

The Fall 554

Chapter 554: Life, Death, War

"My body is telling me that this should be good stuff, but its pollen also seemed pretty deadly," Zac said as he placed the flower on the merchant's inspection table.

"The energies condensed in the pistil are both strong and peculiar, but I don't recognize this species," the Sky Gnome said as he looked at the natural treasure with interest. "It should be something good though. How did you find it?"

"It grew on a tree," Zac said as he described his encounter in the swamp.

"This reminds me of something," Calrin muttered as he took out one of his massive tomes.

A short moment later a page depicting a similar tree to the one on the island appeared.

"It's a [Rageroot Oak], a plant that can match your Tree of Ascension in rarity. It's lucky you didn't actually cut it down. Its trunk contains a sap that might even be able to drive you mad," Calrin read.

"The sap and pollen are both valuable and can be continuously extracted. The flowers can take decades to form though."

Zac felt some cold sweat running down the back when he saw the description. He remembered how something had dripped from those special roots, it turned out to be sap meant to turn him into a madman.

"What's it good for though? Berserk pills?" Zac asked, not too enthused.

Power never came for free, no matter if you were talking about War Arrays or Berserking Pills. War Arrays would always force you to travel with weaker subordinates, each one of them a weak link. As for Berserking Pills, they generally had pretty gruesome side-effects. The stronger the effect the worse the drawback would be.

"The pollen can be made into a potent beast lure which can be useful in all sorts of situations. You can both use it for yourself in case you need to refine yourself through battle, or you can use it to unleash a beast tide on your enemies. The sap is indeed a popular ingredient in Berserking Pills that allows warriors to unleash their potential during a battle," Calrin explained.

"And the flower itself? It should be the greatest treasure," Zac said.

"There is a core in the center of the flower," Calrin said. "It's a natural treasure that works as a Berserking Pill as well."

"That's it?" Zac asked with disappointment.

"Don't underestimate those cores. It will allow an E-Grade warrior to increase their power by one step, and it will not have any major side-effects, just extreme exhaustion afterward. These two combined make it extremely rare and valuable. A pill that gives such a massive boost would carry severe long-term side-effects, or might even lead to death," Calrin explained.

Zac finally realized that he really had picked up something good this time. He had researched this matter for a bit after getting his hands on the Cyborg Corpse, which could be considered the epitome of a Berserking transformation. One step didn't refer to level, but stages of cultivation, meaning an Early E-Grade warrior would be able to exhibit the power of a Middle E-Grade warrior with the help of these flowers.

That was almost a doubling in power, and to be able to get such a boost without lasting detriments was amazing. The cyborg might have gone all the way from early E-Grade to Half-step D-Grade, but that also cut the Technocrat's lifespan down to less than a minute. These flower cores might save his life in the future, turning the tides in a tough battle.

"I also have some wild herbs here as well, see if there's anything valuable," Zac added as he threw over a Cosmos Sack.

There, unfortunately, wasn't anything too impressive, but his six-day haul was still worth over 300 million nexus coins. That was only the immediate value of the herbs he found thanks to [Forester's Constitution], and not including the mountains of E-Grade carcasses that he had amassed in his Cosmos Sack.

It wasn't a huge sum for him any longer, but it proved how profitable even normal exploration could be. You needed both the skills to find the plants and the strength to survive the environment though, which disqualified pretty much everyone on Earth apart from a select few. Besides, he had the advantage of being the first explorer, and future generations probably wouldn't be able to collect such a haul.

But it made him excited for the future. This was the gain from a random forest on his planet. How much wealth could one stand to profit by exploring a newly emerged Mystic Realm in the future, a world that was not only untouched but possibly held extremely rare or even previously unseen herbs?

Zac walked out of the consortia with a sense of excitement, but he didn't get far before he sensed a powerful presence close-by.

"Hey," a voice said, and Zac looked over at the shadows with surprise.

"It's you?" Zac asked. "How do you keep finding me like this?"

"I just need to ask around. It's not like you're very circumspect," Ogras snorted.

"Well, is it done?" Zac asked.

"It's done," Ogras nodded as he stepped out into the light, and Zac could feel that the aura of the Demon was a lot more condensed compared to before.

"What level are you now?" Zac asked with curiosity, as it was obvious the demon had gained a substantial amount of Attributes.

"Eighty-three," Ogras shrugged, his mouth curving slightly upward. "A decent early push."

"Eighty-three? What the f-," Zac swore. "How have you already caught up to me? I had to fight multiple life-and-death battles to get here."

