

The Fall 508

Chapter 508: Bloodlines

The time was finally up, and the azure pillar winked out of existence, leaving yet another inert Nexus Hub behind. If things worked as usual, it would soon disappear without a trace like the others, leaving just the one on his island behind. The last zombies in the area had passed through the portal over an hour ago, leaving the surroundings of the fortress bare.

It was nice to get a confirmation that the Undead Incursion truly was over, but Zac still had a hard time celebrating.

Zac sighed as he looked around the rubble. The Lich King was dealt with and the array was turned off, but as he didn't really feel like a victor as he looked out across the desolate landscape. No matter what the "World Core Upgrade" entailed it hadn't cleaned up the dour atmosphere at the core of the Dead Zone at all.

In fact, they hadn't noticed any change at all after that weird tremor. Ogras said that the upgrade would take a while though, so there was no point in completely giving up on this area.

But Zac had to admit that this place felt dead in a completely new sense of the word. Was there really a return from this? Getting blasted by the furious flames of the cultists at the 11th hour had turned things from bad to worse, and it had turned the whole area into a desolate region. Whatever those flames contained had somehow canceled out much of the miasma in the area, causing it to become almost completely void of any Cosmic Energy at all.

It felt like just breathing was a chore right now, like there was no oxygen in the air. The Lich King was probably spouting the things about Earth's death to mess with his mind, but there was perhaps a nugget of truth hidden inside the taunt. His new butler was no use either, as it had quickly become apparent that Triv wouldn't turn into the wellspring of information as Zac had hoped.

Any question that was related to restricted knowledge of the Undead Empire caused a battle between the Contract of Servitude and whatever compulsion the ghost was born with, and it started to shake in pain as the two orders clashed. Zac was forced to cancel his questions to save him a few times until he finally gave up learning anything of use.

They did however manage to confirm that Triv could be used as a confirmation of source if Zac already had the answer. For example, Zac could say that there was one general alive, and the ghost could confirm it. But probing where he was and what skills he or she possessed was impossible.

There were also no limitations on general knowledge or non-classified intelligence of the Undead Empire, meaning that he could still be useful in the end. He might not be able to talk about his own Kingdom, but he was more than happy to spill any rumors he could think of about the living forces of the Zecia Sector.

The ghost had left him alone to recuperate earlier, instead joining Kenzie in her attempts to take control of the large number of arrays that were still active in the area while Zac kept watch and recuperated. But now that the incursion was closed and there was no sign of the Cultists Returning, there was finally time to go over his gains.

The Cosmos Sack of the assassin unfortunately didn't contain a lot. There were a set of similar spikes like the one he used during the fight, along with two daggers shrouded in darkness. They seemed to be decent Spirit Tools, but Zac couldn't think of anyone they were suited for at the moment. Perhaps Ogras, but that demon had already gotten more than enough benefits for free, and he would have to purchase the daggers with Merit Points if he wanted them.

There was also a cultivation manual and a few information crystals. One of them contained surprisingly detailed intelligence of the forces of Earth, including up-to-date docket on the top elites. His own report was actually decently accurate as well, though it was based on the period when he was closing incursions left and right. Which was a shame for the assassin, as Zac was many times stronger compared to back then.

However, there was one piece of information that was a bit shocking. There was actually a mention of the Tal-Eladar and their recent actions. They had been seen together with the Brindevalt Clan, which apparently was the name of one of the three remaining Incursions that neighbored the Dead Zone. There was even a small notation that the Brindevalt Clan had some sort of business dealings with other factions of the Tal-Eladar.

Was this their plan? Give up on Earth and somehow leave through the Nexus Hub of another force? Zac didn't even know whether that was possible or not, but he couldn't see any other reason for Verana to contact some random force. He had always wondered why the Tal-Eladar hadn't stepped up and fought with Port Atwood when they had their backs against the wall, but it looked like he had found the answer.

They had always had an exit strategy in case things turned south.

