

The Fall 763

Chapter 763: The Price Paid

Something was definitely wrong. Zac was still a pretty decent distance from where he guessed the Splinter of Oblivion was located, but he didn't feel his remnants react at all, like they had when he closed in on the volcano. Neither could he pinpoint the splinter's location as he had been able to with the shard.

Even then, Zac pushed off from the edge of the ravine and swam into the darkness. He needed to confirm the situation before he set off to start a blood feud at the City of Ancients. Besides, he might be able to find some clues in the depths of just what was going on.

The light from the ocean surface was quickly subdued by pervasive darkness. It wasn't a problem for him though, and the chains of [Love's Bond] suddenly slapped away a shark trying to gobble him up. Zac barely registered the attack as he continued further down, following his senses to swim toward where the energy of Oblivion was the densest. Because that was the thing; the energy was not gone, it was simply reduced.

Hopefully, the splinter had simply been sealed somehow by the vampire, and Uona had hopefully underestimated his ability to break things.

The shark was both the first and last creature he encountered, with the area soon becoming a domain of almost pure death. Just like in the volcano, the death-attuned energies were different from both Miasma and Twilight Energy. It was rather reminiscent of the sphere of darkness that sat at the top of his [Pillar of Desolation].

It burrowed into his body as he swam deeper, seeking to destroy all that it touched. But the energy wasn't nearly as condensed as the weaponized Life in the Creation Pulses. Besides, he was Draugr, born from Death far more majestic than this. The ambient energies could barely harm him, and Zac felt he could stay here for days without succumbing.

However, some real dangers were lurking in the darkness as well.

Zac suddenly flashed out of the way, narrowly avoiding a tendril of nothingness that had appeared out of nowhere. Inside it, the power of Oblivion hid, destroying everything that the tendril touched. The Shard of Creation in his mind shuddered, perhaps eager to clash with the tendril, but Zac simply swam away after having dodged it.

But that attack was just the first of many, and Zac soon found himself in a confusing sea of destruction. Water kept disappearing as tendrils swayed back and forth, causing the waters to turn extremely chaotic. Even Zac didn't dare risk touching those tendrils without an Annihilation Sphere of his own, and he carefully dodged back and forth as he followed the intensity of energy.

A few minutes passed and the tendrils grew denser, but there weren't actually any signs of any pulses or the like. This was different from the missive, and Catheya had mentioned she had felt bursts of power much like the ones the Shard of Creation had released. Zac ultimately chose to take a risk and activated [Abyssal Phase].

The world slowed down as his perception of time changed, and his vision turned the monochrome. Zac didn't waste any time and he immediately shot forward, effortlessly avoiding hundreds of tendrils that now moved almost in slow-motion. They were easy enough to spot in his current form, having a far darker shade of black than anything else. Another minute passed, and Zac reached his destination - a pitch-black mountain that seemed to be the source of all the destruction that raged across the area.

The mountain almost looked like a beehive after having been the home of the Splinter of Oblivion for thousands of years, and Zac stopped in his tracks for a second, looking at the patterns in the stone with interest. It was just like the volcanic tunnels, marked by hidden meaning. The scars in the mountain formed a mysterious pattern, a pattern that Zac felt held clues to the truth of Oblivion.

He still had ample reserves of Miasma remaining, so he took advantage of the low danger of the ravine to swim one circle around the mountain, memorizing all the patterns that the remnant had left on the place. Only when he was done did he shoot forward, heading straight toward one of the thousands of entrances.

However, his mind suddenly screamed of danger, prompting him to stop in his tracks and return to his corporeal form. Just inside the mountain, a shield with a hair-raising aura was erected. His first instinct was that this was a roadblock left by Uona, but on second thought, Zac realized that couldn't be true. It rather looked like a thick wall of Oblivion had swallowed so much Twilight Energy and ocean water that a solid wall of death had been formed.

This nigh-physical wall, in turn, blocked any more water from getting through. Zac hesitated for a second before he started forming an Annihilation Sphere, even with the risks it brought. It would certainly be easier to expel some of his overflowing Creation into the barrier and hope it worked, but Zac could sense more than some Oblivion lurking inside the wall of death.

He had no idea what would happen if he attacked Oblivion with a bunch of Creation, which was why he had countered Creation with Creation back in the volcano. The two Daos were each other's opposites, but that didn't mean they canceled each other out. Worst case scenario, a mote of chaos would be formed, and that couldn't lead to anything good.

