

The Fall 673

Chapter 673: Departure

There was just one thing Zac needed to do before he left Earth. He looked down at the crystal in his hands, and a tumultuous wave of emotions hit him once again. He hated the thought of using something given to him by that woman, but what choice did he have? If he ever wanted a chance at taking charge of his own destiny or reuniting with his sister, then he couldn't stay in Port Atwood.

He needed the Array, at least for now.

Zac took a deep breath before he pushed it against his stomach with some lingering fear. Trusting Leandra felt pretty foolish, but he relied on the fact that she wouldn't bother laying some trap with the array. She didn't even care about murdering Thea right in front of him. If she wanted to implant him with something nefarious, she would probably just cut him right open while talking about the importance of her undertaking.

He infused some energy into the crystal, and it quickly turned into a liquid that streamed into his body and formed a mysterious pattern on his Duplicity Core. It wasn't like Yrial's skill that was overlaid like a sphere, but it had rather fused with the Specialty Core itself. There was still no change though, but that was because Zac hadn't activated the array yet.

Another stream of Cosmic Energy entered the array, and Zac felt his connection to the core immediately weaken. A few seconds later it was like both the core and the mysterious array had simply disappeared. Zac could still feel his core, but it was somehow distant, like it had been moved to a different dimension.

Activating Yrial's transformation skill yielded no result, but Zac could somewhat sense that he would still be able to force the race change if he pushed a lot harder. Of course, doing so would waste a month, so he let it be. He scanned himself over and over for the next hour, but he really couldn't sense the smallest hint of the Specialty Core ever being there. The spot it took up had even been replaced with perfectly normal energy pathways.

That meant that even if someone managed to break through Greatest's bangle, it still shouldn't yield any result. Zac changed his appearance next, turning into a middle-aged human with some distinct features that set him apart from Zac's own appearance.

With that out of the way Zac teleported over to the Nexus Hub, and he was gone from Earth a moment later without leaving a trace.

"Guides! Guides to pass the gauntlet! Seize a better score and a better future with this great investment," a furry gnome hollered from his spot on top of a few boxes as he waved a shimmering crystal in his hands.

Zac smiled and shook his head as he kept walking down the bustling street, heading straight for the grand castle in the distance. He wasn't the only one, as people emerged from the ten teleportation rooms every minute or so, resulting in a steady stream of people heading toward the same place. An enormous ship that had to be over a thousand meters long was slowly making its way through the atmosphere as well, and hundreds of smaller vessels followed in its path.

A large number of shops lined the main street, but Zac knew that the wares inside paled compared to the impressive treasures in the windows of the stores. [Havenfort Base] was both an opportunity and a tourist trap, and it all centered around the castle in the distance.

Inside the castle was the Havenfort Chasm, a massive hole of seemingly endless depths. It was created when a Monarch self-destructed out of despair over losing his loved one, though some rumors argued that he did it out of vengeance in an attempt to take out the perpetrators behind the lover's death.

As for the opportunity, it was a mostly safe trial that provided a Limited Title. The deeper you managed to walk into the depths of the chasm, the better the title would be. Simple enough.

One of the greatest benefits of Zac's huge number of teleportation locations was access to thousands of different trials that existed all over the Zecia Sector. It would allow Zac to easily fill up his empty slots before setting out toward deadlier challenges. He had already confirmed that Titles didn't impact attribute limits, which was one of the reasons so many believed that Titles were small bloodline evolutions provided by the System.

Zac had thousands of open trials to choose from all across the Sector, though over 95% of them were low-graded trials that only provided flat attributes. There were all kinds of trials, and it had taken some time for Zac to find those who were suited for him. Some trials provided pretty great rewards, but Zac had to give up on them anyway. For example, there was a trial called [The Riddlemaster's Maze] which took an average of twenty years to complete.

Other trials were unsuitable for him to undergo for other reasons. Certain locations were only open once every few decades, others took a long time to reach even with teleportation access. A lot of trials were also skewed in favor of certain paths, races, or Daos, whereas even more had other sorts of restrictions.

Trials limiting attributes were obviously the worst for Zac, since that wouldn't let him take full advantage of how monstrous his attribute pool was for his current level. Certainly, with his high Efficiency he'd do better than most, but his advantages would partly be nullified by people's cultivation manuals.