"Node-opening pills work as intended on me since I'm not a primordial beast," Ogras snorted. "You racked up a premature resistance by eating them by the handful."

"Well, it's good that you're out," Zac said. "I killed one of the Dominators while you broke through. I can use some back-up soon."

"Oh? Which one?" Ogras said with surprise. "I thought they had already decided to follow the same strategy as the zealots."

Zac quickly recapped what had taken place while Ogras was in secluded cultivation.

"Well, it's good that one of them is dealt with, though it does make me worry a bit that there has been no response. Makes me think they are up to something," Ogras grunted. "Got anything useful from its body?"

"No, I accidentally broke his Cosmos Sack," Zac explained with a grimace. "I've saved the remains to cleanse of karmic ties later, but I want all three of them first. Oh, but I did get this."

Zac took out the pitch-black spear the next moment and threw it over to Ogras. The demon caught it effortlessly even though it weighed hundreds of kilos, and the weapon turned to a blur as Ogras started stabbing it into the air.

"It contains some material and insight related to Space," Ogras muttered with excitement. "It can even enter the shadows! I just need to find a decent Blacksmith to infuse some more shadow-related materials and it will be perfect for me! Are you giving this to me?"

"Sure, but you'll have to find some way to pay me back later," Zac smiled. "We both know how valuable this spear is. Some offhanded advice won't cut it."

"Fine, I'll figure something out," Ogras shrugged as he dripped his blood on the weapon. "Such a good thing."

"Get ready for the war in three days," Zac said as he started walking toward the closest teleporter. "We might have to deal with the other two Dominators there."

"I'll head out for a day or two to get used to my improved strength," Ogras said. "But I will arrange things."

Zac chose to stay behind in Port Atwood while the Demon went away to hone himself through combat, spending his time either in his Soul Strengthening Array or pondering on the Dao. His most recent trips had given him a lot of insights, especially into the Fragment of the Bodhi, and he wanted to incorporate those snippets into his understanding of the Dao as quickly as possible. It wasn't enough to actually evolve any of the Fragments, but it was a step in the right direction.

The days flew by and the morning of the Challenge quickly arrived. Zac hadn't even left his Cultivation Cave during the three days, but he had gotten occasional reports from Triv. The ghost had availed himself as a sort of filter to save Zac's time. Crystals full of reports were sent to his compound daily by Abby and others, and Triv sifted through them to categorize them by importance and urgency.

Of course, the most crucial reports were sealed so that only Zac could see them.

This time Zac didn't set out to war with just Triv, but there was a whole squad waiting for him. Both Ogras and his two remaining generals were there, as was Joanna with a defensive squad of shield-bearing Valkyries and Emily. Triv was already resting inside his pagoda as well, ready to erect the jammers once final time.

Only his sister was missing from this group of core combatants of Port Atwood, with her being busy dealing with the Mystic Realm. Things were thankfully looking up over at Mystic Island, and Kenzie had indicated that there shouldn't be any problems with attempting a re-opening in a few days.

"You know why we're here," Zac simply said as he looked around. "We're not going to participate in the war itself. Our only job is to deal with the real threat; the Dominators. There should still be two karmic connections that can lead that man to Earth, but if we manage to destroy them we'll be safe for a century."

"What if the insectoids want to deal with those guys by themselves?" Ilvere asked.

"Ignore them," Zac eventually said after giving it some thought. "This is a matter of survival for our planet. Taking out the Dominators takes precedence over anything else. I'll just apologize to the Anointed afterward if it comes to that."

The group nodded in understanding, each of them already well aware of their respective roles. Zac would be the main combatant and Ogras would be back-up, with the rest of the group offering assistance in different ways. Thea would take the same role as Ogras as well if she decided to join them this time as well.

Zac didn't feel safe with letting anyone else directly fight the Dominators, and he was only confident in those two thanks to their ability to escape if needed. Harbinger had both proven his power and conviction in the previous battle, and he was afraid that even elites like Billy would just find themselves to be cannon fodder in front of their strength.

The group set out just a few minutes later, and they appeared at an array at the foot of a mountain this time. Zac could sense a terrifying aura though, and a breathtaking scene met his eyes when he turned his head.

Millions of Zhix stood armed and ready, an army many times larger than what he had witnessed so far. Not only that, one look was enough to tell that they hadn't thrown in random people to bolster the ranks. Each and every one was a hardened warrior who had seen battle before. The scene made him sigh with awe but also disappointment.

