

The Fall 768

Chapter 768: The Rules of Madness

The clouds swirled around him as Zac observed the new patch of ruins he had entered by following the trail of blood. He was still in the outer edges of the city, judging by the illustrations he had purchased at the settlements outside. People had painted the town by capturing the snippets seen between the clouds and extrapolated a semi-complete image of the City of Ancients.

Some sections had never been exposed for some reason, including most of the central part of the city. However, many of the residential parts of town had been drawn in great detail, though the map was mostly useless now that everything seemed to be randomized by the confusion array. Thankfully, it was still possible to make an approximation of where he was located by the architecture.

The City of Ancients was like most cities, with the outer regions holding smaller buildings, apart from a number of massive structures that seemed to hold special functions. One was clearly a coliseum, while others might be temples or exchanges. These small buildings were covered with weaker arrays by the looks of it, and many of the buildings were nothing but rubble.

Meanwhile, the neighborhoods closer to the vast castle in the center were a lot more affluent, and there were a few parks as large as forests that had peeked through the clouds. There was not much else to say about this town, except that it seemed to have been the home to two different races when it wasn't abandoned.

There were two clear architectural preferences in the city, though the buildings were mixed pretty freely. Roughly half of the houses were built in white and faded blue rock, having rounded curves that made Zac think of stones smoothed by the ocean waves and to some degree Greek architecture. A lot of these buildings had spiraled roofs like the shell of a hermit crab, and Zac felt it was part of some sort of natural formation to strengthen the buildings.

The second half of the buildings were more sterile, using mostly black stones when creating living quarters that seemed like a slightly gothic predecessor to Scandinavian minimalism. However, these buildings had provided more space for gardens and sculptures, though the former had long turned into lifeless soil by this point.

The buildings around him were part of the slums, though which part was impossible to tell. There were no crazed warriors to help point him in the right direction, but Zac still had some options. One was to exsanguinate himself, but he'd only do that if he was stuck. Instead, he took out a bottle of blood he had collected to replenish Verun's skills, and he poured a small pool of it on the ground.

Time passed, and Zac frowned when his offering didn't elicit much of a response. The pool shuddered a bit, but it eventually simply seeped through the cracks without providing much of a clue. Whatever collected the blood in the city seemed to prefer fresh blood, but the haze seemed to like stale blood just the same as it rapidly turned red around the pool.

Zac sighed in disappointment as he stood up. He had a lot of blood on hand, but it looked like it wouldn't lead him straight toward the splinter. Instead, he turned his attention to one of the still-standing buildings in the area; a two-story house that seemed to have once been a storefront on the ground floor with a decently large living area on top.

He had called this area a slum, but it was only relative to the vast mansions in the inner town, which had gardens tens of thousands of square meters large. Depending on the level of people who had once made this place their home, it might even have been a Hegemon who ran this store.

The odds were he'd just get moved further from the core if he picked a new path at random, at least until he figured out another way to beat the confusion array. So why not stuff his pockets until someone came along? In case that failed as well, he would have to bleed himself and risk a potential bout of madness.

Four chains shot forward, but they were rebuffed by a flickering barrier as a set of fractals lit up along the house. A piercing screech was emitted as well, making Zac blanch as he instilled his chains with the Fragment of the Coffin before attacking again. The barrier was barely functional with multiple fractals missing, and destroying a few more runes on the building broke it completely.

The whistling sound stopped as well, and Zac looked at the building with bemusement. Ancient theft protection, perhaps? It would be pretty hard to sneakily pilfer a store with that sound waking the whole neighborhood.

Zac stepped into the storefront, but there was not much to be found. There was a layer of dust over five centimeters deep, and when he touched a small wooden bench, it collapsed into ash as well. Just how long had this city been hidden under the ground for furniture to be reduced to this point? There was no way that herbs would maintain their efficacy this long, but other items weren't as touched by the passage of time.

Swirling clouds of dust were kicked up as he rummaged about, and Zac was soon forced to tie a cloth over his mouth nose to avoid inhaling the ancient dust. Eventually, he found something of interest in a pile of dust and shards of glass that might once have been a display case for the store. It was a couple of stacks of talismans, though only 11 maintained their use after going through them.

Most had lost their efficacy by this point, with the inscriptions having faded away. The papers only remained since they were made from some sort of spiritual material, and possibly treated somehow to increase their quality and durability. Still, the ones that remained provided Zac with some clues. Looking at the scripture, it was clear that this shop was meant for the living, rather than some undead race.

