

The Fall 772

Chapter 772: Web of Ancient Madness

The golden orb radiated unquestionable might, dispersing the mental undulations that assailed it. He pushed down with a sneer, and it slammed into the spectral cultivators beneath, unleashing a wave of destruction in every direction. A pained wail echoed out across the field, and it was followed by a deadly silence.

Ykrodas swung his sword to rid it of the corrosive thrall's blood before putting it away. The square in front of him was littered with hundreds of destroyed thralls along with the spatial aberrations indicating where the spectral cultivators of the Karabas clan had fallen. He frowned at the scene, filled with a sense of unease.

The Karabas spectral trying to bar their progress wasn't anything surprising. These ghosts were no doubt deathsworn of the clan, sacrifices that their elders would provide passage into the empire heartlands. The large number of thralls was a bigger issue.

"How is she controlling this many?" he muttered with some hesitation.

Uona Noz'Valadir was unquestionably powerful, but she was ultimately just at the E-grade. Yet she had sent over five hundred thralls their way to stall their approach. To form such a vast army of blood slaves should be pushing it, no matter if you considered the amount of essence blood required, and the demands it put on one's soul.

The Havarok Empire did not have much contact with the Eternal Clan, but they still knew the basics. To raise a thrall required the sacrifice of some blood essence, which was related to their foundations. Raise too many too quickly, and it should harm her foundation, perhaps even cripple her.

Yet, by his estimations, this lone scion had raised over three thousand thralls in total since the start of the trial. It didn't make much sense. The Law of Balance might not be inviolable, but there was no way the Eternal Clan would dare step out of bounds like that. She had to be using something her elders had prepared, and it was a problem not knowing where her limits lay.

Even if he didn't want to admit it, there was an undeniable bridge of foundation between himself and the blood mistress. If he went in blindly, he might not only get himself killed, but also ruin the plans of his ancestors.

"Report," Ykrodas said without turning toward the captain who had walked over.

"Twelve lost. Five to battle, seven to madness," the man said before he hesitantly added. "One deserter. Jumped into the haze in the heat of battle."

"Add the fallen to the list of martyrs. Mark the deserter's lineage for ex-communication upon our return," Ykrodas said. "Have the next section been broken open?"

"The acolytes are busy purifying the blood. Do young master want them to focus on progress instead?" the captain asked.

"No. There's too much blood here. We can't let it feed the Blood Effigy," Ykrodas said, though it wasn't without reluctance. "Have the men rest and fortify their heart-sealing brands while the battlefield is cleansed.

"It will be done," the captain nodded. "There is one more report, this one from a scout. Kataron Rissit has made his move, and he is making rapid progress through the maze with roughly fifty elite warriors. He might appear before us at the core."

"Like he'd dare," Ykrodas snorted. "He's been skulking around, modifying the leylines while keeping out of harm's way. I'm sure he's timing things so that we will arrive at the same time. He does not have the guts to put himself at the forefront."

"Perhaps he aims to free this one in addition to killing the Realm Spirit," Orbot ventured as he nodded at the numerologist who they had dragged with them just in case.

"How could that be possible," Ventus said with a grimace. "The Rissit Clan is part of the Starbanner Legion, while I'm a lowly acolyte of Constellation Hall. He's a scion of an ancient family, I'm an outside hire. You know how it is in the temple. Why would he waste any effort on me?"

"A lowly acolyte with a Token of Exchange," Ykrodas snorted. "I wonder, is the one hovering outside the trial your master?"

"I wouldn't know," Ventus smiled. "I might as well be blind by this point."

"Arcas Black again?" Ykrodas said with a raised brow. "If he's going to make a move, he better hur-"

"It's broken!" a sudden exclamation cut Ykrodas short, and he turned over with a frown.

It was the leader of the acolytes who was hurrying over with confusion written all over his face.

"You've broken the blood ritual already?" Orbot exclaimed. "Don't get sloppy at this juncture."

"My lords, something has changed!" the acolyte said with a shake of his head "The soul-siphoning array is breaking apart. It is no longer being controlled by the looks of it. Not only that, the blood ritual has been stalled. It's like a rootless tree by this point. As long as we push a bit, it will crumble."

"Both the blood array and the soul-siphoning array have been stalled?" Ykrodas exclaimed with shock, unable to comprehend how one of his most daunting tasks had been completed just like that. "Are you sure?"

"Chaos," a snicker came from the side. "Chaos has arrived."

Uona gleefully looked on as the two thorns in her side went all out in an effort to kill one another.

She still didn't know if it really was Grandpa Nether who had helped her snatch that cursed thing, but the end result was even better than she'd expected. Perhaps it had been a trap by someone meant to put her on a path of no return, but she had luckily heard the tale of the fall of the two aberrations that had plagued the Multiverse in the early era of the System.

There was no way she'd drink from that poisoned well, but not all could resist its call. She could barely stop herself from laughing out loud when remembering how that arrogant ghost had demanded the corrupted remnant in return for allowing her into the City of Ancients. They had veritably hummed with greed upon sensing the unlimited potential for destruction hidden in the thing.

