

The Fall 558

Chapter 558: Showdown

Zac had been dreading a response from Void's Disciple since killing Harbinger, and this might be his opening move. He felt doubly thankful that he had already sent most people back to Port Atwood in case of attack, minimizing loss of life. However, there were still Skeleton Crews stationed at every spot to keep operations going and there had probably been losses.

"Did anyone manage to return from those places?" Zac asked with a sigh.

"Unfortunately, no," the answer came. "There were roughly 20 people stationed in each of those locations to maintain basic operations."

Zac and the others kept asking things through the Crystal, but Sarah didn't know much. They didn't dare to roll out the army as all leaders of Port Atwood were currently away, so they could only look on with dismay as one settlement after another had disappeared from the screen. They had tried to send out a few squads to random settlements to look around, but they had all come back empty-handed.

Various thoughts swirled through Zac's head, but he eventually made his decision. He needed to get going, even if he had to pay the price to erect another teleportation array with his [Spatial Transfer Array]. But there was no point in rushing. He wasn't able to reach the three lost settlements in short order anyway, and immediately heading there might allow even more of his towns to be attacked behind his back.

The problem was that he didn't know where this mystery attacker would strike next.

"Anyone who can figure out why these three places were targeted?" Zac asked with a frown.

The Valkyries shook their heads, and Ogras didn't speak up either.

"Metals," Ilvere suddenly said, drawing the gazes of the others.

"What?" Zac asked.

"You know, I've been in charge of taking stock of the bases you've conquered. All three of those places you mentioned have Spiritual Metal deposits of pretty high quality. That's the only thing I can think of," the general said.

"Metals," Zac repeated thoughtfully. "But there shouldn't have been too much extracted, and it either left with the invaders or has been transferred to Port Atwood. I had already sent everyone back as well. It's not like they can extract the whole place in minutes or even hours."

"Either they want to stop you from extracting things as well, perhaps preventing us from properly preparing for the Mystic Realm," Ogras slowly said. "The mines might be ruined. Or they are looking for an exotic piece of metal that might be found somewhere in their depths."

Zac nodded with a frown. Just like Nexus Crystal mines sometimes could produce Attuned Crystals or higher-grade ones, so could metal deposit contains small amounts of extremely valuable materials. It was on his radar to scan all his reserves for such items, but he sorely lacked the manpower for such a task.

He hadn't even fully mapped out his own Crystal Mine as its tunnels stretched kilometer after kilometer below ground, seemingly neverending pathways that kept turning and branching. He still only had an inkling of what all his conquered towns could provide.

The problem was how quickly things had transpired. It should take a few hours to reach those places from any other settlement even if you had some good movement method, and from there you would have to enter the depths to extract that precious ore. Zac would have needed almost a whole day to travel to those three locations, even if he only gave himself an hour per mine and used the Flying Treasure.

"Do we have other places that fit the description?" he asked.

"There's just the one," Ilvere slowly said. "Site 16."

Zac immediately remembered the place he was referring to. It was the incursion with the birdmen, that one placed on top of a mountain.

"Good. If the last town was lost just a few minutes ago, then we have a few hours if things will progress as before," Zac muttered. "Traveling to that place will take time even if it's Void's Disciple. Stay here, I need to speak to the Zhix."

The other nodded and Zac descended the mountain, walking straight toward the battlefield a hundred meters per step. The war was over, but a subdued silence stretched across the whole basin. Groups of warriors walked across the fields to retrieve the fallen, but most simply sat down, many with tears streaming down their cheeks.

Those worst off were actually the Anointed, all of them sitting in prayer, tear-streaked blood covering their faces. Even the three great Anointed hadn't walked out of the war unscathed, and Vanexis had even lost a hand. It went to show how massive groups of weaker cultivators could take out much stronger opponents if they were willing to sacrifice enough lives.

He found Rhubat sitting at the center of the army, and he was relieved to see a bloodied but living Nonet not far away. He had lost track of Nonet during his epiphany, but it appeared that Hive Kundevi thankfully was not one of the Hives targeted by the elite executioner squads.

"Congratulations on your victory," Zac said as he turned back to Rhubat. "I'm sorry to interrupt, something urgent has come up."

