

The Fall 557

Chapter 557: Retaliation

The ghost was racked with pain after divulging information about the Primo, meaning Triv had once again been punished for breaking the laws branded onto its soul. It even turned mostly transparent this time, meaning that it might have been hurt pretty bad. Zac quickly threw a soul mending pill he got from the Undead Kingdom into its incorporeal body as he considered the implications of what Triv said.

Who would have thought that the big-shots who had affected the Multiverse as a whole all stepped onto the Boundless Path? Perhaps that was even the only way to reach the greatest heights. He remembered his short conversation with the mysterious man who had married Be'Zi who had spoken about the broken peaks of the System.

That wasn't to say that the System was useless though. It had drastically increased the average power of the elites of the multiverse, and it had pushed the boundaries of what was possible. The Apostates were ultimately extreme outliers and not an indicator of the general situation of the average cultivator on the Boundless Path.

It did feel a bit like walking the Boundless Path was the way of the elite from what Triv said, but he wasn't sure if it was for him. After all, most people seemed more than happy to stay in Heaven's Path, and it was still possible to reach C-Grade and even greater heights.

Setting the issue of his path aside, there were some things that the Ghost had said that he didn't quite understand.

"Are the System and the 'Heavens' not the same thing?" Zac asked. "How can the 'Heavens' send Tribulations at me even if that's not how the System operates?"

"That is beyond me, perhaps beyond everyone in this sector. They are one but also separate, that's all I've heard on the matter. Digging too deep into taboo subjects like this is fraught with dangers as well. Heaven's secrets are not so easily divulged," Triv said as he looked up at the sky with some fear.

"That lightning bolt was extremely frightening. There is no way that normal cultivators would survive more than a second or two. How can whole factions possibly follow this path?" Zac asked next, hoping to find some sort of solution in case the lightning returned.

"I'm no expert on methods of unorthodox cultivation," Triv reiterated. "Though my impression was that both the F-Grade and E-Grades were safe from true Tribulations."

"Guess I'm one lucky turkey then," Zac snorted, but he suddenly thought of something and opened his title screen.

[Terminus – Gaze upon the Terminus.]

It was the first time in a long while he had looked at this odd title that neither appeared in his status screen nor provided any attributes. But Zac guessed that this actually might be the key as to why the Heavens reacted to the creation of his path. If others thought about the Primordial Chaos and the Terminus it was just wishful thinking and not something that the Heavens needed to waste its energy on.

But he had not only seen it, but he still lived to tell the tale. Perhaps this made him a real threat in the Heavens' eyes.

"That said," Triv added, though he seemed pretty reluctant at the idea of Zac continuing down this path. "I would guess that they either have methods to hide from or weaken the Tribulation. You would probably have to visit unorthodox space to find out any real details. Taboo subjects are not freely spread in integrated space to avoid any repercussions."

Zac kept talking with the ghost for a while, but it really didn't know much about the subject. As for formalizing a path, it knew even less. It was the same with Ogras and the others. For one, creating a real cultivation path was something that a lot of weaker factions didn't have any organized intelligence on. They just muddled along, often focusing on lower-rarity cultivation to improve their odds.

He still didn't feel he really had a full handle on the situation with his cultivation, but he felt he should just stay the course for the time being.

The thing that muddled the waters was the opposing signals from the System. It seemed to want him to go down this path for some reason, but it also warned him of the 'Terminus'. Was this the name of the real Heavens perhaps? When the System told him to "beware the Terminus", was it perhaps warning him that the Pre-System Heavens would try to stop him?

Zac eventually sighed and shook his head, deciding to focus on the present instead of worrying about these far-off things.

Hopefully, his previous experience was just a result of him wanting to take control of Chaos itself. If that was the case he might be fine as long as he didn't become too greedy. He could simply focus on just Life, Death, and Struggle like he originally planned when pondering his path during the epiphany.

He deactivated the layers of defenses around him after letting Triv clean him up. The ghost had a skill called [Twilight Scrub] for this very purpose, true to his class. It was a convenient mix of a shower and a wash that just looked like a dense cloud, but it was unfortunately made for the unliving. The azure haze that cleansed his body of both blood and grime felt like a touch of death itself. It wasn't harmful though, so Zac didn't waste time changing into his Draugr form just to clean up.

The group outside breathed out in relief when they saw that Zac was really fine, at least outwardly.

"What the hell happened to you earlier?" Ogras asked with exasperation. "First you blast your aura at full power, then you sit around with the expression of a simpleton for hours until you suddenly start running like a maniac. And what was that lightning?! I've never seen anything like it."

Zac was exhausted, but seeing the demon so frazzled that he started prattling off did improve his mood a bit. It also looked like he didn't recognize the purple lightning as Triv did, once more proving the advantage of being part of a greater force. Then again, it might just be because Triv was a spirit being who was extremely sensitive to energies as his body was made from it.

"Nothing much, I just had an epiphany," Zac shrugged, the corner of his mouth tugging slightly upward.

"What's with that smirk?" Ogras muttered, looking like he had swallowed a fly after hearing that Zac had taken yet another step forward.

Teasing aside, Zac still didn't really know if he had actually gained anything from his encounter apart from solidifying his path. The Hidden Node still hadn't spat out the energy it managed to reabsorb, and Zac started to think that the [Void Heart] kept that Tribulation Lightning for itself. That might not be the worst thing though, as it hopefully meant that the node would become stronger.

