

## The Fall 308

### Chapter 308: Verana Tir'Emarel

It didn't take long until the rest of the squad joined Zac on the field of death. Emelie and the Valkyries looked a bit shaken by the carnage that Zac had unleashed, but the demons nodded approvingly. However, there was one demon who didn't look pleased; Ogras.

"When you do something you go all out, don't you?" Ogras said as he appeared a few seconds after the others. "What happened with questioning them? We already knew our intelligence was incomplete, yet you killed or scared off everyone."

Zac took a deep breath, calm slowly returning to his mind. He felt a bit sheepish after hearing Ogras' admonishment. What he said was completely true. They needed intelligence. But the moment the battle had started he had completely ignored that need, only focusing on killing everything in sight. Any reason to hold back had been discarded with some flimsy justifications, all to be able to keep swinging his axe.

Luckily Ogras acted quickly and caught a warrior who managed to flee the scene. Zac looked at the demon general who looked back with a frown.

"I need a second. Find out anything you can from the man," Zac said and flashed away with his movement skill.

Ogras' words were a true wake-up call. He had already started to sense it during the last battle, but after this slaughter he was sure. Something was wrong with him, and his bloodlust made him lose control in battle. He quickly moved away to a secluded spot and sat down.

First, he checked his gear and possessions, but nothing seemed out of sorts. The only thing that had changed recently was his robe, but he sensed no bloodlust from it. It even gave a soothing and calming sensation, and Zac doubted it was the source of his ruthless behavior. Yrial was a bit flakey, but he would have warned him of something like a side-effect.

Suddenly he had a bad premonition as he looked inward. His internal sight quickly moved to the pocket of isolated space in his mind, and the sight made him despair. The miasmic seal that was sealing away the [Splinter of Oblivion] had changed, and a small passage leading out of the space had somehow formed.

Weird energies, that Zac only could liken to distilled corruption, slowly seeped out of the crack and blended with his mental energy the moment it emerged. The amount was so small that if he hadn't specifically looked for it there was no way he would have noticed it in the short run.

Zac wanted to slap himself from holding himself back from asking Yrial for any tips of what to do with this cursed thing in his mind. He had thought about it, but eventually he had decided against it out of paranoia. If he had known that the seal would break so soon he would have made the splinter his highest priority.

Different plans to handle the leak cropped up one after another in his mind, but they kept getting rejected for being unfeasible. The power of the splinter was simply too great, and nothing he could get his hands on would be able to block it out. His mental defensive skill was completely crushed by it earlier, and he wouldn't fare much better today even with his recent powerups.

But as he despaired over what to do he noticed something odd. He had initially assumed that the seal was breaking, but a few signs indicated something else was happening. For one it didn't seem like the defensive runes had lost even a smidgeon of their initial power, but instead a few more fractals had formed.

It was through these new fractals that the small amount of corruption seeped out and entered his mind, and even though the tendrils of the splinter desperately tried to wriggle out, only a small amount of corruption managed to get through. Even more importantly, the corruption that entered his mind was different from that of the splinter. It was, for lack of a better word, dead. There seemed to be no inherent will in it, and it did nothing to spread or take over his mind.

A new theory was quickly formulating in his mind. The true use of the miasmic formation in his mind wasn't to seal away the Splinter, but rather to absorb it in a controlled manner. The crack wasn't truly a weakness, but a planned opening to let the corruption through after modification.

But the energies were still purified destruction, carrying a hint of the supreme Dao of Oblivion. Even if it wasn't tainted by the inherent will of the Heart of Oblivion it was still energy that was extremely troublesome for Zac to handle. Who knew what sort of effect it would have on his body?

He kept looking for a bit but couldn't make heads or tails of the situation. He could only gather that the change happened recently, likely just before or during the last battle. He would have noticed it otherwise since he checked up on it now and then.

It also was a relief of sorts, since the change in the fractals somewhat indicated that the Draugr woman was an ally rather than yet another enemy. He had initially considered the possibility that she placed the fractals in his mind to safeguard the splinter until she could rip it out of his head. But that felt less likely now that it seemed that she had devised a way for him to absorb it for himself.

"So are you going to tell me what's going on with you?" Ogras voice was suddenly heard from behind, making Zac look over.

"Some complications from my encounters," Zac sighed. "Luckily I noticed it in time, but I am not sure what the effect will be in the long run. Alert me if I start becoming... murderous."

"Murdery..?" Ogras snorted. "That's just great."

Zac only helplessly shrugged his shoulders, indicating that he wasn't ready to disclose anything else. And it was not like the demon was placing all his own cards on the table. Something had happened in the inheritance, but he never made any effort of explaining exactly what had transpired.

"Anyway, we questioned the captive. Turns out they had spies among the Marshall Clan. Normal humans working for them, not shapeshifters or something like that. They recently learned about us and the destruction of the Ez'Mahal, and immediately moved to destroy the teleporter. They were just unlucky they were picked next by you, otherwise they would have been safe for the time being," Ogras explained.

Zac nodded his head. He wasn't surprised any longer that some people would choose to side with the invaders. If Thomas Fischer could ally with monsters like the Dominators, why wouldn't some local people ally with the incursions to gain power and safety?

“What about their forces and human captives?” Zac asked.

“The situation of this Tir’Emarel Family is actually pretty similar to Clan Azh’Rezak. Though they didn’t have the bad luck to get stuck on an island with a humanoid netherbeast,” Ogras said, drawing a roll of Zac’s eyes. “It’s to the point that I don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

“They are a newly formed family just like us, barely qualifying as a D-Grade force. They only got the chance to keep their Incursion slot thanks to the huge war that our old sector is embroiled in, just like my own family. I think that if my invasion didn’t fail early I would have gotten a quest by The Ruthless Heavens to battle it out with these people,” Ogras said with some wistfulness.

