

The Fall 529

Chapter 529: Adaptability

The broken pieces of the enormous sigil still radiated some heat even after over an hour had passed, but it wasn't to the point that Zac felt it was dangerous any longer. He walked closer to it to see if it actually was just normal gold, and he finally realized a pattern covered its surface. It almost looked like Damascus Steel but in gold and white, and where the white formed what looked like hazy patterns.

It clearly wasn't inscribed though, but it rather looked more like something that had naturally grown over time. However, the patterns didn't contain anywhere near the amount of meaning and power as the groves he had seen on the Stele during the vision in the Tower of Eternity. It almost felt like the patterns hadn't really finished forming just yet.

It made Zac unsure whether it actually was a normal metal that was in the process of being enhanced by the fire-attuned energies and prayer, or if it was some alloy the cultists were creating inside the volcano. Zac shook his head and instead made his way up the crater, feeling that it would have to be a mystery for someone else to solve. He had enough on his plate as it was.

His deathly gaze roved across the smoldering mountainside and the jungles for a couple of minutes, but he couldn't sense the slightest hint of life. Had every single cultist died after all? Not that it mattered too much, as there obviously hadn't been anyone of import at the base when he arrived. Just a skeleton crew that would set about the chain reaction that almost got him killed.

They were obviously ready to completely abandon the incursion.

Zac sighed as he understood the implication. He had hoped to be done with the zealots in one swift move with this final fight, at least dealing with the Head Priest and his bishops. But they were probably all still around, waiting to cause trouble at moment's notice. It was a bit of a shame there was not a single cultist to catch and interrogate, but they probably would rather blow themselves up than answer any questions.

Their actions were still a bit perplexing though. Why would they do something like this rather than just cutting their losses and returning home, just like the other invaders? Was the Mystic Realm really that important to them, or rather the Dimensional Artifact inside? It looked like they bet everything on that item and the fact that he wouldn't be able to hunt them down over the next century.

He would need to visit the Mystic Realm entrance to make sure, but Zac guessed that he would be met by a closed entrance impossible to open from outside. If he put himself in their shoes, their best course of action would be to hide inside the mystic Realm for a hundred years, at which point he would try to contact his superiors to pick them up.

Preferably while snatching the Dimensional Artifact.

A hundred years might be a long time to someone like himself, but to the elders of the Church of the Everlasting Dao it was nothing. Waiting a bit longer for the results would probably not matter all that much to them. Not everyone was strapped for time like The Great Redeemer. It meant that yet another old monster probably had set his sights on Earth and its resources.

He would either get the Dimensional Artifact or try to hunt them down, as the Church didn't feel like the kind of people who would drop something like this. However, Zac couldn't really muster any urgency from the realization, as it honestly didn't feel like it changed much by this point. There were already a bunch of old monsters bearing down on the planet, including his mother. What was one more?

Zac sighed as he sat down on the ground, his form once more turning back to human. A wave of pain radiated through his body as his body came alive, and he quickly ate another healing pill as he kept watch over the area. But there was not much to guard against as everything was completely burned and leveled.

The soothing energy of the Fragment of the Bodhi also spread through his body, helping out with restoring his tissue. However, there was stubborn energy hiding in the wounds, rabidly resisting both his pills and his Dao. It looked like some special energy had been infused into the blast, and he would have to slowly grind it down.

As he looked down at the crater he felt that the near-death experience had brought home an important lesson. There were all sorts of amazing treasures and arrays in the world, but nothing was impervious. Treasures could fail at any time, and he could only trust his own body in the end.

A buzz behind him told him that the teleporter had activated, and he turned over to see a vanguard group of demons carefully emerging inside the crater. Ilvere stood at the front, and he looked around with wide eyes before he spotted Zac sitting above. He quickly jumped up, and he gave a start when he saw Zac's wretched appearance.

"Don't you look like shit?" Ilvere laughed as he took out a large vat from his Cosmos Sack. "Something to drink? You look like you could need one. I've made it myself, with some help of that barkeep."

Zac wryly smiled as he took a swig from the Demonic homebrew, and he immediately became thankful that his gullet was reinforced by his high Endurance. The vile brew tasted like paint thinner, but it actually managed to give him a slight buzz. He wouldn't be surprised if a single mouthful would kill a normal human.

"What happened here? It looks like a natural disaster rather than a battlefield," the demon asked as he looked around at the destruction. "No bodies. They sacrificed themselves?"

"There was almost no one here," Zac sighed as he recounted what happened.

"So the lunatics are here to stay," Ilvere muttered with a grimace, echoing Zac's own thoughts. "I hoped we'd be done with them after their two invasions. Like fleas, these ones. Got to take them all out before they start to fester."

"Well, that's why I have you guys, right?" Zac snorted.

"Well, whatever. What do you want us to do?" Ilvere asked.

"Just the usual," Zac grunted as he got back on his feet. "Stay close to this area though. I think the valuable resource was the volcano, but I'm not sure if they broke it. What do you think about those golden things?"

Ilvere grunted in thought, before his massive weapon shot out with extreme momentum, slamming into one of the huge slabs of metals not far from where Zac sat. A deep gong echoed out across the area, and Ilvere even had to take a step back from the power inside the sound wave. Zac felt a bit impacted as well, but not to the point that he was hurt.

A small mark was left on the slab, but it didn't even look dented from the attack. The metal ball on the other hand looked like it had been put over a fire, radiating some heat that forced Ilvere to spin it in the air until it cooled down again.