“You thought you would be able to pull one over on me, little ghost?” Uona snickered. “See where that got you.”

They thought their souls so unique, able to resist the taint while extracting the remnant of its value. They hadn't hesitated to incorporate it into their soul-siphoning array to speed up the formation of the Soul Effigy, thinking it would both bolster their plans and stall hers. Fools. It had never been her intention to use that cursed item in her Blood Effigy.

Nothing good would come from getting mixed up with that ancient madness.

But it had become the perfect method for her to take out one of the biggest obstacles in performing her mission, and without overstepping the commandments in the slightest. What could Clan Ouro say after her grandpa snatched the opportunity of ascension, especially upon witnessing the recording of Eidolon fighting Draugr where both sides had descended into madness?

Those ghosts had just used that thing for a couple of weeks, yet they had already lost their rationality, becoming unwilling or unable to part with the remnant. Even in the face of an insane Draugr that had managed to harm her before.

What unable to extract it from the array? It was just an external source of power, as replaceable as the Nether Gems they used. What needing to wait for five hours? They were simply hoping that she'd show up and deal with the Draugr for them, but when since when was life so easy?

However, that damned Draugr was as unpredictable as ever. She had been elated to see him shedding all cordiality in his desire to gain the remnant, even surpassing her most optimistic scenarios of mutual destruction. But that madman possessed the power of both the aberrations. Was he actually striving toward that unachievable peak rather than the depths of Death?

Uona didn't know how he was still alive, but he probably wasn't long for this world. Even then, a sense of unease filled her as she looked at the transformation of the skill he used. Things were becoming harder and harder to predict with him acting like this, but one thing was sure.

She definitely couldn't let him get his hands on the splinter as well.

Deep thuds echoed from the ground as Zac rushed forward, finally moving from his hidden position at the edge of the cage. The prison was fast collapsing around him as he made a beeline toward the struggling skull, with the three pygmies flying in tow.

Their bones had turned into mottled pearls since Zac had found himself forced to fuse his Fragment of the Coffin into the defensive skill, and the shields that the coffin-bearing pygmy conjured became more and more distorted. However, while their form was starting to grow grotesque, their defensive properties were still top-notch.

Zac swiped his hand past the tower of desolation as he passed it by, and a shudder echoed out across the area before the foundation of the totem exploded. It had been reformed into a mix of ice and molten lead, and the collision of searing heat and chilling cold had resulted in a tremendous eruption.

The sky screamed and flashed in myriad colors as the totem pole started to topple, swinging the orb of Creation in a precipitous arc. Zac didn't so much as look back, but two of the chains of [Love's Bond] had already attached themselves to the falling pillar, dragging it in the direction of the still-trapped skull.

Out of better options, Zac had decided to drag the sphere of Creation to the Eidolon if he couldn't drag the Eidolon to the sphere. The gargoyles locked to the totem pole were more than willing to help out as well, and they gleefully pulled at the golden chains even as they crumbled to dust one by one.

The Eidolon clearly understood the danger they were in, and torrential amounts of Miasma churned in the area as a fifty-meter wide seal appeared in front of the skull. Surrounding it were roughly one hundred aquamarine lights, each one of them containing a rune of their own. Zac's first instinct was that it was some sort of array, but he quickly realized it was an ultimate skill that the Hive had unleashed.

Darkness.

He was void of thought, void of purpose. He was just a flickering light, a spark in the endless darkness. He knew he was in the middle of something, but details became increasingly difficult to grasp. His step grew heavier as their purpose failed them. Why struggle?

A roar of Creation startled Zac awake, and he was shocked to see himself missing a hand along with big chunks of flesh on his torso. It looked like his body was simply turning to dust from the undulations of that terrifying seal. Just a fraction of a second had passed, but he had almost walked straight into the afterlife in one go.

Cold sweat ran down his back, but he couldn't stop now. Zac was forced to drink from that poisoned well yet another time as he combated the waves of destruction, and he quickly realized the attack thankfully wasn't powered by true Oblivion. It was 'just' an extremely powerful skill performed by a peak expert, which allowed him to regenerate quicker than he was being destroyed.

The pygmy skeletons didn't have the same luxury of nigh-endless supply of Creation, and they quickly crumbled under the might of the skill. But they had managed to help long enough, allowing Zac to reach his destination.

Veins stood out across Zac's face, and it felt he was pulling a mountain. The pillar was terrifyingly heavy, even after most of it had crumbled away already. But the radiant orb was just ten metres away from the huge rune by now, heading straight for the skull. Zac's arms suddenly turned into a blur as over ten balls flew out, each of them exploding in unison.

All ten of them were [Void Balls], ripping apart and sealing space all around them now that the cage was on the verge of collapse. A final eruption from the ghastly seal exhausted the 100-odd lights surrounding it, and Zac was almost blinded with pain as his body was completely lacerated once more.

However, the huge sphere of Creation refused to be destroyed. If anything, it almost felt enraged as it pushed into the seal. There was no explosion or outburst of chaotic powers, just an odd ripple as the

sphere of Creation passed right through, and the seal was simply reduced to the same sort of dust that it had turned others into.