The intelligence was days old though, and Zac still didn't know what had come from the discussions, but it still left a bad taste in his mouth. However, his annoyance was quickly alleviated as he turned toward the next Spatial tool. The Assassin had traveled lightly it seemed, but Spatial Tools of the Lich King was a different story.

The Cosmos Sack contained a large number of Unholy Beacons, though Zac realized they weren't activated. It further confirmed Zac's guess that the souls of Earthlings were used in their creation, while these things were just spares brought from home.

There were also several siege tools left completely unused, along with a vast array of cultivation resources. The Cosmos Sack was clearly a superior variant of the sack he looted from Rydel, the de-facto leader of the Demon incursion. That meant the Spatial Ring was Adriel's private stash, and Zac could immediately confirm that the quality of the things stored inside was a lot higher than the things in the Cosmos Sack.

One look was enough to confirm that Adriel truly was a formation master. There were at least a thousand array flags in the Spatial ring, though most of them seemed to be empty flags waiting to be inscribed.

There was also a large number of herbs and powders, and Zac quickly realized they were poisonous after taking out a few of them. There was also a large cauldron that reminded Zac of the one he had seen the

Imp Herald use in the heart of the cave systems of his island. There were a large number of crystals as well, but most interesting was a milky-white crystal as large as a washbasin.

He took it out with interest, and his eyes lit up after instilling some Cosmic Energy into it. It was suddenly showing an enormous horde that looked ready to completely crumble. An army comprised of all four races of Earth was nibbling at its heels, but the real problem came from within.

The zombies had gone crazy, attacking anything around them, which usually meant they were attacking other zombies. It was like the horde had lost all cohesion, and it was suddenly everyone for himself. Zac figured that the death of the Lich King had removed or lessened whatever restraint that kept them from killing each other, and it had turned into pandemonium.

Zac tried to change the scope of the long-distance spying array, but his vision was stuck in place until he finally was forced to give up. But Zac believed that Kenzie or someone on the island would be able to figure the thing out. Having this thing mounted in his courtyard would be pretty convenient, as it would allow him to check in on all his islands without alerting anyone.

He had always been a bit leery about Big Brother until now, but surely it was a different thing if he was the one watching?

The crystal and everything else of interest was thrown into his own spatial ring, where he spotted the lump of coal once more. Or rather, the Bloodline Marrow. Triv had no idea what kind of beast it came from, but he did know what they were used for. Not surprisingly it affected bloodlines, but not as Zac had expected.

It was actually akin to poison to warriors with a bloodline. If whatever genes were preserved inside the marrow entered the body of someone with a bloodline, there would be a clash. The resident bloodline would become agitated and force out the intruding bloodline. It didn't sound very useful on paper, but it actually had a very specific purpose.

It would force a slumbering Bloodline awake, and the struggle would condense and strengthen it. It was just like normal cultivation, where fighting for your life ended with you stronger, provided you survived, of course. There was also a small chance of gaining whatever bloodline hid inside the marrow in case you didn't have one originally, but that was generally seen as a waste.

It was also something that could help upgrade what Triv called Beastcrafted Spirit Tools, which essentially meant Spirit Tools that used animal parts. Zac still didn't trust the ghost even with a Contract of Servitude active, but he seemed to be telling the truth based on the fact that [Verun's Bite] really wanted the thing, while [Love's Bond] was completely indifferent.

It was a relief, as that meant there wouldn't be any conflicts of interest in case he decided to feed it to Verun. Zac figured that he could finally provide his axe with a feast when they returned to Port Atwood, providing all the things he had saved up until now. However, he was still leaning toward only giving his axe the Dragon Core, while keeping the marrow to himself.

The recent opening of his Hidden node and talking with his mother had made him think more and more about his heritage. Not really in terms of wanting to reunite with Leandra, but rather to make the most of the odd constitution he had been given. [Void Heart] clearly felt like a special node based on a bloodline, and he was sure that there would be exponential benefits the more Hidden Nodes he opened.