Instead, Zac had focused his attention on level-restrained trials and dynamic trials. Level-restrained trials had certain cut-off points, and if Zac found one close to his own level he was almost certain to steamroll it. Dynamic trials automatically adjusted the difficulty based the difficulty on your level or attribute pool depending on what it wanted to test.

For example, the Trial inside the castle in the distance was a dynamic trial based on level, which was perfect for Zac.

Unfortunately, the rewards for these kinds of trials were only better than average. It wasn't anything surprising. With a low risk of death and such easy availability, the rewards could only be so good.

The best Limited Titles came from unexplored Mystic Realms where people braved unknown dangers. The second-best titles came from Grade-restricted trials, of which the Tower of Eternity could be considered one of the most famous examples.

All other trials were a notch below, and their rewards differed from case to case. Zac had asked Alyn why the grade trials were the most rewarding, and it turned out the most commonly held belief was

that the System wanted to encourage pushing each grade to the limits. Only after you reached the peak of a grade and deepened your foundations did you have the qualifications to go for the best rewards in that grade.

Zac obviously wouldn't waste his time and limited opportunities in going to those kinds of trials at level 101. He would first go for a set of decent Titles to fill up his empty slots so that he was as powerful as possible before setting out for his more dangerous adventures. It was obviously a unique advantage afforded to him thanks to his training quest, whereas the other trial takers usually had to make do what was available in their surroundings.

Some of those who arrived in this place had gotten a Teleportation Token as a reward for some quest, and it was no secret that the System often dropped tokens in the depths of Mystic Realms as rewards for reaching that far. Others came here through the Space Gate Guild, though that option was only available to the wealthier scions.

The Space Gate Guild was actually a guild that specialized at gaining access to a large number of locations, mainly targeting hubs and opportunities such as the [Havenfort Base]. These people's jobs was simply to take the elite to places they normally didn't have access to themselves.

This business was extremely lucrative, as the guild charged roughly 10 times the standard fare to take a person to a certain location, and just as much to return. However, there were a lot of restrictions to this trade. First of all, you needed to get access to the valuable Arrays, and that was extremely hard.

Not only did you need to complete some quests in the area where you wanted to gain an array, but you also needed to be granted access by the owner. That was easier said than done too, since a Lord couldn't give those out as he wished. The first requirement was for the target to reach the System's requirement to be worthy of the connection. Secondly, the Lord could only form a certain number of connections each year for otherworlders.

Zac himself would be able to give access to Earth to 100 people a year according to Abby, though that still wasn't possible while the shroud was active.

Furthermore, why would someone controlling a great opportunity like the [Havenfort Base] give that access away for free? The Space Gate Guild no doubt had to pay through the nose for every connection to this place they formed.

Travel itself was fraught with problems as well. First, a Guide, as the workers for the Guild were called, could only take on one mission every three months. The System blocked any more than that. Furthermore, they could only take one guest, which was a dealbreaker for many young scions, as they were afraid of traveling without bodyguards. Worst of all, they weren't even allowed to operate through the Mercantile System.

So, it was clearly a business that skirted at the edge of what the System deemed acceptable, but it was nevertheless a pretty common way for the elites of the Zecia sector to get around.

The final method to get here was by Cosmic Vessels. This option was only used by locals. There were quite a few clans and Sects that operated spacefaring lines, operating massive vessels that took people between planets and opportunities.

That option was the least convenient though, as travel through that method took a lot of time, and it was generally restricted to the local cluster of planets. Still, the lucky few who lived on the capital world of a kingdom could sometimes jump onto a vessel, and spend a decade or two touring the local planets, gaining experience and opportunities on the way. Luckily, Zac could skip all that hassle thanks to his unique access.

Truthfully, while the Limited Title one could gain from this place was upper-tier, it wasn't the best choice among the Title-opportunities Zac had researched over the past three years. But the story of Mandar Havenfort had refused to leave the back of his mind since he decided to fill up his Limited Slots.

Zac still had trouble processing with had happened back home, sometimes waking up in the middle of the night full of rage or despair, his whole body slick with acrid sweat. How would one come to terms with something like what he had experienced? His mother sacrificing his girlfriend to save his sister. It was like one of those ethical riddles with no right answer, and he found himself repeating the events over and over.

So Zac came here in search of not only a title, but for something more. He still didn't know exactly what. This trial would tax not only the strength of his body, but the fortitude of his mind, and Zac hoped to find some sort of answers in the depths of the chasm.

