

The Fall 452

Chapter 452: Road of No Return

The more questions Zac asked about the item the Technocrats had found the more certain he became. The item truly seemed to be the equivalent of the Splinter of Oblivion in his mind. The Technocrats had found it on a low-tiered world at the edge of some sector, though they hadn't realized its true origins initially.

Apparently, the technocrat factions often released swarms of drones that floated about in the multiverse, and now and then they'd pick up odd energy fluctuations from valuable materials. Beauty was in the eye of the beholder, and some things that might seem useless to cultivators could be extremely valuable for the Technocrats, and vice versa.

This time though they knew that there was a special item rather than raw materials, and it would be discovered sooner or later. Orders were quickly sent out from above and they tasked the ship Jaol worked on to retrieve it before the local factions realized there was a treasure under their nose.

The Shard, which is what they called it, had long since fused with a humanoid cultivator, which had created a series of shocking changes in both his physique and his surroundings. The man was F-Grade like Zac himself, and he had managed to stave off the effects for almost five years before he started to succumb to the influences of the item.

The Splinter of Oblivion was like an insidious whisper that caused its user to become an avatar of destruction, a madman who couldn't stop fighting. It had been the same for everyone Zac had seen in the visions, with the exception of the Draugr-woman. However, the effect of the Shard of Creation was completely different according to the technocrat.

An item of Creation sounded like something positive to Zac but that truly hadn't been the case for the poor cultivator. If the Splinter turned people into powerful lunatics, then the Shard turned them into monsters. The moment the man lost control he had started transforming and growing.

New limbs, weird tumors, hair, horns, and all types of appendages had started growing on the man, who quickly changed from a normal biped into a massive blob of flesh. Some parts of him had even changed its composition completely, turning into rocks, precious metals, and constructs that moved about.

There seemed to be no limits to his changes as long as he didn't run out of energy. He had completely drained the area he lived in by the time the Technocrats had arrived, and they believed he would keep absorbing energy until his soul couldn't take it any longer.

Of course, the man had become a raving lunatic by the point the Technocrats arrived. Being forcibly turned into a monstrosity that kept growing and changing had to be unimaginably painful. They had obliterated the being with orbital attacks, turning multiple square kilometers into a smoldering hellscape, leaving only the Shard intact.

The task force quickly loaded the items and hurriedly fled. The attack on an integrated planet with advanced weaponry had launched a wide-scale quest of retribution, and they had been forced to fight their way out of the sector while constantly dogged by Spiritual Vessels and the powerhouses steering them.

The Shard was now kept in a secured field that was designed to isolate energies, but it kept causing trouble to their vessel through bursts of creation that slipped through. It had turned a motor into a sentient golem and exchanged a highly condensed liquid energy into something that smelled like wine.

It had already forced the Little Bean out of subspace six times, and if it wasn't for the multiple layers of redundancies and skilled technicians the ship would have been turned to scrap metal stuck in the middle of nowhere. A few of the crew had wanted them to drop it off at a desolate planet and let someone else pick it up, but the Captain was adamant about being the one who brought it in.

"How long until you return?" Zac asked.

"Two weeks," Jaol hurriedly said.

"I will capture more people, and if he gives another answer I'll come back for you, understand?" Zac said, his pitch-black eyes boring into the comms officer.

"One day if we get the subspace engines running," the comms officer immediately corrected himself as he repeatedly bowed his head in apology. "We would have already been picked up if the Shard hadn't completely destroyed our antennas as well. I have worked on opening up a line of communication for days now, but we are lacking some components."

Zac slowly nodded with a snort. This sounded more like a situation that the System would arrange. The engineers might be able to get the system up and running at any moment, at which point he would be barreling toward an enemy stronghold. He would need to delay the efforts or quickly tackle the guardian if he wanted a shot at defeating the level. But there was one thing Zac didn't really understand.

"Can't your people scan this area if you're so close?" Zac asked skeptically. "Just one day of travel."

"One day in subspace can be both close and impossibly far. We would pass through multiple dimensional layers. Our space station doesn't have that advanced scanning equipment," Jaol said.

"How strong is the most powerful warrior on your vessel? And how strong is your chief engineer?" Zac probed

"Strongest warrior?" Jaol said. "The captain is a Class-3 Transhuman, and the chief engineer is only lacking a few critical upgrades to reach late Class-2. My readings are telling me that you are somewhere in the range of early to middle Class-2. Why not just leave, instead of throwing your life away? I will not say anything."

Zac only glared at the technocrat without saying anything, making him shrink back toward the wall again. Classes were likely the equivalent of ranks to the Machine God faction, where Jaol had mistaken him for middle E-Rank. It made Zac a bit curious about the mechanical eyes he employed but now was not the time.