With an army like this in existence, why did he have to close all those Incursions himself? It was living proof that the thing that made newly integrated planets fail mostly lack of coordination and sacrificial will. The Zhix could have taken out a large number of Incursions themselves, but they had been paralyzed by their complex relationship with Cosmic Energy.

"Warmaster, you are here," Rhubat nodded as it walked over. "You brought more people this time?"

"We will stay to the side as promised. I just want to take precautions in case the other two appear today," Zac explained.

The Grand Anointed slowly nodded in understanding, which Zac also took as a tacit agreement that his people could fight the Dominators in case they showed up.

There wasn't else for them to do, and they set out just a few minutes later. Thea had already appeared before his group did, and it looked like the Anointed already had made their plans and preparations before this.

The vast army traveled for over 6 hours until they reached a secluded basin nestled in between towering mountains. There were no known human settlements within hours according to Thea, which was one of the reasons this location was picked. Another reason was probably that the basin stretched far into the horizon, allowing it to accommodate two massive armies.

Zac didn't have to wait long for them to spot their enemies. An endless black snake was moving toward them from the distance, emerging from a canyon on the other side of the basin. The people in his group frowned when they saw that the enemy army was at least 30% larger than their own, but Zac wasn't as worried.

These people hadn't witnessed the power of the Anointed who had entered the Crusade.

Their group found a small mountain not far from their own backlines. It rose about 200 meters above the ground, which allowed them to be close enough to witness the action without risking being suddenly dragged into it.

"Activate the jammer," Zac finally said when the two armies had lined up with a kilometer's distance, and Triv adroitly activated the black pillar.

There was a subdued silence in the millions of Zhix stood ready for war, the War Council was betting everything to secure the future of their race. The Dominators had been a shadow in the collective mind of the Zhix for millennia, and this was their final chance to fulfill the wish of their ancestors to completely cleanse it.

Conversely, if they failed the Zhix would fall. The dominators would seize control, which would be a short hegemony that would last until The Great Redeemer got here to cull the planet.

"So we just stand here?" Ogras muttered with a lazy expression.

"This is the struggle of the Zhix, our presence will only muddy the waters," Thea said from the side, only sparing the demon a glance before turning back toward the battlefield.

The stalemate only lasted for around ten minutes, before a prolonged note was released from a horn somewhere. The call released the floodgates, and the two armies started rushing toward each other. There were no deft stratagems or tactics employed, but rather just brutal fervor as the armies clashed.

The warriors didn't even seem to utilize their classes or skills, but rather just infused their bodies and traditional weapons with Cosmic Energy. It was a bit like Zac before he figured out how his pathways worked, where he just pushed around the energy in his body to improve his power.

Was this a tacit agreement between the two sides? An oath to deal with their conflict following the ancient precepts?

The armies weren't thick, the rows only having a depth of a hundred warriors or so, but the war stretched all the way to the horizon. There were hundreds of thousands of simultaneous clashes, and even the sky was affected by the collective outburst of killing intent and Cosmic Energy. The whole sky glowed in red as the Zhix fought tooth and nail everything they had, and Zac started to enter a mystic state as he looked on from the mountain top.

"This...!" Zac whispered, his eyes widening.

The others on the mountain looked at him with confusion, but he was no longer in any state to think about that as his aura exploded around him, forcing everyone to move away. His aura wasn't calm or condensed though, but rather a chaotic mess of energies that tried to devour everything around them.

"Death," he muttered next and order was imposed upon the chaos.

A massive sphere of darkness had been created, and the deathly energies inside it swirled in a vortex much like how his nodes looked. The enormous sphere took up almost half his vision, and perhaps by accident it covered most of the enemy army. Zac didn't know if others could see what he saw, but it didn't matter. His mind was full of pictures flashing by, superimposing themselves over the gory bloodbath beneath him.

People died by the scores every second, and each death seemed to resonate with him. The two opposing armies were like two opposite energies clashing, and something new would be born from the struggle.

"Life," Zac whispered in a trance, and his aura was split in two.

The growing sphere of death was pushed aside, forced to share space with a vibrant ball of life. Inside it was a power-generating vortex as well, but it flowed in the opposite direction of the sphere of death. The two spheres brought order to the chaos, but they each struggled for dominance.

The space between the two turned into a delimiting line of constant conflict, perfectly mirroring the war of the Zhix. And just like something new would be born out of this carnage, so was something brewing in his own aura. The thing he had been searching for since he started to look for a truth of his own.

"War," Zac growled, and the world finally clicked in place.

Blood fell like rain under a crimson sky, and a Path was born.