"This is not a victory, Warmaster," Rhubat sighed, its enormous face a mask of pain and sorrow. "There are no victors today. We've lost half our children this day, yet the war is not over."

"That is why I've come. I won't be able to stay with you on the way back. Someone has attacked three of my settlements while you fought, it seems the person can move extremely quickly," Zac said. "I need to go before more of my towns are destroyed."

"Do you suspect the Dominators?" Rhubat said, and the other Anointed in the vicinity perked up from their desolate states.

"I do," Zac said. "Void seems to have some method to move about somewhat freely."

"What are you planning?"

“If it’s really Void I’m thinking we should launch an ambush. We need to hit hard and quick because he’s so slippery,” Zac said. “We have located the next place we believe he’ll target, I’m heading there now.”

“Good, agreed. Vanexis and Raja will oversee the rites,” Rhubat said as the giant got to its feet. “Six councilors will come with me. Any more will likely just be a hindrance this time. Our old methods will not work in this scenario.”

A few of the largest Zhix roused themselves and got to their feet with solemn expressions, joining Zac as they returned up the mountain. Zac wasted no time before he found a hidden cave large enough to house his group plus the Anointed. He erected an illusion array at the door before a pile of materials emerged from his cosmos sack.

His hands turned to a blur next as a crude but functional teleportation array was erected in minutes.

“How is this possible?” Thea muttered with incomprehension as she looked down at the newly created array. “There’s no town for hours. Can you actually create arrays like this?”

“No. At least not that I know of. I was given this ability as a reward when the final incursion was closed,” Zac shrugged. “Perhaps the System knew I would be running around all over. There are some limitations though. Only I can activate it and it is only usable once.”

Zac didn’t explain the other details of his array though, letting them form their own hypotheses. He didn’t even need to take out the bracelet hidden beneath his bracer for his [Spatial Gate Array] to work. He just needed to infuse it with Cosmic Energy and a connection was formed between the bracelet and the array. Zac’s best guess was that the bracelet contained some sort of spatial energy, and it infused it into Zac’s previously dead array to give it enough power to work just once.

It was intentional that he did things this way. This meant that both the Zhix and the Marshall Clan would know that he could plop down an array at any time, anywhere. Such an ability was pretty scary and would make his force almost unassailable.

Port Atwood and these forces had a harmonious cooperation right now, and this display would hopefully help quash any contrary thoughts while he was off cultivating or looking for resources in the future.

“Can you place one inside the Mystic Realm later?” Thea suddenly asked. “In case we need to send out things or people.”

“Teleportation arrays doesn’t work inside Mystic Realms,” Ogras said with a lazy expression. “At least not conventional ones. Something about a different sort of space. Now, let’s go before the next Site disappears from the Teleportation Array.”

Zac nodded and the group flashed over, appearing in Site 16 a moment later. Their appearance caused some confusion among the stationed troops, and the confusion only increased when Joanna ordered them back to Port Atwood immediately.

After conferring with the Zhix for a bit they quickly learned that if it really was Void’s Disciple that was attacking them, then he should come from the south. An enemy hive was in that direction, and it was one of the closest settlements as well. The problem was whether they should set out from the town, or just sit around here while waiting for someone to show up.

In the end only Zac, Ogras, the Anointed, and Janos stayed. They would form a squad that would patrol the area toward the north. The rest were sent back as well as there simply wasn't enough room on the flying leaf. He was able to increase and decrease its size to some degree, but the Anointed would be still be packed like sardines. It was clearly not a tool to transport armies, but rather a private treasure for a wealthy scion.

Thea wasn't all too happy about the arrangement, but Zac felt that Janos might be better to bring. They had a lot of fire-power between himself and the others, but Janos provided something unique. If he could trap or at least weaken the Dominators with illusions his value would be extremely high in the battle.

The group flew back and forth at the foot of the mountain, looking for any sign of invaders. However, three hours passed without anything to show for it. Honestly, that was fine by Zac. Only 7 hours had passed since he was sapped by that terrifying Tribulation lightning, and the longer that things dragged on, the more he would be able to recuperate. Certainly, he was in good enough a state to fight, but he wasn't in peak condition.

