

The Fall 770

Chapter 770: Out of Time, Out of Options

Zac tried to take in the situation as he cleared his mind of the tremendous waves of synthetic bloodlust that crashed into his mind after drenching the previous area in blood. The castle grounds were far bigger compared to how it appeared through the vaunted dome from the outside. It felt like a city of its own stretching thousands of meters in every direction.

Just the outer square he had entered was as big as half of Port Atwood, with the whole castle grounds being tens of times larger. It was nowhere near the scale of the research base in the Mystic Realm, but it was still insanely large to be a residential building. A million people would be able to live here with plenty of room to spare.

The group of Blood Cultivators in front of him, most likely Blood Thralls converted by Uona, seemed to have been in the middle of preparing for some battle, only for Zac to stumble right into the square they used as a gathering point. There were over fifty of them, with many of them emitting auras that put them in the top percentile of the trial.

Uona had been active in her recruitment, not simply indulging in wanton slaughter that most seemed to have believed. As for the blood mistress herself, she was nowhere in sight. However, Zac could sense a tremendous sanguine aura in the distance. It didn't come from the main structure though, and Zac could guess why – it was sealed.

A radiant rune hovered above its main tower, powering a barrier that seemed completely impenetrable. The bloody aura rather came from a side structure right next to the castle. A huge bloody sphere hovered above the building, and more and more power blood continuously seeped into it from the building below.

Something terrifying was brewing inside the ball, no doubt the results of thousands of cultivators being killed and drained in this trap. Was it an offensive array of some kind? To strike at either the Havarok who probably were on their way as well? Or rather at the sealed castle in the middle, to seize the valuables and expose that Realm Spirit that Ventus mentioned?

Oddly enough, the desolate aura of the Splinter of Oblivion didn't come from the same direction as the bloody egg. Instead, it seemed to originate from another side building almost on the opposite side of the massive compound he had entered. This one didn't give off any indications of danger like that shockingly condensed sphere of blood, but Zac still felt the hair stand on end when looking in that direction for some reason.

In either case, he had already been exposed. The fact that Uona wasn't already rushing toward him probably meant she couldn't just leave that orb as she wished. That didn't prove that she was completely locked in place though, and the more time he wasted the higher risk was of him getting mired in her ploy.

Zac shot forward, and the pent-up frustration that had been set to simmer for weeks now was finally allowed to be ignited into a conflagration. For the first time since entering the city, he didn't quell these murderous impulses. The haze was gone, and he could feel that the pervasive array didn't cover this core section either.

The traps of soul and blood could no longer harm him, making his anger a tool rather than a weakness. Instead of pushing it down, he used it to regain his long-lost momentum as he closed in on the Blood Thralls, the chains of [Love's Bond] piercing the streams of blood flooding toward him.

He didn't activate [Abyssal Phase], as there was no need to. His towering aura filled with killing intent had given the Blood Thralls pause, and that short moment of hesitation was all he needed to close the short distance with a few herculean leaps. A keening cry of bloodlust echoed through the square as the massive edge of [Gorehew] ripped three Peak E-grade warriors to pieces.

The moment the blade had bisected the final warrior it instantly disappeared, just as a sinister aura filled the chains of his other Spirit Tool. The churning waves of blood closing in on him instantly turned black before they started to fall apart, a result of an overwhelming wave of corruption filling them from [Blighted Cut].

Zac's eyes lit up, confirming his theory that his rot-based skills would be effective against blood cultivators. However, while these were warriors working under some sort of slave-like compulsions, they were ultimately talented warriors who had qualified to enter the Twilight Ascent. More attacks were already pelting toward him, but the three pygmy skeletons had already answered his call.

A large spectral coffin appeared in front of him, and it swiped back and forth to crush the incoming blood spears. Still, [Profane Exponents] couldn't completely block out everything when fifty warriors attacked him at once. A sharp pain erupted in his side as a lanky cultivator flashed past him with shocking speed, wielding two daggers dripping of both blood and ichor.

Unfortunately for him, the rogue had underestimated just how inhumanly durable Zac's body was, and he had only managed to leave a shallow wound in his side. The blades had been laced with some sort of toxin, but Zac could instantly sense that it wouldn't become a problem. The City of Ancients was ultimately in the middle reaches of the Twilight Ocean, and his [Purity of theVoid]-node had more than enough capacity over to help deal with some toxins.