Especially if he managed to wake up a bloodline to match them.

But Zac felt that simply boiling a piece of marrow and drinking it as a soup was too crude, and he wanted to do some more research to improve his odds of waking up his constitution. He kept going through the Cosmos Sack a while longer, but he soon got tired of the dour view and he started to make his way down from the peak of the broken tower.

The wound in his leg had mostly healed over the past 6 hours, but his pathways were still a bit of a mess. He believed he'd be back at full power in a week's time tops though, provided he wasn't forced to go all out in another battle. The biggest issue was redrawing the broken pathways, which was both painful and took a lot of time and effort now that they were so intricate.

Zac was pretty disappointed with the long recuperation times, but he soon enough remembered Galvarion's experience. The aquatic cultivator had spent over a century in the E-Grade, most of it on a sickbed. Being slightly weakened for a week per node was nothing compared to that. Of course, that was provided that the damage didn't get worse with each successive node.

Triv was hovering just by the base of the broken-down tower, apparently having left Kenzie's side some time ago.

"You're really stuck here with us now," Zac said as his eyes turned to the spot where the azure pillar had once stood. "Come with me."

"It is my pleasure to stay with the young lord. How can I be of assistance?" the ghost asked as they walked around the rubble.

"Take me to my sister," Zac said, and they found her resting in an emptied warehouse with Joanna keeping guard.

Zac figured this was as good a place as any, and he bought the Teleportation Array. However, he frowned when he couldn't see any towns on the teleportation screen.

Was this place still jammed?

Kenzie immediately realized something was wrong as well, but she simply threw out a large number of Nexus Crystals.

"It's working, but it will cost a huge amount of crystals to teleport out," Kenzie muttered. "The teleporter can't use the energy of the atmosphere here because there is none. I don't know if it's because of what the cultists did or if it's an effect of the Dead Zone itself."

"Well, we have more than enough crystals," Zac shrugged. "Most of the zombies in the area have left, and we have broken the Unholy Beacons. Perhaps the Array will work by itself as soon as the area clears up a bit. But what about the jamming?"

Port Atwood had appeared on his Teleportation Menu after Kenzie had thrown out the Nexus Crystals, but that didn't really alleviate Zac's fears after their last experience. He couldn't stop himself from throwing a glare at the Ghost who floated by the corner, and Triv could only weakly smile in return.

"Either the jammers broke from us pushing through it, or more likely our people have found the arrays and disabled them," Kenzie said.

"We should send something over with a note side to make sure it safe," Joanna suggested from the side, sharing Zac's sentiments. "In case there are there still are some traps."

Zac nodded in agreement. No need to play with your life when there was no hurry to go home.

"I guess," Kenzie said as she got to her feet. "Have you found anything interesting?"

"A few things," Zac said. "I've been busy recuperating for most of the time. I guess Ogras has gotten his hand on anything of value by now. Do you need my help taking apart those pillars below-ground?"

"No, it's fine now that they've been inactive for a while. Joanna helped me pry them out of the ground. By the way, I found out something interesting from your ghost butler earlier."

"Oh?" Zac said as he looked over at the ghost, who seemingly tried to make himself look agreeable.

"Did you know? It seems that a surprisingly large number of all Earthlings have pretty good bloodlines, some that are completely unknown in the Zecia sector?" she said.

"Is that unusual?" Zac asked.

"There are sometimes some interesting bloodlines that pop up when visiting a newly integrated planet, but not like we've seen on this see- ehm, on Earth," Triv said from the side. "It is no doubt from the escaped test subjects."

"The what?" Zac asked, but he immediately realized what the ghost was referring to.

The Mystic Realm.

"The undead believes that the Mystic Realm was used for researching Bloodlines. Some of the test subjects escaped thousands of years ago, and they became our ancestors. Isn't that crazy?" Kenzie said with excitement.

Zac's thoughts went back to the lump of coal in his Spatial Ring once more. A mysterious base researching Bloodlines?

Wasn't that just perfect?