

The Fall 526

Chapter 526: Holy Fire

Zac didn't have time to curse the demon for his foreshadowing as he felt something terrifying was coming. He immediately started setting up his layers of defenses, not holding anything back for potential enemies. Everything except him was long dead in the area, killed by either the explosion, the magma, or the concussive explosions who had rocked the whole core of the basin.

The cage of [Profane Seal] sprung up around him, forming an outer layer of protection. Zac normally used the skill as a means of caging his enemies, but it was just as good at defending from the outside. It was also one of the skills that hadn't worsened in compatibility at all since gaining the Fetters of Desolation class. Between the chains and the entrapment, it looked like it was right up the new class's ally.

The cage encapsulated the Incursion as well even when he shrunk it to the smallest size possible, and Zac was both surprised and relieved to see that the energy-dense pillar didn't cause a clash with his skill. The pillar that almost blinded him with its intense fire-attuned energies shone straight through the fractal dome of his skill like it was just an illusion.

Zac had no idea how that worked, but he had no time to look into it as the flames were almost upon him.

A huge amount of Miasma left his body the next moment a hundred skeletons materialized. They didn't stay around inside the cage though, but they rather ran out as Zac opened the back gate of [Profane Seal] before closing it again. The skeletons didn't stop there, but they kept running into the jungle, only stopping hundreds of meters away when he couldn't control them any further away.

They weren't there to defend against the incoming flames, but rather act as damage substitutes. They would hopefully work as sentries as well in case there actually were cultists hiding in the jungle. He didn't share vision with the things, but he did have a vague sense of the life-force around them. He would also feel it if they were destroyed by something, giving him an early warning that way.

The skeletons barely made it out in time as the holy flames finally descended upon the cage. He was immediately inundated in not only a blazing heat, but also a pressure that he could feel on a spiritual level. But the shield held, though Zac knew that the golden flames were not the true threat. The real danger was the damaged insignia in the sky.

The enormous rune still hadn't completely cracked yet, but Zac could see between the fiery sky that it wasn't long for this world. There was a massive cut in the middle of it now, where the half-moon blade had struck it. Hairline cracks spread all across its surface as well, and an intense light radiated out from the cracks, proving there was still a lot of untamed energies trapped inside.

Zac still didn't feel safe after seeing the ominous portents in the sky, and the black armor spread out across his body as [Love's Bond] took its defensive form. He might not be able to activate [Death's Embrace] as things stood, but he could still use the shield-shaped coffin to summon [Immutable Bulwark].

He also tried activating a few backup defensive talismans just in case, but they didn't work just like everything else. There was nothing else he could activate, so he finally started digging a hole into the ground, hoping to use the earth itself as an insulating layer against the flames. It had worked against Salvation, so he hoped it would work once more.

However, Zac only managed to rip a ten-meter hole before a terrifying crack in the sky released a tremendous pressure, almost destroying the outer cage in an instant. The massive gates and miasmic towers were reduced to decrepit ruins, and the azure fractals had almost turned invisible from the flames. There was no more time, so he punched the ground one last time and jumped into the hole before he put his bulwark as a stopgap to block out the flames.

[Profane Seal] completely crumbled the next moment, just as a shocking aura was released above him. Zac couldn't see what was going on because of having burrowed down, but it almost felt like a celestial had descended upon the basin. A marvelous aura drenched the whole jungle, and Zac felt his mind going blank.

The Lord was calling him, so what was he doing underground? He needed to welcome His arrival and offer obeisance. Zac slowly got up to his feet, but his whole body suddenly froze as he was startled awake.

What the hell was that?

One more second and he would have deactivated his defensive shield and welcomed the holy flames from above. His mind had thankfully been hardened by constant life-and-death struggles and competing with the Splinter, allowing him to snap out of it before it was too late. More importantly, he still had [Indomitable] to fall back on. It was far stronger than [Mental Fortress], and it had managed to rebuff the false thoughts after just a second, even though the skill was still middle proficiency.

It was just in time too, as the flames slammed into the bulwark the next second, immediately incinerating the shallow layers of dirt above.

The miasmic shield from [Immutabe Bulwark] was mostly opaque, but it still allowed him to somewhat see the fiery hellscape above. The flames were no longer golden, but rather replaced by a milky white. The holy aura in the flames was multiple times stronger than what he felt before, no doubt containing the essence of the rune in the sky.

His heartstrings tugged again as he saw the pristine flames, and part of him just wanted to open his arms and take it on. But he didn't completely lose himself this time after already having realized the threat of the flames. However, it did make him wonder. Were the zealots perhaps not quite as pious as advertised, but rather forcibly converted?

Zac's pitch-black eyes were illuminated by the flames as he thought of the possibilities. What if the Church of Everlasting Dao had formed some sort of ingenious cultivation system? They turned cultivators into zealots with the holy flames, and the zealots kept empowering the flames with their conviction. It formed a self-perpetuating source of power that could swallow everything in its surroundings.

Things quickly took a turn for the worse though, stopping Zac from entertaining any other stray thoughts. The flames steadily ate away at the floor itself, until he was standing in a deep crater, assaulted by flames from every direction.

His bulwark was able to rebuff the flames, but it couldn't cover him from all sides, so the flames finally reached his last line of defense, the black armor of [Vanguard of Undeath]. His whole body was awash with pain the next moment as the flames glommed onto him. Zac tried to at least keep the flames outside, but they were like burrowing parasites that found their way inside through the tiniest cracks and weaknesses in his defenses.