The inscriptions were based on the script of the Apostate of Order, but trying to decipher it felt like looking at some proto-language on earth rather than the letters he was used to. [Primal Polyglot] and his accumulated experience still helped him somewhat understand their functions though, mostly because they weren't that complicated.

The first set was simple healing talismans you'd slap on your wound to seal it and increase the speed of recuperation. The talismans held a hint of Life in them, and Zac estimated they'd be equivalent to a Middle E-grade healing pill. The other type of talisman was life-attuned as well, and Zac found them pretty interesting.

They were actually offensive talismans even though their patterns were over 50% identical to the healing ones. From what he could tell, they were meant to flood certain part of an enemy's body with life-attuned energies and damage organs and bursts blood vessels. They essentially overheated parts of an enemy's body.

This method was quite ingenious, considering many defensive talismans and skills wouldn't block out a healing wave. The bodies of living cultivators also took in these kinds of energies naturally since life-attuned energy had all kinds of health benefits. Putting Divine Crystals in Cultivation Caves was the norm, for example, since it boosted health and longevity.

The talisman took advantage of this fact, acting like a trojan horse to bypass some of warriors' natural resistance. This obviously wouldn't work against undead whose bodies were naturally hostile against life-attuned energy, but these talismans would probably be quite lethal against them anyway.

Zac felt there was a lesson there, as he still struggled to find ways to use the Dao of Life offensively. If he wanted to grasp the Branch of Life in the future, he would have to broaden his definition of Life to include more than just the healing aspect. This was just one simple but effective aspect of life, while the pulses at the volcano had shown him another aspect.

He kept rummaging through the house for another minute, but he only found some Nexus Crystals hidden under a loose tile in the bedroom and two more stacks of talismans. Even then, Zac wasn't too disappointed since his findings confirmed a few things. First of all, the city seemed to have been hastily vacated.

Otherwise, the talismans and secret stash of money would have been brought away by the owners. It was also possible that everyone had been instantly killed by something like a mental attack, and their bodies had turned to dust like the furniture. No matter which was the case, that hopefully meant the bigger houses also had their valuables left behind.

Secondly, a shop at the edge of the City of Ancients sold Middle E-grade items like they were common goods, which probably meant the inner parts held D-grade items. And perhaps, the castle in the middle was once controlled by a Monarch, meaning there was a chance for C-grade items to appear.

Zac was still some ways from reaching D-grade, but he had already spent a good chunk of the seemingly endless fortune his mother had left him. Port Atwood would sooner or later start generating a steady source of revenue, but income sources like the Havenfort Chasm would take thousands of years to build up.

This was a huge opportunity to make a fortune in the short run. After all, even the worst C-grade items were way more valuable than the best E-grade items. Just a single pill or a piece of Spiritual Metal at C-grade might be worth more than his whole fortune. Certainly, he had his hands full with Uona and the splinter, but he would have to be crazy if he didn't keep his eyes open for other opportunities.

Hopefully, the System hadn't been stingy and whisked away all the high-grade items already.

Light steps suddenly echoed out on the cobblestone outside, and Zac immediately turned away from the desolate store and walked out to see who had arrived. It was a Revenant who was made from some unknown humanoid race with oversized purple eyes. She was not affected by the madness of the city either, and three glowing orbs shuddering with condensed mental energy swirled around her.

The moment Zac stepped out of the doorway, the woman turned in his direction. At first, she looked a bit confused, like she couldn't make heads or tails of what she was seeing. At first, Zac didn't know why, but he looked down at himself and noticed he was absolutely covered in dust. A quick shake and it fell off, and the Revenant's look went from confusion to despair as she looked into Zac's abyssal eyes.

The ladder screen had appeared above the Revenant as well by this point, and the Revenant only showed a value of 0-250. The moment she realized who she was dealing with, she rushed toward the closest path, but Zac was much quicker. A chain slammed into a wall in front of her, and Zac dragged himself over to bar her path.

"Stop," Zac calmly said.

"Lord Black," she said with a deep bow, her voice shaking with fear. "I have nothing that would enter your exalted eyes. Please spare me."

"I have no interest in your life, but I need answers. How do you resist the madness?" Zac asked the woman who had shrunk away with fear.

"I'm a Spiritual Warrior. My soul is strong enough to resist the lure," she said, and Zac wasn't too surprised now that he had gotten a better look at the three orbs rotating around her. They were not only made from miasma, but they also contained a lot of Mental Energy.

