

The Fall 563

Chapter 563: Return

Zac looked in the direction of Site 16 with incredulity. Void's Disciple hadn't fled as expected, but he actually went out of his way to blow up the town even when it was uninhabited. Was there some deeper meaning to his actions, or did he feel that he hadn't caused enough damage to their group before?

Zac personally wasn't really feeling ready for another battle as he had already entered his weakened state. Swapping over to his Draugr form wouldn't help against that, and he would have to use one of his very limited [Rageroot Oak Seeds] just to regain his combat strength temporarily. The others looked just as worn-out too, with only two of the Anointed maintaining full combat strength.

But could they just sit still, doing nothing?

"We are willing to set out if you are, Warmaster," Rhubat rumbled as the group of Anointed walked over. "We will ignite our life-force to explode ourselves if need-be."

"... I'm sorry. I can't. I'm in no state to fight him again, and neither are these two," Zac eventually said as he nodded at the two demons.

Janos was sitting still not far away, his eyes closed in a slight frown. He had been knocked unconscious by the backlash, but his breathing was steady and his aura was slowly stabilizing after having meditated for a while. Zac was confident that the illusionist simply needed rest to recover. But he still couldn't assist in another fight in this short a window. His soul might be irrevocably hurt if he did.

"Do not apologize, Warmaster. Without your efforts all seven of us would have fallen," Rhubat said, and the other Anointed nodded in agreement. "Sacrificing once life without a chance of victory isn't noble, it's foolishness. Especially now that doing so will empower our enemy."

"The Sage has grown so powerful. I couldn't sense any corruption even at such close distance," another of the Anointed said with a forlorn expression. "Three councilors lost for nothing."

"Not for nothing," Ogras grunted as he finally managed to get up to a sitting position, though he had to lean against a rock to stay upright. "That asshole was a mystery until now. No one knew anything about him apart from his affiliation and his connection to the Dao of Space. But now we know quite a lot. We can use that next time."

Zac nodded in agreement. The mission was a failure, but not an abject one. They had gathered a lot of intelligence, and they had exhausted some of Adcarkas' aces. The scroll seemed very dangerous, but he still only used it once, meaning it was either a one-time thing or had other restrictions. He also shouldn't have too many peak-grade defensive talismans, as those things simply had no supply on Earth.

Furthermore, now that Zac had calmed down from the heat of the battle he realized something. Void's Disciple was definitely strong even though he only went all out toward the end, but his power wasn't insurmountable. Their Attributes shouldn't be too far from each other judging by the stalemate from their clash, and Zac was probably even ahead in Strength and Endurance.

The cracks of bones had been heard when Zac launched his attacks, and Adcarkas had been slowly pushed down in their deadlock. Part of the reason was that the Dominator was taking the momentum

for himself, but part of it was definitely because Zac was simply overpowering him with the help of [Hatchetman's Rage].

If he could make some improvements and perhaps even awaken a bloodline inside the Mystic Realm, then he would feel confident in clashing once more.

There was however the issue of the Zhix magically surviving getting bisected. It would be extremely difficult to finish off a person who not only was extremely strong but also had such a cheat-like skill. However, something so heaven-defying shouldn't come without a price. Zac had lost decades of his lifespan because of the Shard of Creation, and who knew what complications Ogras he stuck with from getting his body fused with the shadow-creature.

"Do you understand how he survived?" Zac asked as he turned back to Ogras. "I'm confident that it wasn't an illusion. He was really split apart by my attack. How the hell did he survive that?"

"Not illusion," Janos added from the side without opening his eyes, and Zac felt that he would know if anyone.

"I agree," Ogras nodded. "There are all kinds of odd techniques and treasures in the world, but it shouldn't have been a mirage. I was in the shadows right behind him when it happened, I saw blood rain down toward me, I could see his body splitting. I felt him die. Pretty scary skill of yours, by the way. What's it called?"

"Nevermind that. Do you think it was a skill or a treasure he used?"

"I'm guessing treasure. I haven't heard of E-Grade skills that can subvert life and death like that. I'm guessing that whatever you pulled off in the base-town should be the same?" the demon said, his eyes boring into Zac's.

Zac slightly nodded in acquiescence, knowing that the demon was referring to the time that his chest was blown apart in front of everyone, only to have it instantly regrow with the help of the last remnants of Creation Energy in his body. Zac still hadn't explained how he did that to the demon, not that Ogras had asked until now. He still wouldn't tell Ogras about the Shard of Creation though, for both their sakes.

He had been reminded the hard way of the dangers of dealing with those things earlier today, and he didn't want to bring another tribulation down on the demon's head as well.

"Is that even possible though? Where did he get something like this? He should mostly have stayed in secluded cultivation since the integration, apart from when he set out to cause some destruction," Zac said skeptically and turned to the Anointed to see if they knew anything else.

"Don't look at me, Warmaster," Rhubat said with embarrassment. "This is beyond our knowledge. The Dominators of old always followed one of three means of battle. Some controlled chains of enslavement. Others caused thousands of casualties with their spears. A few walked the path of pugilism as Adcarkas, rampaging through our ranks with their fists alone. However, there are no records of surviving something like this, and neither of the mystical skills of space we witnessed."

Zac nodded in understanding. They had already gotten an information package about ancient battles against the Dominators back on the Zhix homeworld. It wasn't much to go on though, especially as those

wars took place around two thousand years ago. The Medhin Royals seemed to have followed the spear heritage as well, but Zac's best guess was that thousands of years had caused the heritages to diverge.