“Well, sorry for ruining the cosmic plan,” Zac snorted. “So the strength of their leader should be around that of Rydel’s?”

“Seems a bit stronger, as Rydel still hadn’t evolved when you fought. This Verana Tir’Emarel has evolved and gained some sort of great opportunity after arriving, and she has spent most of her time in meditation since. Anyway, they possess a Nexus Vein, which naturally means various goodies have cropped up in the area, sort of like Port Atwood,” Ogras continued.

“So, the humans?” Zac probed.

“Most work in the mines or the fields, though they are treated decently enough. No soul-sucking arrays or anything like that. Not all are actually slaves it seems, and the mining parties are actually overseen by Humans or Ishiate foremen,” Ogras said. “They have some program with freedom for contribution. Sounds like a scam to me.”

“A scam?” Zac repeated with some confusion.

“It seems that these people aren’t planning on staying for much longer. It’s not surprising, with the Undead Empire being here and all,” Ogras explained. “I guess they are dangling freedom as a carrot to have people work harder until they cut and run.”

“Without making a lot of enemies in the long run,” Zac added with a thoughtful nod. “Neither your people or the Tal-Eladar seem too bad compared to the zombies and the Ez’Mahal, why are your species hostile?”

“Who knows anymore?” Ogras shrugged. “The war has lasted forever. The original reasons are long forgotten. Now it’s about stealing resources and birthing powerhouses through slaughter. The Ruthless Heaven always provide bonuses during wars since it’s one of the best ways to forge true warriors.”

“Well, we’ve wasted enough time. They will undoubtedly find out about this battle soon enough. Let’s not give them too much time to prepare,” Zac said as he got back up on his feet and walked toward the group waiting in the distance.

The others were ready to go and they immediately set course for the Incursion. This time they didn’t plan on sneaking inside, so the Valkyries took out a handful of modified cars from their Cosmos Sack. Far more effort was spent on strengthening and adapting these cars compared to the ones at the Marshall Clan.

Zac didn't drive this time either, instead opting to sit in the front seat training with the mental dexterity puzzle. If his mind was slowly being infused with a foreign force it was more important than ever to have a firm grasp of his mental energy. Perhaps if he could control his mind better he would be in a better position to contend against the mind-altering effect of the splinter of oblivion.

They met no obstacles or traps as they drove along the road, but Zac wasn't really happy about it. They had passed two strongholds that should have been manned by small frontier forces, but both of them were completely abandoned. They all felt it was pretty fishy, and the most likely cause was that the Tal-Eladar were gathering their forces for a concentrated defense.

Their fears were soon realized as they closed in on the core area. An army consisting of over ten thousand beasts and well over a thousand soldiers solemnly stood lined up, awaiting their approach. The scene caused some worry amongst the small squad of Port Atwood, but also some confusion.

Why didn't they fight from within their arrays?

"What's going on?" Zac muttered with some hesitation.

"I guess we'll find out," Ogras said as he nodded ahead.

A woman stepped forward from the orderly line and walked fifty meters toward his convoy before she stopped. On her shoulder a small alien creature sat perched, looking like a ball of fur with four glistening eyes. She also had a white furry pet tucked in her arms, which seemed to be contentedly snoozing away.

"I am Verana Tir'Emarel. Am I correct in assuming that Zachary Atwood, The Super Brother-Man is visiting?" she said with a strong voice carrying across the empty field.

Zac gave Ogras a nonplussed look before he stepped out of the vehicle to see what was going on.

"I didn't believe the rumors of you working together with the treacherous demonkin at first. But seeing his wretched appearance I can only assume you defeated them and turned them into somewhat competent workhorses?" she said after throwing a scathing look at Ogras who stepped out of the car after Zac.

Zac's mouth couldn't help but turn upward with some mirth, but he didn't believe the demons were too happy with the comment, even if Ogras donned a smiling face.

"Girl, what is your goal by confronting us like this? I don't think even the half-animals of the Tal-Eladar to be stupid enough to step out of their Arrays unless necessary," Ogras retorted, causing a wave of killing intent to billow toward them from the army.

"In contrast to the horned goats of the Azh'Kir'Khat Horde we know when to advance and when to retreat," she answered without missing a beat. "You hid it well, but we have already learned of your great power, Mr. Atwood."

"Well, thank you, I guess," Zac responded, still not sure what was going on.

"I have a proposition for you. Even with your great power, the Tir'Emarel Family are no weaklings, and we have prepared for your assault. You might be able to defeat us, but not without casualties," she said, her eyes moving toward the cars behind them. "Not everyone in your party is as strong as you."

Zac frowned and was about to speak up, but Verana continued before he could say anything.

"You should already know that our family is young, and a lot of our resources are tied up in this invasion. The massacre of our whole incursion would cause lasting damage to our force, and the loss of one of our battalions is all the Tal-Eladar blood I want to see. So instead of further bloodshed, why not settle this with a duel? You versus me, one on one," she said.

Zac's brows rose in surprise, and he looked over at Ogras for his opinion.

"It's not a bad idea. If they try to double-cross you, just go a bit murderly on them all," Ogras said. "Saves me a lot of effort as well, so win-win."

Zac mulled it over for a few seconds, but he saw no true downside to the proposition. If he could conquer another Incursion without losing a single soldier it would be for the best.

"Fine," Zac said as he stepped forward, [Verun's Bite] appearing in his hand.

"Lulu! Grub!" she said, placing the two small animals down on the ground.

Zac first thought that she wanted to let her pets get to safety, but his eyes widened the next moment. Terrifying auras started to leak from the beasts as they almost instantly grew to reach almost ten meters.

In just one second the small fluff balls had turned into terrifying killing machines who clearly were well into the E-Grade.