Zac also asked some questions about what had transpired while he was unconscious or mid-enlightenment, but the others hadn't really gained anything from witnessing the struggle below. They also hadn't shared his vision of the two massive spheres splitting the basin in two, and the vortex of struggle in the middle. Zac was relieved to hear it was for his eyes only, as that vision could be considered a core cultivation secret of his, almost on the level of his mutated Duplicity Core.

The shocking lightning field that blasted out from his body earlier had apparently given pause to the bloodshed below, but the war had immediately picked up its pace again as he focused on recuperation. Thankfully it looked like the Dominators really wasn't around. If they were, then they would definitely have attacked him at his moment of weakness.

He looked down at the battlefield once more. This time he didn't see the scene as a representation of his cultivation path, but just as the gruesome war that it was. Hours had passed by this point, and the battle had reached its high point.

Over 90% of both sides were actively engaged in battle, with neither side retaining any spare combatants. The last 10% Zhix were roving elite squads that shored up any weaknesses that appeared in the frontlines, or who mounted assaults aimed at taking out leaders or Anointed. And it had worked with things being so chaotic.

It looked like a quarter of the Anointed had fallen by this point, and more joined their ranks by the minutes. They resembled proud lions that were finally harried to death by a vast pack of hyenas. Massive swathes of destruction surrounded every fallen Anointed, and it took hundreds of strikes to finally bring one of the behemoths down.

Of course, the fall of a spiritual leader only led to further slaughter as the hive soldiers of the fallen Anointed turned insane in their desire for revenge.

The number of combatants was almost uncountable, but the ferocity of the war was also unmatched. Zac and his group once more found their spirits subdued by the bloodshed. Only a lunatic would be able to witness this much death without batting an eye. Even Triv looked downcast as he gazed upon the scene below, though his reasons were different than the rest.

"So many children... What a waste. Young master, why not..." Triv whispered by his side.

"I'm not going to raise an army of Zhix undead," Zac said without hesitation. "You've seen it. They cremate their fallen. I neither want nor need an army like this."

This wasn't the first time the ghost had brought forth the point of saving the bodies of his enemies to create undead followers. Zac had staunchly refused until now, though he inwardly wasn't as confident. There were a lot of bodies of his fallen enemies stored in Cosmos Sacks. They had the potential to create a group of elites that might be able to rival all the geniuses in his force.

But the time wasn't right.

Triv had actually provided a large-scale array that would slowly infuse Miasma into bodies. The field of corpses he appeared on during the climb was one such Array of Awakening as Triv called. The problem was that anyone who was resurrected through that array would automatically be part of the Undead Empire. That's why Triv didn't even get a backlash from providing it. The Undead Empire was more than happy to let others raise more subjects for them.

Perhaps he could revisit the issue if the planet really gained a Life-Death attunement though, and after he had visited Twilight Harbor and gathered intelligence on how unattached undead factions functioned.

Besides, he didn't have the resources to nurture unliving elites at the moment. He did have the [Corpsebloom Mantra] he looted from Mhal along with a few more random manuals and skills, but he was never able to unlock the manuals of the Lich King. Even if he managed to awaken a group of undead right now, he would just be wasting their potential.

The war raged on for a few more hours before there were just a few pockets of traitors on one side, with the Zhix War Council having more than enough steam to crush the last resistance in minutes.

Bloodied and ruthless Anointed pushed forward, their ceremonial knives continuously giving the last rites to those led astray, and finally there was just deafening silence as the victors stood over the fallen. Zac looked down at the carnage with mixed emotions until he sighed and stood up. All-in-all they had stayed in this basin for around 8 hours, and Zac was eager to leave this cursed place and its intense stench of blood.

"Looks like it's over," Zac said as he turned to Triv. "You can turn off the jammer."

However, Zac got a sinking feeling when his Communication crystal started vibrating just a few seconds after the black pillar stopped humming.

"Lord Atwood, settlements are under attack!"

Zac inwardly swore as his group gathered around him, looks of worry adorning their faces.

"Attacked? Who? Where?" Zac asked with anger. "Is it Port Atwood again?"

"No, it's thankfully just settlements on the mainland. We've first lost contact with Site 27 less than an hour after you activated the Jammer. Four hours later Bastion disappeared, and just now Site 2," the voice said on the other side of the crystal.

"Where are you?" Zac asked next, recognizing the owner to be one Sarah, one of the newer Valkyries. "How are you able to contact me?"

"We set out toward your location from the closest town when we lost contact with you. We've left relays to keep us updated. But we were unable to enter the mountain range where you are staying, so we could only warn you now. I'm sorry," Sarah sighed.

"That's okay. Are you able to get back by yourselves?" Zac asked. "I might need to move quickly."

"No problem. We'll be back in Port Atwood in a few hours," Sarah said without worry.

Zac sighed in relief as he muttered the list of towns with confusion. Those three settlements were nowhere near each other. Site 2 was the provisional name of one of the first Incursions he closed; the time he saved the Ishiate towns from the rockmen. Bastion was the location of another Incursion, but it was given that name as there were large numbers of humans actually living there.

The controlling faction there had been one of the better ones, all things considered, killing few natives and 'only' enslaving them to gain a workforce. Finally, Site 27 was one of the last Incursions, one he didn't actually fight against. It was one of the forces who gave up soon after Zac closed the Undead Incursion, leaving a ghost-town between two secluded peaks behind.

Still, Zac couldn't completely understand why those three had been targeted. They were on different parts of Pangea, and they weren't of critical importance to him at all. None of them were all that easy to access, making it impossible they were random strikes. Either three forces would have to coordinate their efforts or a group that moved extremely quickly between the towns. Judging by the fact they were attacked in sequence, it was more likely it was the latter.

Was it Void's Disciple?