Hearing that there was a D-Grade warrior on the ship was problematic. He wouldn't be able to run rampant and simply cut his way through to the engineering bay. If the captain suddenly showed up his only recourse would be to crush his token.

However, the real issue was the Shard. Should he go for it?

It felt like the System was presenting him with an alternative to assaulting the 8th floor guardian. He could either target the engineers and the engine to delay the ship, or he could snatch the Shard of Creation.

In a perfect world, he would be able to do both, but either action would no doubt expose his presence on the ship and result in a massive response. With someone like the captain onboard he wasn't very confident in completing either task, and doing both seemed nigh impossible.

The question was what he wanted the most. The past levels had pushed him pretty hard, and he wasn't completely confident in a fight against a floor guardian of this power level. But the rewards would no doubt be shocking as well. The gains from the 7th floor had been extremely suited for him, and the completion reward for the 8th floor should be pretty amazing as well.

On the other hand, finding a Shard of Creation was once in a lifetime opportunity. He had long thought about finding a counterweight to the Splinter in his mind in order to restrain it, and this was his chance. This desire had only increased over the past weeks since his soul got infiltrated.

Shooting out bronze sparks every now and then to weaken the splinter was a patchwork solution at best, but sooner or later it wouldn't be enough. It felt like he was a pressure cooker waiting to explode, and this might be his only option on hand. The item was just the kind of thing he had envisioned, and Zac felt it wasn't a coincidence he had been placed here. It was a temptation that he could either follow or choose to ignore.

But did he even dare to absorb such a thing?

The ending of that poor sap who had fused with it previously sounded beyond horrifying, and he didn't really have any means to counteract it apart from his Soul Strengthening Manual and the Miasmic Fractals inside his head. He also didn't dare place his hopes on a second old master popping out of nowhere and giving him another set of fractals to house the Shard.

The optimal scenario was that the Shard would enter the miasmic cage and the two items would restrain each other. The worst-case scenario was that some unexpected chain reaction would take place, causing a massive eruption in energies that would blow both him and the Little Bean into smithereens.

There was also the issue of agency. The words of the Seer back on the 73rd level echoed in his mind. He had said that Zac was just as much a pawn as he in the eyes of the System, and perhaps he was right. It couldn't be seen as a coincidence that the System first presented him with the Splinter of Oblivion at the specially created Hunt on his planet, and just a few months later put him next to a Shard of Creation out of a trillion possible scenarios.

What was the goal of the System here?

It felt like he was being led by the nose down a path rather than creating his own destiny, and he wasn't sure for what purpose. It was one thing if the System simply wanted to make him stronger, and found a suitable solution for him. But everything he had heard about the System indicated that it wasn't so benevolent, and also not hands-on to this degree.

Was the System treating him like a prize hog, feeding him with these two treasures? But to what end? Considering his Technocrat heritage he felt like it couldn't be anything good. Or was it the mysterious Draugr woman who somehow influenced his fate? He had no idea what cultivators standing at the peak were capable of.

But was there anything he could do about it, even if he was being manipulated? He needed power, and he had started down a road of no return the moment he got mixed up with the Splinter. Things were already spiraling out of control, and this might be his only opportunity to strike a balance in his body.

Hesitation gnawed in his heart for a few seconds, but he eventually decided to go for it. The Splinter was uncommonly silent in his mind, and he guessed it was because it sensed the presence of its opposite. He needed to make this effect permanent by bringing the shard with him.

There were a lot of logical reasons to not take such a massive risk, but every fiber in his body told him to consume it. It felt like he was a puzzle, and the Shard was the final piece to finish the image. This wasn't the decision he would have made before the integration, and it probably wasn't even the decision he would have made just a few months ago. But he had realized something during his climb.

One needed to push oneself to achieve anything worthwhile.

On the surface it might have seemed that Zac had pushed himself beyond what was almost possible, but most of his actions had been forced out of need. But here was a difference between risking your life to survive, and risking your life to push yourself to greater heights. He had mostly done the former, but he knew that he needed to take some risks to keep his momentum going.

Things might very well turn to shit, but even the random cultivator on an unintegrated planet had managed to stave off the insanity for a few years. If things truly didn't work out he would still have time to save Earth and deal with the Dominators and even have a couple of years to find a way to rip both the items out of his body.

Besides, the very fact that he was probably being manipulated into consuming both these items felt like an indication that he wasn't going to die from it. Why would the System or some mysterious peak being go through all the trouble of manipulating his fate and the Tower of Eternity if the end result would be him simply dying? There were a lot of easier ways to kill a puny F-Grade warrior.

Since he had made his decision he could only walk forward, taking things as they came.