Besides, he was a pureblood Draugr, which brought the benefit of extremely strong natural resistance to most poisons. So the attack didn't even phase Zac as he continued to push forward as a wave of darkness spread with Zac as the epicenter. One skill after another was activated as Zac started to superimpose his domains to completely restrict the small army.

The blood soldiers clearly understood that they were dealing with a close-combat warrior, and they quickly set up a series of defenses while two squads pelted him from behind a bloody barrier. Meanwhile, the rogue from earlier was joined by another group of nimble warriors that tried to launch quick and deadly strikes at him from the sides.

None of these warriors were a threat to him, but there were simply so many of them. He only had two hands and the ability to keep a couple of skills running at once, and he felt one shallow wound after another being added to his body. However, this was exactly the kind of fight he excelled at, and he inexorably pushed forward as he was finally joined by some reinforcements in the form of the axe wraiths.

From there, the dance of his Inexorable Stance begun, where he continuously pushed forward, unleashing an unceasing barrage at both the backlines and the warriors who tried to flank him. A

spectral warrior suddenly appeared behind a thrall who wielded a spike and a shield, but just as she was about to stab the spectre and destroy it, a chain dripping of corrosion shot toward an opening under her arm.

She desperately swiveled to block the chain with her shield, but that opened her to an attack from the wraith. She was still a Dexterity-based warrior, and she phased to the side just as she was about to be bisected by a ruthless swing of the wraith. However, she was still nicked by the spectral edge, which meant her fate was sealed.

A rune appeared on the wound, and she stumbled forward while shrieking from pain as the darkness of [Deathwish] streamed into her wound. A few more warriors had been marked already, and even the unscathed Blood Thralls were in a bad way from his corroding domain. The blood attacks were continuously being eroded by the pervasive atmosphere, and by the time they reached Zac they'd lost half of their strength.

Zac wouldn't let his summoned companions do all the work, and the four chains of [Love's Bond] weaved back and forth to restrain and harass the flanks while Zac pushed straight ahead, braving a ceaseless barrage of attacks. The ranged attackers tried to keep some distance, but he used his superior attributes and wraiths to direct the battle.

Soon enough, he had managed to essentially swap places with the blood thralls, with them having their backs against the huge wall. That way, they weren't able to escape his advance, and Zac would be able to maneuver more freely in case reinforcements appeared.

It was a valuable insight. Until now, he had only fought one or a handful of enemies while utilizing his Inexorable Stance. In those battles, his tactics had been to restrain each individual warrior, directing the tempo of the fight while creating openings. Now, it was more about controlling the tempo of the whole battlefield while breaking apart their cooperation.

He was like an inexorable army, pushing forward, neither fearing death or defeat. Any attempt of the enemy to swing the battle in their favor was crushed before it even had a chance to be started. Ambushes were turned into frantic last stands as wraiths, corrosive chains, and Zac himself appeared out of nowhere.

Defenses and defensive lines were broken by brute force and the ghastly light of the lantern-wielding skeleton. The battle had only lasted for thirty seconds, but more than twenty thralls had already fallen to Zac's unceasing barrage, with another ten sporting either wounds or corrosive runes of [Deathmark].

As Zac pushed forward, he realized that these warriors were a bit like the tattooed puppets he had encountered close to the Twilight Chasm. There were mages, warriors, and Dexterity-based cultivators, but they all used blood as the basis for their attacks. Zac didn't know exactly how it worked, but it was undeniable that these people probably had their cultivation path altered when they were turned.

There was a hint of unfamiliarity in their actions, of sluggishness that he normally wouldn't encounter in an E-grade warrior. That was a huge opportunity for Zac as one warrior after another fell, continuously restoring some of his lost Miasma through [Fields of Despair].

Unfortunately, Zac labored under some disadvantages of his own. He took a step forward, but a burst from the Shard of Creation made him stumble. The remnant was in a fully rampant mode by now, and

Zac felt he had a few minutes tops before he lost control entirely. The Shard needed an outlet, and quickly.

"Just wait a little more and you'll get your wish," Zac muttered as he adjusted the grip of [Verun's Bite].

The inner area was almost void of people, and his eyes once more turned toward the nondescript building in the distance, the building where the Splinter of Oblivion waited for him. As long as he got his hands on that thing, Uona was more than welcome to come over. He'd treat her to the same reception as the adolescent dragon back in the Tower of Eternity; a blast of Chaos right in her face.

