

The Fall 764

Chapter 764: Blood and Soul

There was nothing else of interest in the hollowed-out mountain, so Zac immediately set out the same way he came. Besides, the invitation might be a misdirect, and it was possible that an insane bloodsucker was bearing in on his position at this very moment. If so, he would rather fight somewhere else, than in this restrictive place.

Zac emerged at the top of the ravine a few minutes later, and he immediately crushed an escape talisman to move away. The moment he reappeared he turned into his wraith form and flashed away with [Abyssal Phase], not forgetting to make use of the slowed-down environment to look for threats.

However, there was no blood tide crashing toward him, and no other signs of a trap waiting to be sprung. It really looked like she wanted him to head to that city. Zac was just about to return to his normal form, but an odd flickering of light far in the distance caught his attention. He immediately changed course and rushed over to the small hill he had spotted.

Normally, Zac wouldn't have cared about some random glimmer, since there was an endless number of herbs and materials that gave off some light after gaining spirituality. The expansive reef back by the Twilight Chasm had almost looked like a rave, for example, without any of the corals being anything much of value.

However, this was different, since he actually recognized the energy – it was not Twilight, but rather the power of stars.

Zac turned back into his corporeal form and swam over until he was in front of the source of the anomaly. It looked like a couple of fireflies were dancing upon a random rock on top of a hill, but it was rather small stars that winked in and out of existence. He scanned it over and over, and there was no doubt.

He had been sitting at first row when Ventus had formed his Dao Branch, how could he possibly mistake his Dao for something else?

The question was why there was a small mote of his Dao on this desolate stretch of land in the middle of nowhere. Ventus was a numerologist from a B-grade faction, making Zac believe there was a deeper purpose for it. Most likely, the elf had somehow managed to calculate that Zac would pass by this area, and left this marker here to be found.

But whether Ventus left this thing for 'Zac Piker' or 'Arcaz Black', he had no way of knowing. Could he have calculated that the two were one and the same? Zac doubted it. He didn't have any proof, but he was somewhat certain that his mother's array contained anti-divination capabilities. Otherwise, it would be useless in preventing others from finding out his secret.

Whichever of his identities this mark was left for, Zac's instincts told him it wasn't a trap. Even then, he summoned the three pygmy skeletons of [Profane Exponents] and even started charging up [Pillar of Desolation] as he moved his hand toward the shimmering starlight.

It was almost like a mirror cracked as a small area on top the stone shifted, and the starlight was suddenly replaced by a small box. Zac opened it, which prompted a recording to immediately start playing as a hologram of the annoyingly handsome elf was conjured by shimmering starlight.

"Greetings Mr. Black. You do not know me, but I hope you'll trust me when I say our fate is connected. I am Ventus Kalavan, Starseeker of the Radiant Temple. By the time you see this, I will have been captured by Ykrodas Havarok in his efforts to enforce his will on this trial.

"I am not asking for you to save me. I am simply bringing a word of warning in hopes you will reciprocate in the future. I spent a decade of my lifespan to calculate some major events in this trial, and if you're seeing this particular message, you have failed in whatever mission that brought you to the Twilight Ocean.

"Do not worry, calculating the details of your mission is far beyond my abilities. It is related to Chaos, making any divination unreliable at best. But I do believe that you are heading toward the City of Ancients in hopes of resolving your matters.

"My gift to you is divulging the true nature of the City of Ancients. As you probably know, this realm is not a natural formation of nature. It is the result of realms of opposing elements colliding, resulting in this odd ocean. What you might not know, is that these two ancient worlds both had a spiritual will, and these wills survive to this day. One of them is hiding in the heart of the City of Ancients.

"The Realm Spirits are weak and susceptible to sabotage by this point. The faction that manages to decide the fate of this spirit, will have a leg up on the events that follow. The Eidolon is planning to either turn it into a soul slave or replace it with a spirit of their own, and the Eternal Clan should have a similar goal.

"The Havarok wants the spirit to live on for a while longer, and I think you can figure out the goal of the Radiant Temple yourself. I do not know exactly what will await within the gates of the City of Ancients, but the stars warn me of a cage of soul and blood. This is the limit of what I can calculate at this juncture. I hope we will meet again."

Zac thoughtfully looked at the small box for a moment before he crushed it and flashed away. The moment he reappeared he applied another round of karma-breaking powder across his body. The message left by the Numerologist was extremely helpful, but it was still extremely discomforting that he had been read to the point that Ventus had managed to place down a communication crystal like that.