"Over there," Rhubat suddenly said as it pointed toward the forest. "An odd corruption suddenly appeared in that direction. It might be worth investigating."

Zac nodded and changed course, knowing already that the Zhix were able to sense Cosmic Energy to a far greater degree than humans. A few seconds later he understood what the Anointed was talking about as his [Cosmic Gaze] picked up something odd as well. A small spatial disturbance had appeared in the middle of a secluded glade, and it was steadily growing.

Zac landed right in front of it, and he quickly summoned Triv from his pagoda.

"Hide some distance away from here," Zac said as he took out the jammer. "Activate it the moment someone appears."

The ghost nodded and stowed away the jammer, immediately flying into the dense bushes and disappearing from sight.

The Anointed murmured in a mix of shock and disgust when they saw Triv, but they didn't comment on it as their focus was all on the anomaly. They only needed to wait for ten more seconds before the gate rapidly changed, forming a proper portal, and Zac couldn't help his heartbeat speeding up when he saw a familiar figure emerging the next second.

"It's you after all," Zac said with a frown as he mentally prepared for one of the toughest battles of his life.

Shocking energies started to radiate from the bodies of the Anointed as well, and they glared at the much smaller Zhix that had appeared with seething hatred in their eyes.

"Betrayer, it turns the deeds of your kin wasn't even for yourselves in the end? We hear your kin betrayed the Zhix for an outsider? Why? Power? Power is available for everyone. There is no need to go so far" Rhubat rumbled as a dense killing intent blanketed the field. "You were the Great Sage. You were supposed to help the Zhix move forward, not destroy us."

“And perhaps I would have if the Integration waited for a few generations,” Void’s Disciple said with a hollow smile before he shot a dark look at Zac. “You killed my son.”

“Death is unavoidable in war. Is that why you attacked some random settlements?” Zac retorted.

“Just releasing some tension before the real battle,” Void’s disciple said as a savage grin spread across his face.

Zac had seen a glimpse of that madness once before, and he quickly activated [Hatchetman’s Spirit] and [Nature’s Barrier].

“Don’t worry. There will be a reckoning, but not today,” Void’s disciple laughed as his face returned to its original form. “You know where our fates will clash. Only one faction will gain the Dimensional Seed.”

‘Dimensional Seed? That’s the name of the treasure?’ Zac thought, but he still kept his face neutral.

“That is not up to you betrayer,” Rhubat rumbled, and the auras of the seven Anointed exploded out with enough power to even make the nearby trees sway.

Their lifeforce shone like radiant beacons as crude patterns lit up across their bodies. Zac’s eyes widened at the sight, guessing that this was the true form of the Crusade. But if they would die in a year just from being in their normal state, how long would they be able to fight like this? And would they even be able to return?

“You lunatics have really entered the Crusade, and you have even learned some new tricks since you embraced the truth of Cosmic Energy. However, it is still just a lamentable corruption of a true path,” Void’s Disciple said with a shake of his head, and Zac was almost certain he could see some pity in his eyes. “No matter.”

“It’s active,” Triv whispered in his mind, meaning that the jammer was activated.

Zac inwardly nodded. This was an opportunity of sorts. An opportunity to see how Void Disciple's mysterious skills worked, and what they could do to restrain them. He had personally seen Void’s Disciple open tears in space twice now, simply disappearing or appearing where he wanted. Such a skill was even more annoying to deal with than his own [Spatial Gate Array]. A lot of people had thought long and hard to combat such a skill, and the first idea that was brought forward was the jammer.

It worked on Teleportation Arrays, so why not on normal teleportation?

Four balls actually flew out of Void’s Disciple's own shadow the next moment, and each of them exploded and caused intense spatial distortions. Zac recognized the items at a glance as he had used that kind of offensive treasure before. They were not [Void Balls], but rather the same sort of spatial disruption balls he used to block arrays in the Underworld.

Ogras had launched the first blow against the Dominator, and the rest were quick on the uptake. Zac's aura exploded outward as well as determination shone in his eyes. [Verun's Bite] was already in his hand and the Spirit Tool keened with bloodlust.

It was time to see whether he or Void’s Disciple was the strongest warrior of Earth.