"Are you able to overcome the confusion array and pick the correct path?" Zac asked.

"No," she hurriedly said with a shake of her head. "It is out of my expertise. After finding out the nature of this place, I simply plan on moving at the edges and avoid battle until someone breaks this array."

Zac sighed, realizing he wouldn't get anything of use out of this woman. She was not much better than the average warrior that entered the trial, just above the weakest warriors who had dared enter the City of Ancients. She didn't seem to have any backing either that would allow her to share insights that Zac didn't already know.

He asked a few more questions, but she knew even less than he did. He even had her try to instill some mental energy in a batch of blood to 'enliven it', but it didn't make a lick of difference. One side of the pool bubbled slightly more than the other, but the whole thing was pretty inconsistent. That left him with one conclusion; someone would have to bleed if he wanted to proceed.

It almost felt like it was intentional. Uona didn't explicitly stop people from finding the way toward the core, but every step forward would need a sacrifice of blood. That blood, in turn, would probably be used for something nasty that would empower the vampire.

"Release some blood, and you can go," Zac grunted.

"Please, I saw another warrior get a wound. He was withstanding the madness before, but it seeped into the wound. I'm afraid-" she hesitated.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have a lot of options either," Zac said with an even stare. "It's life and death for everyone here. I'll give you two options. Release some blood on the ground and I'll give you a natural treasure from the inner part of the Mystic Realm. Refuse, and I'll knock you out and use you as a compass."

He knew what he was doing wasn't very gentlemanly, but this wasn't the time to start equivocating about right and wrong. If possible, he would prefer not to harm the innocents to reach the heart of the City of Ancients, but he'd do what he needed to get the job done. The Havarok had warned of this place

for months, yet this Revenant and others had jumped heedlessly into the maws of the unknown in search of treasure.

Besides, the sooner he got to the heart of the city, the sooner this madness would end.

In fact, Zac started to wonder if he might be able to seize the splinter without having to deal with Uona at all. After seeing the state of the Blood Slave back in the ravine, Zac had guessed she used her underlings as containers for the thing. But now, the remnant was out in the open judging by how its aura permeated the whole city.

Hopefully, Uona would be busy with all the blood that kept pouring toward the heart of the city, allowing him to snatch the splinter with the help of his movement skill before they knew what hit them. He'd seen the Havarok entering the city ready for war as well, and he might even be able to use them as a distraction while absconding with the splinter.

The mentalist was clearly reluctant, but she took a deep breath as she took out a knife with a silver gleam. A small wound was opened up on her palm as a stream of black blood fell on the cobblestones. The reaction was immediate as the white haze in the air was drawn over, their color rapidly darkening to gain a sanguine hue.

"How do you feel?" Zac asked curiously from the distance, not forgetting to mark down the direction the blood moved before being swallowed by the ground.

"It's entering my body," she said with a shuddering breath as black veins stood out on her forehead.

Zac looked on as the Revenant struggled for almost a minute while stumbling around in the area. Her eyes had gained a red tint, but she was still clearly in control as she applied a healing balm over the wound. The bleeding stopped quickly enough, and her visage relaxed soon after as she regained her aura stabilized. She took a shuddering breath before she looked at Zac.

"Avoiding the haze did only lessen the effect. I felt a powerful bloodlust enter my body until the wound closed no matter where I moved. However, simply being covered in blood did nothing to me personally, except attract the haze. After the wound was closed, I was able to expel the bloodlust by controlling my mind and circulating my Dao," the Revenant reported, clearly understanding what Zac was looking for.

The report was extremely helpful. It looked like getting wounded in this place was doubly dangerous compared to normal, but as long as he kept his mind in check, he shouldn't be taken out of commission. As long as he didn't get rage-addled to the point that he started fighting like a beast, forgetting skills and energy circulation, his body would heal quickly enough while [Purity of the Void] dealt with the rest.

"Thank you," Zac nodded as he threw over one of the decent herbs he had found in the Coral Forest on the way back from the chasm. It was nothing special to him after having pilfered that place for weeks, but it was probably as valuable as over fifty good herbs you'd find in the middle reaches of the Twilight Ocean.

"It's my pleasure," The Revenant said with a curtsy before she hurriedly stowed away the precious herb. "If anything, the experience helped me as well. It's better learning the rules of this place now than when under attack by a crazed warrior."

“True enough,” Zac grunted as he walked into the haze in the direction that the blood had indicated, leaving the Revenant to her own devices.