

The Fall 765

Chapter 765: Gathering at the Gates

Zac didn't know how to feel about being called a walking powderkeg, but it was hard to argue with the description after having literally blown up a volcano just two months ago.

"Well, I do have something that might work," Catheya laughed after seeing Zac's awkward expression. "I didn't manage to gather all the information you needed, but I did manage to get my hands on a few interesting items that might help you."

"What's that?" Zac asked curiously, happy to change the subject.

"First, this," Catheya said as she took out a finely crafted cloak seemingly made from high-quality wool.

"Invisibility cloak?" Zac blurted with excitement.

"Unfortunately, no," Catheya smiled. "True invisibility requires too much energy to trick even the eyes of scouts. It would have to be a D-grade treasure making use of a Hegemon's Core. This is something simpler, but still very useful."

"I can't see any difference?" Zac muttered as he tried putting the thing on.

"It's a distraction cloak," Catheya explained. "You know that others need to focus on you for roughly two seconds to see your bounty, right?"

"Ah!" Zac exclaimed, looking at the robe with appreciation.

He remembered that Verana owned a cowl just like this. She had used it to hide her identity when they entered the underworld together, and even Zac had found both his mind and eyes drift any time he had tried to focus on her. The cloak Catheya had provided now seemed to be of even higher quality, and Zac immediately realized how useful it could be in this place.

"Exactly. You already have something to deal with your aura since coming back from the Chasm, and with this, you will avoid anyone's attention. As long as you keep moving and don't do anything to draw attention, you might even be able to walk on a crowded street without getting exposed," Catheya smiled. "Secondly, I have this."

The next moment, a finely crafted golem appeared, its body covered in inscriptions. It was roughly as tall as Zac was, and it even emitted a pretty dense aura, roughly the equivalent of a normal cultivator at the peak of E-grade.

"A golem?" Zac muttered as he looked at Catheya for her to explain.

"A remote-controllable puppet," Catheya explained as she handed him an array disk. "Infuse your mental energy into this disk, and you will be able to control the puppet from a great distance."

"You've really thought of everything," Zac smiled.

"Well, as much as I'd like to take credit, both these methods have become somewhat common outside the City of Ancients. The few puppeteers and craftsmen who have entered the trial are making a

fortune. I simply snatched up a few of the higher-quality goods," Catheya explained. "Now you can enter the settlement without raising any waves. I'll try to figure out something else on the go."

"This is more than enough," Zac hurriedly assured. "Should we set out?"

"Give us a moment, please?" Catheya said.

Zac nodded, guessing they needed to discuss the situation among themselves. He left the hidden room, leaving Catheya and her two companions.

"I won't ask you to go with me this time," Catheya said. "You know how dangerous this might get. If I fall, you can still return to the clan and work in my father's palace."

"Where you go, we will follow," Varo said without hesitation, and Qirai nodded in agreement.

"So I guess we're going on an adventure together," Qirai snickered. "I guess your spring is finally coming, huh? Some heat to melt that frozen heart?"

"That's enough," Catheya snorted. "You know it's not like that."

"Then what is it?" Qirai said with a raised brow.

"That's..." Catheya hesitated. "We'll see. For now, I simply enjoy traveling with him. Don't you feel the same way? You know how life is back home. It's safe and stable. But it's also slow, uneventful, and predictable. If I return, I will become a Peak Hegemon at worst, a middle Monarch at best, tasked with maintaining some section of our estate until the madness takes me."

"Well, you better figure out what you want, and then communicate it clearly," Qirai snorted. "That guy's ability to create trouble is top-notch, but he seems about as dumb as they come when it comes to matters of the heart."

"Yes, mother," Catheya laughed. "When did you become so wise?"

"Whatever," Qirai grunted as she launched a jab toward Varo. "How about it, want me to help you ambush your rival?"

The quiet Revenant effortlessly dodged the swing, shifting just out of reach. "Arcaz Black holds great importance to Clan Sharva'Zi, provided his connection to the founder is true. Working against him is out of the question."

"Boring," Qirai muttered.

"Alright, that's enough. You don't need to worry about me. For now, try to figure out a way to turn this mess into an opportunity for us," Catheya said as she walked out of the room.

The group set off toward the City of Ancients, with Varo once more taking on the role of helmsman. It allowed Zac to rest and focus on keeping the remnant in check. It almost felt like it had realized Zac was aiming to pick up another splinter since the ravine, prompting it to start stockpiling energy for the upcoming clash.

It was hard to tell exactly how sapient these things were. Sometimes they just felt like small balls of primal anger, while at other times it seemed as though they had personalities of their own. In either

case, it made Zac's life a lot easier. It still released a burst of energy now and then, but it was far more controlled compared to before.

Finally, after just below two weeks of travel, the vessel suddenly stopped before Zac felt a thump as it set down on rocky ground. Zac was about to step out of the vessel to check on the situation, but a cough from Catheya stopped him in his tracks. He shrugged helplessly and instead took out the golem, which was now decked in a robe.