"You called him the Sage of the Basin earlier," Zac asked instead, changing the topic. "What did you mean by that? What was his earlier identity?"

Zac didn't know much about the civilian identity of Void's Disciple from before. Even the Zhix War Council had only managed to confirm the real identities of the Dominators after Harbinger appeared. Adcarkas and his children had passed completely under the radar until the integration, and pretty much everyone who encountered them after was killed.

But perhaps they could find out some useful information by digging through their past.

"Adcarkas was a great scholar and artisan, to the point that his name was known across the world. He was an expert on all kinds of topics, from painting masterworks to perfecting superior smelting techniques to create stronger metals. The Sage also invented marvelous machines that would have made the lives of our kin easier if there had been time for them to spread and become adapted," Rhubat explained.

A few of the other Anointed had moved over by this point and added to Rhubat's explanation. He had been a 'wanderer', a traveling Zhix whose Hive had fallen in a war. He had taken up residence in a hive placed in the middle of an enormous basin, where he had mostly stayed to work on his projects. According to general knowledge, he should be around 50 years old, but he could be much older since he appeared out of nowhere.

It sort of sounded like Void's Disciple had been someone like the Zhix World's Leonardo DaVinci, a great mind that could change the course of history. Then again, Zac suspected that Void's Disciple was quite a bit older than what was believed, and a few centuries was enough time to master all kinds of things.

He didn't have any proof on the last guess, but he trusted his intuition. Void's Disciple emitted a similar aura as the Demon Master he had fought during the Tower of Eternity. The aura of an old expert who had perfected his skills and combat techniques to the peak.

"All those treasures though, where did he get them?" Zac muttered.

"He might have made them," Ogras ventured. "At least the weaker ones. Just think about it, he spent decades, possibly centuries, in an unintegrated world with very sparse Cosmic Energy. Cultivation would have to have been extremely slow. He might have built all those things in his search of improving his power in other ways."

Ogras' guess was as good as any theory they could come up with now, and the conversation eventually died out as everyone focused on recuperation. Only when an hour had passed did they begin to stir again, and Adcarkas was probably long gone by now.

"The Crusade will truly move into the hidden world you spoke of after all," Rhubat eventually sighed.

Zac understood the giant's despondency. The Anointed were almost out of time, and who knew how long the visit to the Mystic Realm would last? The Anointed would perhaps never be able to return to their hives even if they won, provided that the supposed lockdown that Julia mentioned lasted longer than expected. No one would cherish the thought of dying in a foreign world.

"I'll look for more ways to restrain him until we set out. What will you do next?" Zac asked.

"We need to finish the rites for the fallen," Rhubat slowly said. "We will return to the Hives for now, but we will follow you into the hidden world."

"Will you be done with everything in one week?" Zac asked, and he received a nod of confirmation.

"Good. We'll try opening the pathway at that time. I'll send someone to discuss the details, but I need to focus on getting stronger myself. I'm not sure he'll back off next time going by how much importance he places on the Spatial Artifact."

The group set out a few minutes later, and Ogras was able to walk again by the time they reached Site 16, albeit with the assistance of Janos. However, Ogras' aura was even weaker than a mortal's, and Zac wondered just how long it would take before he completely recovered.

The destruction of the outpost wasn't as bad as Zac had feared, but everything within a hundred meters of the mine entrance had been reduced to rubble, including the Teleportation Array. That wasn't a problem for Zac though as he could simply buy a new one, which made him even more confused as to why Void's Disciple had done something so pointless.

"We can sense remnants of the corruption," Rhubat said with some surprise. "We still don't understand how they managed to hide it, but perhaps he was unable to in his current state. There's a trail leading east from the epicenter of the attack."

"Look," Ogras added as he pointed to the left, and Zac's eyes lit up when he saw that one of the security cameras were still intact.

Port Atwood was still sorely lacking in personnel, but they had a huge amount of resources that they were able to use to get almost anything from the Marshall Clan. All outposts had been equipped with old-world security measures to shore up the lack of guards, so Void's Disciple's actions might actually have been caught on film.

They hurried toward a secluded guardhouse, and Zac turned on the monitors while the giants tried to peer inside through the doorway, their bulky frames much too big to fit inside. The latest hours started to flash by on the screen as Zac fast-forwarded the film until there finally was a change.

"It's him," Zac muttered when the familiar form appeared. "He's actually bleeding from the wound!"

There wasn't much else to see on the tape, but it was still good to see that Void Disciple hadn't come out unscathed after all. It broke the illusion of them dealing with someone unkillable. And it also seemed as though he could confirm a suspicion; he was after the mine.

The Dominator had appeared within frame as he moved toward the mine with impressive speed, but he had suddenly stopped and grasped his head. A second later the screen turned to static for a whole minute until the current scene outside appeared on the monitors, with the Dominator gone.

It seemed as though he had been planning on entering the mine, but changed his mind and left eastbound if Rhubat's senses could be trusted.

"A backlash? Something else?" Zac muttered, his eyes glistening.

"Serves him right for killing me," Ogras muttered. "Though I wish he would have looked a bit more wretched than sporting some surface wound."

Zac wryly smiled as he stepped out of the guardhouse and bought a new Teleportation Array. There was just a week left until his sister would rip open the portal to the Mystic Realm once more, not much time for his final preparations.