Soon enough he set off in his vessel again, heading straight for the City of Ancients. The information that Ventus had shared didn't change his goal, but it had given him a better idea of the situation. He didn't know exactly what a Realm Spirit was, but he guessed it was something similar to a Tool Spirit.

It wasn't hard to connect the dots from there. If there was a spirit having some sort of control over this Mystic Realm, it would probably affect the Eveningtide Asura's plans. Meanwhile, it sounded like the undead factions wanted to turn the Realm Spirit into a backdoor to snatch the opportunity for ascension.

Zac didn't care about the struggle over the Realm Spirit's fate, but he had a feeling that he would be dragged into it whether he liked it or not. And from what he had gathered, it sounded like the best

option was if the spirit survived, allowing it to act interference on Alvod. He sighed with exhaustion as he looked at the state of his body.

Thankfully, he had only been forced to activate a single Annihilation sphere to break into the heart of the ravine, and the single set of cracks was fast being eroded by the Creation Energy in his body. But Zac had hoped he'd have managed to form an equilibrium by now with the help of the Second splinter, which was impossible in the short run.

Thankfully, the brush with Oblivion had somewhat calmed down the Shard of Creation for the time being, and it was currently sitting motionlessly in his Mental Energy cage. But that didn't mean it had been subdued or that it had given up. The shard was still agitated, but more in the sense of a cornered beast preparing to pounce.

Its demeanor was completely different from how the shards acted in all those visions. The shard holders had all met a miserable end eventually, but they didn't seem as pressured as he was. It was more of a slow grinding down where thoughts of desires were fulfilled, but in a way that brought unintended and often horrible consequences.

His situation wasn't just a matter of completing his quest any longer. If he didn't manage to regain equilibrium within a few months, something bad would happen. The shard kept gaining energy out of nowhere to continue its assault, while he was constantly expending Mental Energy to resist.

The best theory he could come up with was that the new shard kept acting out because it failed to merge with the one locked in his cage. He had already passed the 'Calamity' by surviving the outbursts and wresting control, but the process was only half-finished. At the same time, he didn't dare let the second shard into his cage, causing an imbalance like that.

As precarious as the situation was right now, Zac had a feeling it could get exponentially worse if he opened the cage before having collected the splinter. So for now, he was stuck in this weird state of limbo, as half a calamity on two legs. Hopefully, Catheya would have some answers for him soon enough.

Two weeks passed, at which point he suddenly felt a change in one of his talismans, prompting him to immediately take out a communication crystal and infuse some Miasma.

"Mr. Chaos," Zac said with a modified voice through the crystal, a small smile spreading across his face.

"Blue Lily," an unrecognizable voice responded, confirming that it was Catheya on the other side. "How did it go? Is it done?"

"I got your message," Zac sighed. "It failed, it was like you expected."

"Can you meet up?" Catheya asked.

"I'm on my way," Zac responded as he cut the connection.

Not far from here, hundreds of thousands of warriors had gathered, and it was impossible to know what kind of capabilities they had. Just like bugging telephone lines was possible back on Old Earth, it was apparently possible for inscription masters to lock onto the communication crystals of others. They might even be able to use the signals to pinpoint the speakers.

That's why they disguised their voices and didn't go into any details. Some things could only be discussed in person. Even if someone had managed to listen in, it didn't warrant any additional attention. With so many people and groups gathered in one place, there were bound to be tens of thousands of schemes taking place at any given time. Why waste time on a random one when there were no hints of there being a payoff, especially when he mentioned the operation was a failure?

Zac soon enough reached the spot his tracker indicated, this time a small glade in a forest of dense reeds. It was located almost two weeks travel from the City of Ancients, no doubt because it would be a bit risky setting up a camp any closer. A hole appeared in the ground, and Zac jumped inside.

A moment later the four of them sat together like they did a few months ago. However, the atmosphere was more subdued, with Zac's plans having gone awry.

"What happened?" Catheya eventually sighed.

"Uona had figured out my goal, and she's stolen the item in the ravine. She left a message for me. She's forcing me to enter the City of Ancients," Zac mumbled with some distraction as his shard had finally started to wake up after weeks of inactivity.

"Well, the road of cultivation is full of setbacks. This chance might have passed, but new ones will come," Catheya said on the other side. "Are you ready to leave this trial?"

"I can't," Zac sighed. "If I leave without that item, I will probably die."

"WHAT?!" Catheya shouted with shock as she dropped the glass in her hand. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Not only that," Zac grunted. "Without it, I will not be able to contact your ancestor."

"Never mind that," Catheya said with exasperation. "You should have told me the ravine was that important to you. I might have been able to distract that witch for a while."