"Won't probably be able to maintain its original function, but it's definitely good stuff. Perhaps we can reforge them into weapons and armor with flame attunement?" Ilvere muttered. "You have that mine in the underworld as well. If you can figure out a way to fuse the two resources you might even be able to make something valuable enough to even export through the blue one's Mercantile Licence."

Zac's eyes lit up at the prospect. He still hadn't been able to use Calrin's consortia for interplanetary trades so far, as the fees were too high to justify selling stuff like the ant carapace armors. But what if he could make a bunch of attuned weaponry? Fire had always been a popular Dao and cultivation path due to its offensive nature.

An armor providing flame-resistant would be a huge asset against fire-based forces like the Church of Everlasting Dao or the flame golems of the Underworld, and flame-attuned weaponry would no doubt sell like hotcakes.

"Harvesting those things have the highest priority then. Don't bother scouring the jungle. It's full of beasts, and it would take the whole army to canvass it," Zac said.

Zac gave it a thought and bought a set of defensive arrays as well for the area around his newly-acquired ruins. He usually didn't bother with that in the beginning, but he didn't want to risk the lives of his people in case some suicidal zealot was waiting for an opportunity in the vast jungle.

"Everyone returns together later, and everyone gets tested," Zac added. "Both with Origin Array and the root."

"Understood," Ilvere agreed. "We'll make sure not to bring any of those bastards back to the island."

Zac nodded and stepped through the teleporter the next moment, appearing in the public teleportation station. He was surprised to find Joanna waiting there for him and she walked over with brisk steps.

"Welcome back. The Administrator is looking for you," Joanna said with a smile. "You really did it. You actually saved Earth, like a real-life action hero."

"I don't think that action heroes look like this after winning," Zac wryly smiled. "And there are still a lot of bad guys around."

"You know, it's okay to celebrate taking a step in the right direction," Joanna said as she walked next to him. "If you only focus on what's wrong you'll always feel stressed out."

"I know," Zac smiled. "One step at a time. By the way, have Billy and Thea come here while I was gone?"

"Not to my knowledge?" Joanna said. "Is there something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing," Zac said with a shake of his head.

Zac had somewhat expected the two to claim their Inheritances by now, but perhaps they weren't quite ready just yet. Then again, he had closed the incursion a bit faster than expected, taking less than a day to get the job done. They would probably come over within the week unless their reward for surviving the Integration allowed them to gain another boost before the trial.

Joanna followed him over toward the government building, and Zac heard she had gained a rating of C by the system, with most of the Valkyries having gained a D. C was apparently the highest of anyone in Port Atwood, though Joanna hadn't asked his sister as she was busy with her experiments.

Most of the townspeople got an F or E, which didn't surprise Zac seeing how the System was so biased in favor of the Elites. It also turned out that only those with C or higher gained rewards and a Title. Zac guessed that getting to live another day was the only gift those with worse ratings got.

However, the situation was a bit baffling to Zac.

"What do you think the System graded you on?" Zac asked with some confusion. "A rating of D seems pretty bad for how many Incursions you guys helped me close. Not even Thea has closed as many as you did."

"I don't think it's just that," Joanna said with a shake of her head. "It has only been an hour, but I've started to get a small understanding of the situation after asking around. A part of the grade was definitely achievements, Dao, and Level, which isn't a surprise. But I also think a big part of it was adaptability."

"Adaptability?" Zac muttered.

"Ryan, for example, got a D grade like the Valkyries, even though he hasn't closed a single incursion. He did however quickly adapt after coming here, and now he's one of the most successful people on the island," Joanna said. "But both Ryan and us Valkyries didn't really excel in the beginning. We only got where we are because of you, so we didn't get too impressive grades."

Zac slowly nodded, feeling it made sense. The Incursions and the integration was a massive trial, and the System was probably only interested in helping those who were able to embrace their new reality and make the most of it. Besides, not only those like him or Thea was of value to the System. People like Smaug and Henry Marshall should probably have pretty decent ratings as well as they excelled in what they set out to do.

There was a palpable celebratory atmosphere in the town as the two walked toward the government building. People were out on the street with big smiles on their faces, and Zac was surprised to see that some had even raised the flag of Port Atwood on their storefronts or from their porches.

Zac had already hidden his identity with a hooded robe though, mostly because he was a bit embarrassed about his crispy appearance. Joanna wanted him to hold some sort of speech rouse to the citizens, but Zac was far too tired for something like that. He only wanted to get his rewards then rest up for a day or two.

They soon reached their destination, and Zac walked up to Abby's private floor in one of the wings after issuing a set of orders for Joanna to start preparing the Valkyries for the Mystic Realm. He entered after

a knock and found Abby hovering in the middle of a bunch of screens. She closed them and turned toward him, and Zac was surprised to see that she had grown since last time.

The diameter of the floating eyeball must have increased by 20 to 30 percent, and her shimmering eye looked even more magical compared to before. It seemed like his Administrator had reached E-Grade or at least evolved her race.

Another new addition was a golem standing in the corner of the room, a massive construct of polished stone that reached almost three meters into the air. One of its arms was just a long spike, and the other formed a shield. It didn't move in the slightest when Zac entered, but Zac still felt a vague pressure from it, meaning it should probably have the combat strength of an Early E-Grade cultivator.

Had the Stargazer bought herself a bodyguard?

"It's been a while," Zac smiled as he sat down at a free seat.

"Well, you've been busy," Abby said as her massive eye turned toward him. "I'm guessing you're here about the reward?"

"So there is one, after all?" Zac said, his eyes lighting up in anticipation.

"Yes, two actually," Abby said.