"Be careful to not expose yourself," Catheya said. "We probably have dozens of sets of eyes on us. Luckily, the spot we used last time was still available, and our neighbors should quickly lose interest when they see it's us."

"Alright," Zac agreed as he slumped down into the chair again and infused some energy into the Array Disk.

His perception shifted, and Zac was beset by a bout of vertigo for a few seconds until his vision stabilized. Suddenly, he had two sights, one coming from himself, and one belonging to the puppet.

It was an odd feeling, but as long as he didn't move around too much in his real body, he could freely control the golem as though it was his own. That was partly thanks to him practicing over the past weeks though. The first times he had been unable to shift his focus properly, making the puppet stutter like a drunk. It had been a source of endless laughs for Catheya, and an embarrassing reminder for Zac of his horrible performance during the Dao Discourse in the Tower of Eternity.

Catheya donned a cowl to hide her features, even though her face had transformed into a Revenant's, and the two walked out of the vessel.

"I guess I'll start setting up the arrays," Qirai grunted, and Zac only hummed distractedly in response as he focused on the vision of the golem.

The City of Ancients was located in a vast basin, sitting in the center of the thousand-meter-deep indent in the ocean bed. Meanwhile, Varo had set down at the edge of a cliff overlooking the whole area, providing a spectacular view.

The city itself was not that shocking, at least not in Multiverse Terms. Some of the cities on the Twilight Harbor world disks were larger than whole countries of old Earth. Meanwhile, this city didn't seem much bigger than cities like New York or London.

Interestingly enough, it was enclosed by an air bubble, and it was even filled with swirling clouds that obscured most of the city's features. However, now and then a small piece of the city was exposed, showcasing ancient structures that seemed to be in decent shape. Zac could understand why many believed it housed treasures after seeing the glimpses of thousands of mansions.

In the heart of the city, a massive castle pushed through the clouds and was one of the few permanently visible structures. Its walls were covered in fractals, though many of them had cracked from eons of disrepair. Even then, it gave off a grand aura, and Zac guessed that it was once the home of a supreme cultivator.

The city was surrounded by thick medieval walls reaching over fifty meters into the air. That would not be an issue normally, considering they were underwater and could simply swim over it. However, there

was clearly a barrier powerful enough to keep the whole Twilight Ocean at bay, let alone some piddling E-grade cultivators.

Outside the city, four smaller settlements spread out in front of the four closed gates, and Zac could barely believe his eyes when he saw people walking back and forth like it was just some random town on the outside. Of course, he had already heard about the situation from Catheya, but it was still eye-opening to see in person.

It was all thanks to the Twilight Council, apparently. They had allied with the Havarok Empire to enact strict rules for anyone entering the settlement outside. The Radiant Temple hadn't opposed the idea, and neither had the spectral cultivators. Uona's stance was unknown, but it was a fact that she hadn't attacked anyone within a day's travel of this basin.

Zac turned the golem's vision to the side, and he spotted dozens of vessels parked just like theirs, at the edge overlooking the chasm. Some had even built small mansions to live in. And this was just a small section of the ledge that surrounded the basin.

"It's hard to believe we're in the middle of a slaughter trial," Zac muttered, his voice being transmitted through the array disk.

"It's not as peaceful as it seems," Catheya smiled. "I figure at least ten thousand cultivators have died in those settlements, and at least a hundred vessels like ours have been raided. But as long as you're strong enough to ward off opportunists, it's pretty safe."

"Even then, people keep flocking over," Zac commented as he looked at the streams of cultivators swimming down toward the cliffs from every direction.

"In a place like the Twilight Harbor, only 1,000 or so out of all the Trial Takers are expected to reach Hegemony through normal means," Catheya said. "Few have ever left the Harbor. The Twilight Ascent is the only chance to create an opportunity to overcome their lacking talent and fate. Many have come even if they know the odds are they will die here."

"Is it really worth it?" Zac muttered as he looked down at the city.

"Aren't you the same?" Catheya laughed. "The things you've done so far are beyond death-defying. If you can risk your life even though you're so strong already, why can't they? If anything, their willingness is even greater. If they die, they die. If they succeed, their destiny will change completely."

"Fair enough," Zac acceded. "So, what do you think? Should I try to break down the gate? I can't sit around here forever. If Uona is already inside..."

Catheya and the others had followed Uona after she had snatched the splinter, but she had disappeared after closing in on this place. Things mostly pointed toward the vampire having entered the city somehow,

"You wouldn't be the first one to try," Catheya smiled. "But give it a little bit longer. I think we're close."

"What makes you say that?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Womanly intuition," Catheya winked.

"Is it population...?" Zac muttered, completely ignoring her comment. "Or perhaps energy flows?"

"Whatever," Catheya spat. "It's the clouds, you meathead."

"The clouds?" Zac repeated with surprise as his gaze turned back to the City of Ancients. "What about them?"

