

The Fall 525

Chapter 525: Sigil

Zac finally understood why the cultists had acted so weirdly until now. A few of them had simply been sacrificial pawns for Zac to kill in hopes that it would make him lower his guard. The cultists utilized the fact that everyone thought of them as insane zealots with no regard for their lives. They were ruthless against others, but perhaps even more-so against themselves.

But the real method to deal with him was obviously not the meager defense in front of the main temple, and the inscription in the mountain wall was probably just a red herring as well. The real threat was brooding inside the lava itself, its presence obscured by the huge rune and the natural fire-attuned energies of the volcano itself.

That only left the issue of the nine flame crystals. Zac had immediately remembered the invasion of Port Atwood the other week when he saw them setting up their “array”. The invaders had set up a very similar constellation back then to summon the set of meteors. Nine clergymen set themselves ablaze in a circle around him, just like these ones planted the crystals in a circle around the incursion pillar.

Were the actions back on the island all a sacrifice to trick him into destroying those crystals?

The utter lack of powerful arrays had also made him lower his guard somewhat after he had destroyed everything that looked like a threat. But the golden insignia in the sky radiated a terrifying pressure, even eclipsing the force of Adriel’s blast that was powered by four array towers.

Figuring out how they had actually managed to create the massive avatar in the sky obviously wasn’t as important as getting the hell out of here though. He activated [Cosmic Gaze] to get a hint of how the burning fetters worked, and it was mostly fire-attuned as expected. However, there was also that other odd energy mixed withing; the energy of conviction.

The golden fetter seemed to be held together by the faith of these zealots, and Zac long knew their conviction was as strong as it could get. Zac growled with frustration as he tried cutting the bindings apart, but [Verun’s Bite] just flew straight through the flames without affecting it at all. Infusing the blade with his Dao Fragments didn’t make a lick of difference either, it was even more intangible than the ghosts he had fought until now.

He tried ignoring the pain and keep running away next, and he was soon screaming on top of his lungs as he stretched the flames to their limits. He was hoping to snap the fetter with brute force, but the pain quickly became too much to bear even for him, forcing him to move back toward the incursion pillar once more.

A bell suddenly echoed across the basin, a clear gong that seemed to reach the depths of his soul. It obviously came from the rune in the sky, like it was announcing the descent of the divine. A few cracks echoed out from his body and he coughed out another mouthful of blood, just in time to see a waterfall of fire fall out from the sky.

The flames came out of the insignia itself, and it felt like time itself slowed down as it slowly made its way toward the ground. Zac’s danger sense was once again screaming at him to get away, and one

glance was enough to realize that the fire that was currently moving toward him was far more dangerous than normal flames.

It was once more that power of conviction that made the flames almost seem holy, and Zac started to understand what was going on.

The Zealots had probably prayed toward the rune on the volcano since they arrived, constantly reinforcing it with the power of their conviction. The rune in turn had taken that energy and infused the golden insignia that now hung in the sky. Who knew what the end-goal was of this thing was, if Zac had not shown up to ruin their plans.

Set the whole world on fire?

Knowing the cultists it wasn't such a far-fetched idea. The body snatchers would capture the high-value corpses of Earth, after which the fanatics torched the whole planet, leaving no evidence or lingering threats behind.

Zac's mind churned as he tried to figure out a way out of the situation, and he could eventually only come up with one solution. Space split apart above him as he ran toward the incursion, once more jumping on top of the roof closest to the pillar itself.

The wooden hand of [Nature's Punishment] rose toward the sky, but Zac frowned when he felt the hand being rebuffed as it tried to ascend after a certain height. The three lines hummed as it released a radiant light, and Zac found himself unable to place the skill above the insignia, like it was some sacrilege that went against the order of the heavens themselves.

It immediately dashed his idea of drowning the burning sigil in a deluge of water.

With his first plan ruined he could only move to his backup plan, and he instead activated the hand where it was. The enormous emerald fractal lit up in the sky, and a torrent of water started pouring out. However, the water didn't target the insignia itself, but rather the golden flames it spewed out. He could at least deal with the flames even if he couldn't take out the root cause just yet.

A massive explosion threw Zac off the roof again as the water of [Nature's Punishment] was instantly turned into steam the moment it came in contact with the holy flames. The same happened to the streams that missed the flames and instead fell on the lava below, but the reaction at least managed to slow the lava's advance toward his location.

Pain racked Zac's body, but he made sure to keep the skill going as he scrambled back on his feet, pushing [Nature's Punishment] to its limits as he infused it with the Fragment of the Bodhi. There was thankfully no lack of water with such an enormous lake nearby, and enough liquid to submerge a city block burst out of the fractal.

Zac breathed out in relief as he could quickly make out that the descending sea of golden flames had been stopped in its tracks, whittled down by the incessant outpouring of water. However, that didn't mean that he had won, but rather that he had entered a competition of endurance of which skill would run out of steam first.

If it was just a cultivator on the other side, then Zac would have been confident in outlasting them without breaking a sweat, but he quickly came to realize that he was dealing with something else

entirely as the seconds passed. Sweat started streaming down his whole body from the heat and exertion, and he felt that he wouldn't be able to keep the skill going for much longer.

It wasn't an issue of Cosmic Energy, but simply that there was a limit to how long the skill could function. However, he could sense that the energy that the golden lines radiated had been expended by more than half, meaning it wasn't some infallible item that drew power from the heavens or something.

Only five seconds remained on [Nature's Punishment], and he immediately made his choice as he pushed the golden hand to readjust itself somewhat. The emerald fractal that came with the skill was pretty much fixed after having been activated, but he could tilt it a little bit, which allowed him to change the direction of the stream of water.