More likely, a completely uncontrollable eruption of energy would blast both Zac and everything around him into smithereens.

The Shard of Creation was clearly incensed upon sensing the purified energy of Oblivion being drawn out from Zac's Soul Core, but it actually restrained itself for some reason. Zac would have thought it would rail against the cage in front of this much energy, but it was like it behaved better the deeper he delved into this place.

Zac didn't know why it was helping him out, but he wouldn't waste the opportunity as he quickly pushed the Annihilation Sphere into the wall. His sphere was like a black hole, greedily gobbling up more and more energy from the barrier until it had become over a meter across. Zac figured that was enough and threw the sphere away.

The Annihilation Sphere ripped through the waters, searing space itself until it imploded, taking tens of thousands of liters with it into nothingness. Zac didn't care about that though and was rather busy

squeezing into the breach in case it would close again. The insides of the mountain were mostly hollowed out, through some weird twisted pillars remained.

Zac carefully started moving toward the core of the mountain, but he stopped after just a minute as he heard a shuffling sound.

"You came after all," a cackling voice said.

Zac looked over with shock as his axe appeared in his hand, ready to unleash a wave of unfettered carnage on whoever had spoken.

However, Zac could quickly confirm that it wouldn't be much of a fight. The one who had hidden in the mountain was on the verge of dying. He seemed to be a revenant, but his skin was covered in protruding veins that had an angry red glare. His eyes were glowing red as well, and he emitted a strong smell of blood. Zac hadn't seen one before, but he was pretty certain that it was a turned Blood Thrall he had encountered.

Blood Thralls were essentially slaves to cultivators of the Eternal Clan, but many still entered the contract willingly from what Zac was told. They gave up their freedom, but they gained power in return. Their bodies were filled with 'the holy blood', which functioned as a second source of strength for these warriors.

As long as they properly integrated with the blood, they would become Blood Servants, who were considered commoners rather than slaves in the domains of the Eternal Clan. In both cases, they could be just as strong as any other elite, but the reason Zac didn't see a battle coming, was the fact that the Blood Thrall had lost most of his body already.

Both his legs were gone, as was his stomach. He had one of his arms intact, but the other ended just below his shoulder. Zac could sense that it was fading, and fading fast. The thrall had probably sealed itself somehow to prolong its life, and now that it had woken up, it would not last very long.

As for the source of his wretched state, Zac could understand it all-too-well. The thrall had been hit by Oblivion.

"You have a message for me?" Zac sighed.

"Indeed," the thrall coughed. "Mistress Uona cordially invites Master Black to the City of Ancients to reconcile their differences. The item you are looking for is waiting for you there."

"City of Ancients? How is your master related to that place?" Zac frowned.

Unfortunately, the thrall only snickered in response, and he turned into a bloody goop a second later. Zac swore as he looked back and forth through the cave, but neither the splinter nor any more thralls hid in the darkness. He even found the spot where the Splinter of Oblivion once had rested, but the only thing remaining was an engraved line signed by Uona herself.

'I took it. You can't have it. Come fight me if you have a problem with that.'

Zac guessed it was a precaution in case the thrall wouldn't make it until he appeared, but it at least allayed any confusion from the thrall's flowery way of speaking. The only way he would get his hands on the Splinter of Oblivion was if he ripped it from Uona's cold dead hands.

He closed his eyes with exhaustion for a few seconds, taking a few deep breaths to stop his tired and aggravated mind from conjuring some new type of horrors at the cost of his life force. Only then did he open them again, and he wordlessly turned around and left. He was curious how the hell Uona managed to summon her ancestor to reach the heart of this place, but it ultimately didn't matter.

She had decided to cut off his lifeline when the System was holding his cultivation hostage. This was the second time she targeted him while he was minding his business, and it would be the last. She had told him to come fight her if he had a problem, and Zac swore that she soon would come to regret those words.

Ventus took a deep breath as he looked up at the sky. The stars had shifted, and fate had become obscured. No calculations would be able to foretell the result any longer. But his mouth still curved upward, as this was exactly what he had hoped for.

"You have sensed something," a calm voice said from the side.

Ventus turned to his captor, and his smile widened when looking at the staid face of Ykrodas Havarok. A storm was brewing, and not even this princeling would be able to come out of it unscathed.

"That smile of yours makes me a bit unsettled, templar. I'm starting to feel I would be better off simply killing you to save myself from the trouble," Ykrodas snorted.