The whole planet the chasm was placed on had been turned into a desolate rock after the Havenfort Monarch blew himself up, and wild energies still ravaged the outside. The thick barriers protecting the town no doubt cost a bundle to keep operational, so the town only housed the bare essentials; a wide variety of establishments where trial-takers could waste their money. The actual metropolis where the massive Cosmic Vessels stopped was on another planet, with ferries taking the trial-takers here.

Zac soon reached the square in front of the castle, and he unhurriedly entered a grand building outside the castle gates. There was a line of warriors emitting decent auras to his left, and three cultivators radiating the aura of Hegemons to the right. The hegemons got personal and immediate service, whereas the E-grade cultivators had to stand in line.

He didn't really mind, but he was rather amused about how it all felt like he was on a vacation to a theme park or something, with concession stands and ticket booths. The desk itself was blurred, and Zac realized they used an isolation array for some reason.

"One person," Zac said when he eventually reached the front.

"Certainly! Do you have a Heaven-bestowed token in your possession?" the gnome clerk asked.

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"One ticket is E-Grade 10,000 Nexus coins," the goblin smiled. "The estimated waiting time is currently sixteen months."

"What?" Zac blurted, losing his equanimity for the first time.

The price was pretty steep, ten billion Nexus Coins, but Zac knew about that already. In his mind it was definitely worth it, considering that it would provide a Title. The same went for most cultivators. If they had the money, purchasing a Limited Title was one of the most efficient ways to strengthen yourself since it had no drawbacks.

The real problem was the waiting time. He didn't have time to wait over a year, and he definitely didn't want to do so in this price-gouging little town.

"The Havenfort Chasm is a unique marvel of the whole Reputtin Domain. A lot of elites come from all over, even from other parts of the Zecia Sector to test their mettle against the pressure below. However, the Heavens themselves have limited the number of trial takers. Naturally, this has caused a line to form," the fuzzy gnome said, and Zac inwardly groaned when he saw the pointed look she gave next.

Were all gnomes the same?

"I don't have time to wait that long. How much to... expedite... the process?" Zac sighed.

"Now and then a trial taker backs out for one reason or another. It would be a shame to allow precious slots to go unused, so we have a few people standing by. Of course, this comes with the slight premium of an additional 40,000 surcharge," the gnome said, her smile wide enough to brighten up the room.

Zac understood what she was saying all-too-well; want to cut the line? Well, pay up!

"Fine," Zac snorted and transferred the funds, along with a few dozen D-Grade Nexus Crystals. "A little something for your troubles."

"This way, young master. I'm sure an opportunity will show itself anytime soon. A few hours at the latest," the gnome said as the crystals disappeared in a blur.

A hidden door opened to the side, and the gnome indicated for Zac to enter. No wonder the gnomes had people buy tickets in private, the VIPs were actually led right inside the castle while the others had to wait outside the gates for over a year.

"I'm sure," Zac snorted as he walked through. "Otherwise, I might come back for my crystals and try my luck at a different gate."

The hidden gate led to an opulent room full of artwork depicting the history of the Havenfort Monarch, but Zac wasn't interested immediately stepped onto the Teleportation Array that activated automatically. The next moment he found himself in front of a gate, and there was a large plaque detailing a few hints about the trial next to it.

Most of it wasn't news to Zac. The trial put everyone in a dimension of their own, or at least hid the other participants from sight. The task was exceedingly simple as well; you only needed to walk down a spiraling path cut into the edge of the chasm, trying to get as far as possible.

Every so often you would reach a marker that acted as a checkpoint for the trial. It both held a teleportation array to leave, and it denoted the level of your limited title. You could try going further, but you had to turn back if you found yourself starting to lose to the pressure. Safety wasn't guaranteed, and there were people every day who fell down the chasm and died after overestimating their capabilities.

There were 5 levels in total, with most people reaching the second layer from what Zac had gathered. The thing that prevented most people from going further was the mental pressure, and now that Zac had arrived to this place he understood why.

It turned out that mental defensive skills and similar items didn't work in this trial, which wasn't mentioned in the information missive at all. It might even have been omitted by design, as exposing that would scare away a lot of meathead trial takers who never worked on their spirit. Zac actually felt like he benefitted from this though, and it was an opportunity for him to test his recently evolved soul.

Zac pushed open the gate, and walking inside put him face to face to an impossibly large chasm hundreds of times larger than the castle he had entered.