"Well, I hoped things would work out somehow, but I guess I was a bit optimistic," Zac grunted.

"Anyway, I'm heading to the City of Ancients."

"Wait, take a breath, and calm down. You know how powerful she is. We need a plan!" Catheya hurriedly said.

"Don't worry, this is not your fight, and I won't try to implicate your clan. Besides, I have my methods, it's not like all hope is lost. I almost killed her last time, and this time I have the means to finish the job," Zac said with a weak smile.

"How could you possibly... Wait," Catheya muttered before she seemed to realize something. "Like that time?"

Zac didn't exactly know what she talked about, but he guessed she might be referring to when he raged out at the Zethaya pill house. However, he didn't have time to answer before he felt a surge building in his mind. His eyes widened in alarm, and he immediately started making his preparations.

"Watch out!" Zac roared as he rushed toward the exit, his breath turning into opalescent gas full of creation. "Get away from me!"

Catheya caught on quickly, and layers and layers of ice enclosed the three as Zac pushed his hands into the wall. He needed to contain it, he couldn't let it spread and hurt the others. He furiously imposed his will on the storm of Creation that erupted, pushing it all into the stone.

For a second, a huge chunk of the wall turned into an empty hall full of a dozen statues, each one depicting a person he had met inside the trial and made from a different material. The next moment, the chamber had turned into a confusing maze made from bronze, but it didn't last any longer.

Zac strained his mind and imagination to the limit as he cycled over a dozen scenes in an instant, each transformation exhausting some of the energy and preventing it from ballooning out of control. It took just two seconds, but Zac slumped down on the ground with a throbbing headache and shaky hands when he was done, leaving a wall of Memorysteel behind.

"What... was that?" Catheya asked with a shuddering breath before she emerged from her protection while repeatedly sniffing in the air. "This smell..."

Zac smiled weakly in return as he got back on his feet and sat down again. "It's safe now. For a while at least."

"Is it really safe?" Qirai asked with a frown as she stepped in front of her master while Varo glared daggers at him from the side. "Are you safe?"

"A side-effect from my mission," Zac grunted. "As soon as I get what I need from Uona, it will be fixed. For now, I'm a bit volatile. Sorry, I thought I had it under control."

Of course, he wasn't quite as optimistic as he tried to let on. Getting his hands on the splinter was nowhere near as straightforward as he would like. Certainly, he almost managed to kill Uona last time with a simple Annihilation Sphere, and this time he was armed with a fully charged Shard of Creation.

But at the same time, she was now ready for him to use that kind of attack, and she had probably spent a full year figuring out a counter.

His best chance was that he would be able to create an opening with the help of the unpredictable nature of Creation. She was probably expecting a ball of Oblivion, but he was going to attack her with the opposite. He had to make that count.

"Is there nothing you won't blow up?!" Catheya cursed as she thumped down on her chair again. "We haven't even covered how you managed to cause a volcano to erupt. Are you allergic to some peace and quiet?!"

Zac only smiled weakly in return, not sure how to respond.

"Well, we're still going," Catheya said after taking a few calming breaths. "We might not be able to help you in a direct conflict, but we can help you gather intelligence and provide ancillary support. Besides, we've stayed by the City of Ancients for over a month by now, you will save a lot of effort having us around."

"...Alright," Zac reluctantly agreed. "I'm sorry, I keep putting you guys in danger. I'll try to find a way to make it up to you all."

"No need to be so distant, we're all friends, right?" Catheya countered with a smile. "And I've already gathered some tidbits I think you'll find interesting."

The two proceed to exchange what they had learned since they met the last time, which ended with Catheya glaring at him accusatorily.

"How is it that you keep finding out more about what's going on while off traveling in desolate regions, compared to us who actually spent a month in the temporary city?" Catheya muttered with annoyance.

"Lucky, I guess," Zac smiled.

"So it is a trap, after all," Catheya muttered. "A lot of people have similar thoughts, but there hasn't been any clear proof either way."

"People know, yet they stick around?"

"The city has essentially been confirmed to predate the Twilight Harbor, and everything points to it being untouched. Even if Aia Ouro has managed to set up some sort of trap, they believe that with enough participants, the smart ones will walk out with ancient treasures while using the foolish as shields," Catheya explained.

"And everyone sees themselves as the smart ones," Qirai added with a snort.

"A disaster waiting to happen," Catheya agreed before she released a deep sigh. "Blood and souls... Realm Spirit... What a mess. And now with a walking powderkeg joining the fray, ancestors have mercy on us."