swallow the Hegemons whole. It turned into a bloodbath almost instantly, with Ogras and his minions being both quick and seemingly impossible to retaliate against.

Four Hegemons were ripped apart in an instant before the others managed to break apart the darkness, and the other four were wrapped up in a losing battle against the storm of shadows.

“Shadewar indeed,” Rhubat sighed before rushing forward, wading straight into the mayhem to fill the gaps like ordered.

The others followed suit, dealing with common soldiers.

“Don’t get distracted,” Lissa said from a few meters over, and Carl once more thanked the gods she’d been assigned to guard those who maintained the barrier to the entrance. “You’re our sniper.”

“So the young lord has turned into a shadow monster,” Carl said as he shot out a perfunctory arrow that pierced the skull of a pirate who had taken out what looked like a rocket launcher.

“It would appear that way,” Lissa nodded.

“And he’s waving around an obviously cursed soul-trapping item like a madman.”

“Seems to work for him.”

“Promise me,” Carl said as he looked at his smiling wife. “After this, no more.”

“Well, maybe if I had a child to care for, I’d be less likely to take these large risks,” Lissa said, eliciting a few laughs from the nearby Valkyries.

“I’ll speak with the alchemists,” Carl said, ignoring the teasing looks as he started shooting arrows with newfound vigor. “That’s an assignment I’ll finish even if I die trying.”

“Well, first, we have to survive the next 20 months in this place,” Lissa laughed as she disappeared. She’d skewered an invisible pirate who’d tried fleeing into the base a moment later.

“Twenty months,” Carl muttered, knowing their budding reputation in this quadrant would get even more outrageous after this. “God help us.”

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The walls hummed, and Galau threw out a Six Directions Talisman that formed a cross in the air in front of him, creating a protective bubble around the group. Powerful undulations of runaway force scattered his thoughts once more. A moment later, he woke up on the ground with a painful burn on his leg from where the manacle held him in place.

Still not enough. The pulse could scramble their minds even when inside the protective sphere.

Galau grimaced as he bent down to unlock the constraints, but the vibration remained in his body. His fingers felt like a stranger’s, and it took him almost a minute to free himself. By that point, the others had started to wake up, and Galau sighed when he saw the new set of cracks that had appeared on Kaso, Bubbur, and the others.

“Don’t look at us like that, shartermaster,” Bubbur said with a weak grin. “It’s a miracle we’ve survived until now. I would have joined the others already if not for your talismans.”

“Still not enough,” Galau muttered as he started recording. “Something off about the fourth trigram...”

“Sure, sure,” Bubbur grimaced as he took out a canteen. “You’d have to be a real bastard to build a pulverization tower. Leave your enemies a body to bury, at least. And if you have to build them, make sure you shield the damn things, so you don’t hit your own.”

The others swore in agreement, some angrily glaring at the tower vaguely visible through the window. That particular one was not the weapon that had gone off just now, but Galau suspected it was one just like it that kept launching its deadly salvos from further inside the base.

Eventually, ten minutes had passed, and Galau was forced to put away his notebook. There were so many things to go over and too little time. Nullifying the collateral damage from the vibrational attacks was important, but so was breaking through the next door. The castle showed no indication of slowing down its frenzied war against an empty sky.

Sections as large as whole towns had collapsed already from the forced activation of the weapon batteries. Sooner or later, these sections would collapse as well. Before then, they needed to find the escape array that a base like this should possess. If that failed, at least turn off the weapons before they destroyed everything.

Since the pulverization tower had gone off just now, their window of opportunity had arrived. If the patterns held, they had an hour before the ring of fire would incinerate the sky. That one was easier to deal with, but they would still have to retreat to the underground to survive the heat. Before that, Galau wanted to crack open the next door.

Galau shook off the lingering effects of the attack as he walked over to the gate, and the soldiers expertly helped him dismantle the outer panels to display the array within. Everyone breathed out in relief; the recently added array spindles had survived the previous round of barrage. Yet Galau didn’t immediately add the final piece to the puzzle.

“I might be wrong. These security measures are far more stringent than the outer doors,” Galau muttered. “Maybe I should just head back to the other sealed chamber.”

“No,” Bubbur said. “Trust your instincts. If you go and get yourself dusted, we’ll all die.”

“That’s right, that’s right,” Kaso added. “Besides, how can such a good thing fall into one’s lap twice? You’re already a Threadwinder of that Ultom thing. You said the other room felt different; I bet it’s meant for someone else. Maybe someone with a handsome face.”

“Well, that would explain why none of you got it,” Galau muttered.

“That it would,” Bubbur laughed. “It’s better we stay the course and keep looking for the others. That explosion two months ago was definitely our munitions rather than the weaponry of this base. I bet they have the same idea as we do, but only you have managed to figure out a real plan.”

Galau nodded, and he installed the last spindle. This one had six strings of revolving talismans, and it should short-circuit the door and its defenses if he understood the theories in the Scripture Hall right. If only it hadn't collapsed back then.

But it worked, and the door soundlessly slid open before its lights went out.

"Alright, who'll it be?" Bubbur said. "Draw lots?"

"Don't bother," Asho grunted as he stepped forward, his shield already fastened to the stump of his left arm. "I'll take this one."

"This..." Galau hesitated.

"Don't say anything," Bubbur said as they watched Asho warily enter the path. "Remember, we can die, but you cannot. This castle, those schematics that now only live on inside your head. Even that opportunity of yours. I have a feeling they might be the key to winning the war."