Sizzling sounds escaped from within his armor as he was getting cremated alive. He screamed on top of his lungs, but his cries were drowned out by the roaring flames. Rolling around on the ground did nothing, and the Bulwark had essentially become useless by this point. All he could see was white, and all that he could feel was agony.

Even his mind was assaulted by the insidious whispers of the holy flames, trying to make him stop resisting with the help of [Vanguard of Undeath] and [Undying Legion]. He was currently infusing the black armor with the Fragment of the Coffin, while his body itself fought the flames with the Fragment of the Bodhi. He also released a steady stream of miasma from his pores, which helped combat the flames as well.

He also got one surge of vitality after another as a handful of skeleton warriors crumbled every second or so. He felt that if he stopped anyone of these things he would actually die, so he could only keep going while ignoring the calls from within the fire. Zac quickly worked his way through the hundred-odd summons though, at which point he only was able to rely on himself.

Every second felt like an hour, but he finally felt like the flames started to weaken? Or was he just so badly burned that he couldn't really tell any longer? A deep thud suddenly shook the ground, and Zac glanced toward the source of the sound with bleary eyes, only to see a massive golden pillar stab into the ground just fifty meters away from him.

The sigil had finally broken down and was falling apart.

However, he didn't have time to celebrate as the surroundings suddenly started to darken, and he looked up in horror only to see an enormous golden pillar falling straight toward him. His legs didn't really listen to him, so Zac barely had time to resummon his bulwark before it slammed into him like a mountain. The pressure from the slam transferred into his body, and Zac once more felt the cracking of broken bones.

The thing was just way too heavy to throw off, and Zac was forced to activate [Unholy Strike] to just angle his bulwark and have it thump down next to him, causing a minor earthquake. A series of tremendous shockwaves followed, and the area was soon covered in the remnants of the broken sigil.

The fall of the insignia also meant the end of the white-hot flames, but the remnants of the sea of golden fire still covered the area. The golden flames only felt like a sunburn after having withstood the condensed version though, and Zac slowly made his way toward the Nexus Hub.

Without the sigil in the sky, the sea of golden flames had lost its source, and it died down soon after. However, there was one fire remaining; the fetters binding him to the Incursion Pillar. Zac was shocked

to see that the fetter still held. Just what was that golden dust made off to be able to withstand just about everything and keep him in place?

However, the only capability of the odd flame was to prevent him from leaving, which was fine with Zac. He wasn't planning on going anywhere while the pillar was still active, and he instead sat down in the middle of the crater and popped a healing pill into his mouth.

Only when things had calmed down did he realize just how bad his state was. He had 9 broken bones and multiple wounded organs. Even worse, most of his body was covered in severe burns from the flames. If he had been a weaker human he would likely have died from the shock alone. Even with his massive Endurance and Vitality it still felt like his skin was on fire, and the salves in his possession were only limited in their efficacy.

His wretched state wasn't the only surprise though.

There was a lot of energy in his body, slowly swirling around his Hidden Node. Zac hadn't noticed earlier due to the pain, but it looked like his [Void Heart] had been busy while he withstood the flames, and a massive amount of power had accumulated. Even better, it looked like energy extracted with his hidden node stayed within his body longer without dissipating compared to the energy that came from kills.

It was good news though, as he didn't want to repeat the mistake from the Undead Incursion. What if he broke open his next node, only for the Head Priest to jump out of the woodwork once more? Then again, he had already done some research to avoid something like that happening again and he had actually learned a few tricks thanks to Triv.

The ghost had been utterly astounded to find out that Zac actually was a mortal, and he even insisted that a pureblood Draugr couldn't be one. It also made him a lot more adamant about having Zac "return" to the Empire Heartlands to seize his so-called birthright. Triv was sure that Zac would be able to cultivate as long as he found a proper Draugr master.

Zac wasn't so sure though, even if his undead side was of the noble race. He had a feeling that his utter lack of cultivation ability was related to his constitution, and not something a better master could solve.

But after the ghost had calmed down it actually taught Zac a pretty nifty trick. Being an energy-based creature Triv had a really marvelous control of his energy, and it taught Zac a simple method to use his own Miasma or Cosmic Energy to "trap" external energy.

Triv used it as a defensive measure, but it worked for Zac as well in preventing energy loss. It was far from fool-proof, but it did prolong the duration he could keep the energy he gained from kills by a large margin.

Cultivators could apparently just use their own cultivation manuals for a far superior result, some being able to store the energy for weeks if need be. Zac was nowhere near that, but he could at least keep 80% of any energy he gained for over an hour. It was enough for his purposes, as it would give him ample time to get to safety in case he wanted to try breaking open a node.

It was also enough to wait out the Nexus Hub this time, and the golden pillar finally winked out of existence, and Zac sighed in relief when his bindings disappeared as well.

During this whole time he had kept an eye out for any movement, but the area was utterly desolate. Neither [Cosmic Gaze] nor his augmented Draugr-vision had seen a lick of activity, essentially proving that the cultists had given up on this place.

With the Incursion being closed as well there was not much reason for the cultists to return either. Zac guessed they were either running toward the mystic realm or hiding in some desolate corner of Earth right now. With no threat appearing, Zac decided to try bursting open the node in his leg. He was in a pretty wretched state, but not to the point that he needed bed-rest.

He would need to rest up in either case after this fight, so he might as well take the opportunity to break open a node. That way he could heal everything together without wasting time. However, just as he was about to take control of the energy circling his heart a series of prompts appeared, making him stop in his tracks.

[Congratulations. Integration Trial Succeeded. Calculating Grade.]

[Grade awarded: A. Contribution Rank: 1. Grade awarded increased to S.]