He didn't try to catch a larger part of the wave of flames that kept raining down from the insignia, but rather the opposite. The water instead shot straight toward the incursion pillar and himself. Zac steadied himself as a wall of water slammed into him, completely drenching him as it tried to carry him away toward the jungle.

However, Zac quickly stomped his feet into the ground with enough force to lodge himself in the rock, while doing the same with a fractal blade from [Chop]. He wouldn't have loved anything more than being carried far from this place, but the water was unfortunately unable to douse the fiery bonds that kept him in place. The Incursion pillar rebuffed the water without any effort as well, and it looked like the pillar empowered the bond.

He was afraid that he would accidentally kill himself if he pushed himself too far, so he had to stay around. [Nature's Punishment] finally ended, and Zac saw that his efforts at least had allowed him to quell the threat of the magma flowing out from the remains of the volcano. It had already cooled into odd layers of stone that formed a towering wall where the city once stood.

However, the insignia was still going strong, and Zac scrambled to figure out what to do next. The flames weren't especially fast, but they would still reach him in just a few seconds. Wasting no time he immediately rushed into the Incursion pillar itself. A strong rebounding force was emitted from the Nexus Hub, but he had no problem pushing through.

He quickly reached the center of the pillar and he swung his axe with all the force he could muster.

A golden shield that Zac recognized all too well appeared in front of his edge just as it was about to bite into the large crystal and Zac sighed when he realized that the System prevented him from destroying the crystal itself. He hoped he would be able to free himself from the burning bond that way, but it looked like it would be impossible. However, that didn't mean that there was no reaction to his attack as a prompt appeared in front of him.

[Nexus Hub Capture Activated. Hold for 1 hour to conquer.]

Zac quickly read the screen before he waved it away. It wouldn't help him against the incoming sea of flames, but it did sound like there wouldn't be any grace period for the Invaders if he completed the capture. How would they use his Nexus Hub to return home when they were enemies?

However, he first needed to survive the incoming flames, and he looked up with consternation. He eventually decided against unleashing [Deforestation] in hopes of destroying the rune, wanting to save it

just in case. It was still possible that the Head Priest and his remaining generals were hiding in the vicinity somewhere, waiting for him to be weakened enough by the insignia before they struck a killing blow.

He needed to save his most powerful ace just in case.

The bronze flash would probably do the trick, but he had no way to get up there with his flying treasure being blocked out somehow. There was something else though. Zac sighed as he took out the rusty sword, and discordant wails immediately assaulted his ears.

Using the cursed sword so soon after activating it last time came with very real risks according to Catheya. A weapon like this fed on its victims, and it was evidenced by how he already heard the voices even before even unsheathing the weapon. You would normally use some restraining method on a weapon like this, or starve it out to weaken it before you used it again.

But Zac didn't have the luxury of waiting around as the golden insignia seemed more than capable of spewing out its unceasing flames for a while longer. His whole body was wracked with pain as he drew the blade, unleashing the half-moon toward the three lines in the sky. It steadily started to grow as it picked up speed, seemingly eager to attack the energy-rich rune in the sky.

A handful of tendrils immediately emerged from the weapon and latched onto Zac's arm as well, making it look like the sword was fusing with his body. A mysterious energy burrowed into his arm and headed straight for his head the next moment, effortlessly evading his attempts to block it out with [Mental Fortress].

Extremely intrusive voices boomed in his mind, blocking out any coherent thought. Zac's eyes widened in fear as he saw more and more tendrils reaching out from the weapon, and his whole arm was covered in an instant. He wanted to stow away the weapon, but he knew he needed to hold on, as putting it away would cancel the attack in the sky.

However, a deep resounding heartbeat suddenly quelled the voices, and Zac felt like his heart turned into a black hole that swallowed the invading energies whole. More and more energy entered his hidden node, and more was even dragged out from the sword itself. Zac even sensed fear from the weapon just before the sword detached itself from his arm and turned inert.

The half-moon thankfully wasn't affected by the struggle on the ground as it effortlessly cut through the sea of flames in the sky, heading straight for the divine rune. It created a corridor free of fire for a brief second before the sea closed in on itself as it passed by. It seemed unable to actually absorb the flames, but the flames also seemed unable to deter its progression.

Finally, it reached its maximum size just as it slammed into the rune. There was no clear winner and no explosion of wild energies, only a stalemate that emitted a steadily increasing pressure. Zac knew things wouldn't end well no matter what the outcome was judging by the ominous buildup, and he quickly tried to activate one of his defensive treasures.

However, he quickly found that the restriction on the area didn't only apply to his flying leaf, but even his defensive talismans. [Love's Bond] seemed unable to activate its skills as well, though he could thankfully swap between its different forms.

An explosion finally rocked the area and the thick haze from the evaporated water was pushed away, exposing three golden lines and no silver half-moon. Even the cursed sword had been unable to take out the divine symbol it looked like. However, Zac soon noticed that the rune wasn't completely unscathed.

Not only had it lost its radiant luster, but there was even a small tear on one of the golden lines. The crack quickly spread, like a piece of ice that was slowly breaking apart. However, Zac didn't really feel any relief as his danger sense didn't calm down in the slightest. Looking up at the enormous rune made him feel like he was standing in front of a dam that was slowly bursting.

That rune had contained terrifying amounts of flames. What would happen when it finally broke apart?

He couldn't help but think back to Ogras' words of warning, of how the cultists always seemed to default to blowing everything up when it looked like they would fail. Miasma immediately started coursing through his body as his eyes and hair turned pitch-black. He couldn't flee and breaking the rune didn't seem to have helped all too much. He would need to endure the final blast, and that would require his other class.

Ogras and his big mouth.