Until then, he was still restrained, fearful of exposing his huge stockpile of Creation energy in his body. That's why he had to fight so hard against a group of cultivators who both were weakened by the Twilight Energy and unfamiliar with their new state of existence; the moment he infused his skills with his Dao, they would definitely transform like [Arcadia's Judgement] did.

That would expose his hidden card against Uona without a doubt. Even if she wasn't here, he was sure she was observing the battle one way or another.

Zac fought desperately, using everything he had learned over the past two years as he tried to restrain and dismantle their cooperation while he felled one warrior after another. But for every Blood Thrall he killed, he received a couple of wounds. Furthermore, these slaves were not deterred at all by seeing their comrades fall. If anything, they fought more valiantly, and Zac even saw that the blood of the fallen streamed toward their compatriots to bolster their attacks.

Meanwhile, his domains were starting to fall apart.

A dozen thralls had worked together to unleash a bloody rain, where every drop was like a small projectile that ripped apart the darkness. Together with the constantly churning rivers of blood that rampaged through the area, crushing his specters and forcing him back just as he was about to deliver killing blows with his axe, he knew his skills teetering on the brink of collapse.

The blood thralls weren't stupid either. They had lost half their warriors already, while only dealing some surface damage to Zac in return. But with his skills falling apart, they had one last chance to turn the tides before he killed them all. The bloody rivers suddenly ignited one by one, as the thralls sacrificed their longevity to give them a final burst of power.

Zac didn't know if it was just to deliver a strike of vengeance while they stood at death's door, or if Uona's mark had some sort of compulsion. In either case, it was bad news. It felt like he was surrounded by a swarm of bees that frantically tried to defend the hive. Meanwhile, the force inside his mind kept building, making it harder and harder for him to focus.

Something had to give.

"Enough!" Zac roared from pain and frustration as thirty bloody chains, each one wrought from bone and sinew, ripped out from his body in an outburst of fury and Creation.

They punched forward with undeniable momentum, propelled forward by a D-grade treasure gone berserk, crushing defenses and ripping warriors to shreds. It felt like Zac's own body was being torn apart as well, but he had at least managed to use the Longevity Gem this time around rather than his own life force.

The area looked like it could have been a layer of hell by this point, with enormous pools of blood stretching covering hundreds of meters. Maimed body parts littered the ground, some hacked to pieces by [Gorehew], with others corroded and killed by [Deathmark].

In the middle, Zac stood like a denizen of the Maleboge, his body a mix of black and red as the chains created from his innards held the last thralls in the air like a morbid homage to the spectral chains of [Profane Seal]. Zac groaned in pain as the links shook, throwing off the carcasses before they were drawn back into his body as he expended some more Creation Energy to restore his body to its normal form.

The moment the chains were back in his body, a grey ball appeared in his hands which he threw down on the ground, creating a thick ashy haze that covered the area. By the time the dust cloud had settled, Zac was already gone, transformed into a spectral wraith as he surged toward his goal – the Splinter of Oblivion.

His gory outburst was pretty suspicious, but he was out of time and out of options. The blood thralls had delayed his progress to the point that the amount of Creation Energy had become unbearable, and he would have to vent it one way or another. Rather than creating something out of thin air or empowering a skill, he had decided to transform his own body.

Having his body reconfigured like that hurt more than getting stabbed, but it didn't release any Creation Energy out of his own body, which hopefully would make anyone observing the fight mistake the bone chains for a self-mutilating skill.

Zac appeared fifty meters away from the building where he could sense the remnant, but his abyssal eyes kept glancing in the direction of the blood ritual. Uona still hadn't made her appearance after all that carnage, but he could see that there wasn't any blood flowing up toward the sphere either. Was she stopping its formation so that she could come deal with him?

He obviously didn't want to wait and find out, so he kicked the massive door leading into the building in front of him, creating a clamor as though a massive church bell was being rung. The door didn't break apart as he'd hoped, but it at least swung open. The shard in his mind was like a radiant sun by this point, ceaselessly expelling torrential amounts of energy, almost reaching the levels in the volcano.

It felt like he was trapped in a nightmare with thousands of wailing voices fighting for his attention. The shard was ready for war, to the point Zac could feel a primordial hunger as he stepped into the enormous chamber where the splinter waited for him. Even then, Zac found himself rooted in place as he looked at the scene inside with wide eyes.

Why did the Eidolon have his splinter?!