"The clouds are a lot thicker now compared to the last time I visited. When the city first appeared, you could see most of the city at any point. Now, it looks like it's just days from being completely obscured."

"Making it impossible to see from the outside if something sinister is going on inside," Zac concluded.

"Exactly," Catheya said.

"You're not heading inside, right?" Zac asked for the fifth time or so.

"I told you, no," Catheya snorted. "At least not unless the defensive array breaks apart. I want adventure, but being trapped in a slaughter array is not my definition of adventure. Only a deviant would enjoy something like that."

"I told you I don't like that nickname," Zac muttered.

"Whatever," Catheya laughed. "Let's head down while the others deal with the arrays. A few weeks have passed since I was here last, and if the city is about to open, we might learn something important."

Zac nodded, and the two swam down toward the closest settlement. As they descended, Zac spotted thousands of small shacks that formed a circle at the edge of the basin, enclosing both the City of Ancients and the settlements outside.

"What are those?" Zac asked.

"Guard stations," Catheya snorted. "The Havarok set them up. It's one of the worst-kept secrets of the area that there are array flags under each one of them. I never managed to figure out what they were for, but now that I know the whole story, I would guess they're either there to empower the Realm Spirit or make sure the gates don't open."

Zac nodded, and the two soon entered the closest settlement. But unfortunately, even after having traveled back and forth for over three hours, there was not much of value he had learned. There had been no sightings of Uona, and not for lack of searching. The last time she was seen was when she appeared roughly two days' travel away, ten days after she had stolen the splinter. Since then, nothing.

In somewhat related news, the Havarok was running a campaign that the city was a slaughter trap, but it mostly fell on deaf ears. But Zac was still pretty interested in the large posters the Havarok had set up. One of the most common messages was 'Uona lurks inside the City of Ancients', like she was some sort of dangerous beast.

People thought it was meant to scare people away from entering, but Zac wasn't so sure. He didn't feel he was being narcissistic when he believed the warning was a message for him.

"What do you think?" Zac asked Catheya as he looked at the sign.

"I guess they'd know if anyone," Catheya slowly said. "And we don't have any better idea."

"It's a conspiracy," a nearby Revenant warrior who had overheard their conversation spat. "Those Havarok dreamers say that only death awaits inside the trial, yet they have called over more than 500 more soldiers over the last two weeks. Even more, they have recruited ten times that number as mercenaries."

"Well, who cares even if that witch hides in there," Catheya winked. "She can only kill so many of us before she runs out of blood, right?"

"You got that right!" the warrior laughed as he walked away.

Zac simply snorted before he turned away and continued down the street. Greed was running rampant in the settlements, and almost half of the discussions were theoretical debates about what kind of treasures waited inside and what they'd do after breaking through to Hegemony.

There were also quite a few who took advantage of the calm to make some money, and there were dozens of exchange stations where a few wealthy but uninformed scions were trying to buy up Twilight Fruits en masse. It seemed extremely unlikely that the Fate-Plucking ladder would take place when the trial closed in a year, and it looked like the more connected clans had come to a similar conclusion.

Only the Elementals and one more clan were buying Twilight Fruits, and but Zac felt it was more for commercial purposes than for ladder placements.

The two eventually returned to their submersible, which was now shrouded in both a layer of mist and an illusion array to keep prying eyes away. Zac opened his real eyes and stowed away the puppet as they walked into the vessel.

"I guess we'll just wait?" Catheya sat as she sat down next to Zac. "A week at most seems to be the consensus."

"I guess so," Zac nodded.

The following days, Zac simply rested up in the vessel, but every day the impatience built in his chest. He felt stressed, and not just about the splinter. It almost felt like there was some looming danger that he was unaware of, but his Luck tried to make him aware of.

And on the fifth day of waiting, something changed.

"What the hell?!" Zac roared, startling the others to the point they erected defensive measures.

However, it wasn't another burst of creation coming on, and neither was it the gates of the City of Ancients opening, even though the city was completely shrouded by this point. It was something far more unexpected, and Zac almost felt his brain short-circuit as he looked at the screen in front of him.

"What's going on?" Catheya eventually asked as she peeked out from behind a wall of ice.

"How is this possible?!" Zac muttered, barely hearing Catheya's question.

Catheya gave her two followers a look, and they left the room as Catheya walked over and put her hand on Zac's arm. "Hey?"

Zac finally woke up and looked over at Catheya before he shared the screen that had just popped up in front of him.

Incursion opening in 8 hours.

Maximum Level: 100.

General: Vilari Blackwood

Lieutenant General: Joanna Thompson

Captains: Pika Blackwood, Rhuger Blackwood, Ilvere Azh'Rodum, Ciru Volor

Combatants Registered: 10,000 (10,000).

Surcharge for preregistered items and teleportation: 5,053 D-grade Nexus Coins.

Approve?

"What in the heavens," Catheya murmured, her eyes wide.