"Fate will come knocking no matter whether I am alive or dead," Ventus grinned. "So why not keep me alive? That way you'll at least have an inkling of what might happen going forward. Besides, you know the price of killing me. Do you really want to turn the conflict into a blood feud with how the winds are blowing?"

"You are right. A storm is brewing," Ykrodas nodded. "Who knows if your token is still of any use? If you want to stick around, make yourself useful. What did you see?"

Ventus' smile didn't fade, but a pang of fear still rippled through his heart. Ykrodas was right. If this was like normal times, a Token of Exchange would be honored, and a ransom would be paid in return for release. But these were not normal times. He couldn't show fear though. He had calculated everything. The path was narrow, but it was there.

Especially now.

"Fate is gathering over the City of Ancients," Ventus said as he turned to look at the sprawling city in the distance, the movement prompting his fetters to rattle.

"You don't need to be a numerologist to figure that out," Ykrodas commented. "There is something else."

"He is coming," Ventus said, not bothering to hide the truth. "And he brings a storm in his wake."

"Arcaz Black?" Ykrodas said with a frown as his aura rose. "Before you said he wouldn't become a thorn in my side, and that he was even aiming at leaving early. Now, you're saying he's coming here? Are you toying with me?"

"Uona has forced his hand somehow," Ventus hurriedly said. "I warned you of this probability, that their conflict wasn't resolved. The details I cannot calculate, I lack information."

"So, he is coming here after all," Ykrodas muttered thoughtfully as his aura receded. "I guess his ploy turned out to be prophetic."

"He should have known better than to tempt the Heavens like that," Ventus smiled.

"Is his arrival good or bad for the Havarok?" Ykrodas asked as he calmly looked at Ventus's face for clues.

"It can be good," Ventus slowly said. "It can be bad."

"Playing games with us," the princeling's advisor said from the side, his eyes cold with murderous intent. "Have you not learned your lesson yet?"

An involuntary shudder went through Ventus's body, but he immediately stabilized his mind again. He had known torture would wait down the path he had chosen. Such was the price of trying to siphon Heavenly Fate.

Hopefully, it would all be worth it.

"You should not see Arcaz Black as an agent of the Undead Empire," Ventus eventually said. "My calculations indicate he has no real interest in the fate of the Realm Spirit or the ascension of Alvod Jondir. He is a lone agent, a messenger of Chaos."

"Chaos? You think he's here to make trouble for the other imperials?" Ykrodas ventured. "To prevent one of the other factions of their empire from stealing the opportunity? Is that why the Umbri'Zi is so conspicuously absent?"

"Not figurative chaos," Ventus smiled. "Literal Chaos. He is related to that unreachable peak. A storm of fate is dancing around him, causing havoc on everything it touches. My calculations are becoming less tenable by the second. Therein lies your opportunity, but also the risk to your plans. To everyone's plans."

"An E-grade warrior shouldn't be able to carry such fate," Ykrodas frowned. "The accumulated providence of those outside should largely negate it."

"Well, you don't need to trust me. Soon enough, your Sandsayers will find the shifting dunes unreadable as well," Ventus muttered. "One month. You better prepare yourself. Your seals will fail, of that I am sure."

"Impossible," Ykrodas said with a shake of his head. "The Eidolon has tried to break the restriction for half a year without any result, and every day our restriction grows stronger."

"I'm only relaying what I've calculated," Ventus smiled. "I've told you already, your plan would have failed in either case. The stars tell me that Uona and the Eidolon are walking in parallel, though both sides hide a dagger behind their backs."

"So, vaunted Starseeker," Ykrodas snorted, "what is your suggestion for me? Give up and let your temple claim another Autarch?"

"That is beyond what I can see. I can only tell you one thing. When the Heavens descend and all reality cries, give in to his demand. That is your path for survival," Ventus said as bleeding cracks started to form across his skin. "Don't forget the price he has paid by that point."

"The price he has paid?" Ykrodas muttered as gave Ventus an inscrutable look. "The Havarok is not unreasonable, but there are some bottom lines that cannot be crossed. It's up to this mysterious Draugr from here on out."

"My lord?" the advisor asked.

"Prepare our backup plan. Start inscribing the heart-sealing brands on our elites. We're entering the City of Ancients in a month," Ykrodas sighed. "Also, prepare the array. I need to send a message outside."

"It'll be ready in three days," the advisor nodded.

Ventus only smiled in return as he slumped down on the ground. He had done everything that he could. From here on out, he simply needed to stay alive. Of course, that would be easier said than done.