From there, the orb of creation slammed straight into the forehead of the skull. A thousand shrieks almost knocked Zac out once as he just reformed his broken body, but he wasn't the only one having a bad time. His bomb of Creation was exerting its terrifying influence on the skull, and Zac felt one wave of energy after another enter him as Eidolon succumbed to the attack in droves.

Suddenly, the skull simply disintegrated, and a handful of Eidolon desperately flew away, their intangible bodies chaotically shuddering as they tangled with an invasion of Creation. Aia Ouro was among those who had managed to survive, but they were clearly grievously wounded. Two more of the surviving Eidolon fell just a few meters away from where they started, but Zac wasn't interested in that.

A huge stack of talismans flew out from his sleeves, and a bone-chilling cold spread across the area, sealing even space itself as the temperature dropped to an almost unbearable degree. Simultaneously, Zac instilled his will into the crumbling sphere, forcing it to heed one last command of his.

The command wasn't to finish off the maimed spectral cultivators, but rather to flood down at a particular spot on the ground in the huge chamber they had fought inside. Zac's eyes lit up when he saw it was a success, and a stream of opalescence flooded toward the frozen spot. However, Zac didn't wait around to see the result, and instead activated [Abyssal Phase] with the help of [Force of the Void], sparing no effort to increase his speed to the limit.

The area was a chaotic mess of broken space from the [Void Balls], frozen space from his talismans, and chaotic swirls of unfettered Creation left over by his attack. Turning into an abyssal wraith in a place like this was perhaps even more dangerous than doing so in the frenzied waters of the Twilight Chasm, but he knew he only had one shot at this.

The skull had collapsed, and he could vaguely spot the Blood Thrall in the heart of chaos. Unsurprisingly, he had died. His body was rapidly falling apart, partly because of the creation, but partly because of the remnant that hovered right next to him. Finally, Zac had finally found his opportunity, and he intended to take it.

But his heart filled with dismay as the disintegrating thrall suddenly melted into a pool of goop which in turn transformed into a maw. It swallowed the remnant in one gulp before it simply winked out of existence. The scene was extremely quick, to the point that it looked fast even in the slowed-down environment he experienced as a wraith.

Space cracked the next moment as a familiar figure stepped out from the void. The chaotic and frozen atmosphere that was meant to seal, or at least somewhat delay Uona Noz'Valadir had proven utterly incapable of stopping her, and Zac knew his gambit had failed. He immediately returned to his corporeal form a hundred meters away from the blood mistress.

"So you had actually managed to spot me, how embarrassing," a laugh echoed out across the hall as the Splinter of Oblivion appeared in a flash of blood.

Zac only grunted in response as he furiously looked at the vampire, or rather the remnant that hovered above her hand. Between his multiple layers of domains and the aura of Creation that had suffused the whole area, how could he miss there was another enemy hiding beneath the ground?

It was just a drop of blood hidden between two tiles, yet it wasn't enough to escape Zac's supercharged senses. He had tried to both directly attack her with the left-over Creation and seal her path to the Splinter of Oblivion while he took it for himself. But she had already been one step ahead of him, being able to use the dead thrall as a transportation device.

"You lunatics," an infuriated voice echoed out, and Zac frowned as he spotted Aia Ouro appearing in the distance.

Their shape was the same as when Zac saw them before, but their aura was extremely unstable. Not only that, but Zac could still sense remnants of Creation inside their body, which no doubt was a source of endless pain and trouble for a spectral cultivator.

"You two are running rampant in this place, caring nothing about the law. We are here as subjects of the empire, and what kind of chaos are you sowing!" the ghost sputtered.

"Truth is relative. We cannot let it be subject to the whims of the accuser," Uona sneered. "Isn't that what the Grand Speaker of Hive Yso said when your ilk suddenly drew back on the battlefield, causing one Autarch to be crippled and over fifty Peak Monarchs to fall among the Eternal Clan? Who's to say what really happened here?"

"You want to subvert the event?! Do you think Hive Ouro is going to stand for this?!" the ghost roared, and the whole building shook from their wrath.

"Enough. You might have been a worthy foe on the outside, but in this environment, you were never my match," Uona said. "And now, you have less than fifteen percent of your strength remaining. Go deal with that disgusting energy inside your body, or the situation might get even further out of your control."

"This is not over," the Eidolon growled, but they still dissipated, leaving Uona and Zac behind.

"This has gone on long enough," Zag said with grit teeth. "We never had an irreconcilable grudge, and we don't have opposing goals. Give it to me and our Karma is severed. Make it any harder than it has to be, and only one of us will walk out of here alive."

"Well, you say that," Uona smiled, though Zac actually felt it looked a bit strained. "Yet my instincts tell me that if I give you this thing, I will definitely die. Things have been set in motion, and they will have to reach their natural conclusion."

Zac took a deep breath before he leveled an even gaze at Uona. Abyssal eyes gazed into two sanguine orbs, two fates that had somehow come to a collision course. As the heavens so often decreed, one would have to become fertilizer to the other's path.

"Very well."