

The Fall 710

Chapter 710: Detour

The damage caused by their actions was not readily apparent, but Zac believed things would eventually reach a tipping point. Perhaps the Living Pulse would be gone by the time they were done unless someone stopped them. But ultimately, Zac didn't care too much. Messing with the Divine Grotto had provided another 8,000 Contribution Points, so their actions were clearly sanctioned by the System.

Zac sat in his private compartment, currently busy powering the purification array. Running the array for hours on end wasn't too taxing, but it was boring. It was impossible to enter a meditative state when he constantly had to maintain the array, and there wasn't much else to do either. He could only go over various missives on the Twilight Ocean to pass the time, but he had read them cover to cover over a dozen times by now.

He had pretty much memorized all the fixed locations in the missives, but more than half of the locations and dangers were new things that the System added between generations, and this was especially true for the Twilight Chasm. Being completely prepared was a fool's hope.

Finally, his time was up, and he took his hand away from the array. Zac felt life-attuned energies quickly spread through his chambers, but they were soon pushed away again as the air gained another death-aspected Dao instead of his Fragment of the Coffin. It was Yod who had started channeling the array, taking the next shift.

The purification couldn't keep all the life energies away in the ship, especially not this close to the Life Pulse, but it did lessen the strain the others felt. As for Zac, his mental ocean was still far from saturated, and he'd be able to remain unaffected for a long time.

However, Zac had noticed that the speed his [Void Heart] had to work had increased by a noticeable margin, now beating once every five minutes compared to the once every ten back at the starting continent. That meant the energy density was roughly double now that they had entered the middle reaches of the Trial. He wasn't sure it would be able to deal with all the energy by the point they reached the inner parts of the ocean.

Zac took a deep breath, feeling that it was finally time. He had spent the past two weeks going over the insights he gained during his battle with Yanub Mettleleaf, trying to integrate his new stance with his insights into the Dao of the Axe.

He restored his mental energy with Soul Crystals for an hour before he took out two small boxes from his Spatial Ring, each of them containing a Dao Treasure. Zac stabilized his mind for a few more minutes before he ate the first one. A surge of energy entered his body, and it circulated a round through his pathways before it shot toward his mind.

The hidden node [Spiritual Void] immediately woke up and started absorbing the delectable energies, but Zac forcibly stilled it as he pushed the energies toward the avatar of himself. The avatar immediately stood up on top of his soul core, and he started swinging his copy of [Verun's Bite] in a series of attacks.

Some of the swings were quick and unfathomable whereas others were powerful and overbearing like a battalion of heavy cavalry descending upon an unsuspecting enemy. Some felt like they contained

world-ending force while empty, whereas others looked average but had the power to slay powerful generals.

This was the insight that Zac had started work toward for some time. He was walking down the path of war, and war was everchanging. His axe needed to be the same, especially now that he was forming two very different combat stances. Zac had found himself on the losing end against weaker enemies on multiple occasions, and it was usually because he used his weapon like a brute.

Certainly, the axe was ultimately not a weapon as versatile as the sword, but it didn't mean it was simple. As he had started refining his paths, he realized there were endless variations and permutations to even a seemingly crude weapon as the axe. He wanted to shed his rigidity in favor of flexibility, to become as everchanging and unpredictable as the tides of war.

That didn't mean he was heading toward a Dexterity-based fighting style from a Strength-based one. But one of the goals of a Strength-based Warrior should always be to constantly refine themselves and figure out how to make their strikes land. How to catch the wily rangers, how to find the weakness in the guardian's armor, how to fell the undying ones in one fell blow.

Strength was the basis of victory and survival in his Evolutionary Stance, and without enough strength, his Inexorable Stance would be useless. Who would allow themselves to be restrained if they could simply power through and break his tempo like Yanub eventually did?

Scenes of his recent battles flashed by his hand, and a path was slowly forming. However, Zac frowned when he sensed his inspiration suddenly turn hollow, like he was just daydreaming rather than pondering his Dao. He immediately ate the second fruit, and he once more found himself immersed in the feeling of communicating with the heavens.

Finally, it felt like something blurred became focused, like something snapping into place. Zac opened his eyes a moment later, and a smile spread across his face as he opened his Dao Screen.

Fragment of the Axe (Peak): All attributes +40, Strength +1110, Dexterity +700, Endurance +30, Wisdom +130. Effectiveness of Strength +20%.

Zac looked at the result with a grin. It was a long time coming, but it didn't make it less satisfying. His boost from gaining 8 levels back in the Twilight Harbor had been substantial, but it ultimately couldn't compare to a Dao Breakthrough at his stage. A level provided roughly 350 attributes now that he was in the Middle E-grade, but a Dao evolution provided over 2,200 attribute points thanks to his massive multipliers.

It was also a welcome change to see the Fragment of the Axe add some extra Dexterity. He had essentially been forced to continuously pour his free points into Dexterity to scale it with his other attributes, but this would give him a breather to focus on either pushing his Strength to even greater heights or work on his survivability.

No one wanted to die, but Zac leaned toward putting points into Strength for a while. He still had two Dao Fragments waiting to be upgraded as soon as he got his hands on the Life-Death Pearls. Each of them would provide a big boost to his survivability, making it unnecessary to waste his free points there.

Zac opened his Ladder as well, but he sighed and closed the screen after seeing he hadn't gained any Contribution Points for evolving the Dao Fragment. It was expected, but he had held out some hopes he'd at least get a consolation prize.

He closed his eyes again and started observing his Dao Avatar, but Zac only got a few minutes to get acquainted with the evolved Fragment before he heard a chime. He opened his eyes and shot a querying glance at the door leading out to the communal area. Someone was standing outside, and Zac got up with a grunt and crossed his living room.

It wasn't too big, just forty square meters, but it would be considered an extremely luxurious suite on any cruiser back on earth. Catheya hadn't prepared any furniture, so Zac had simply thrown out some random things he had lying around, making the interiors look a bit sparse and discordant.

Zac's favorite feature was a "window" that covered half his outer wall. It was actually an array that connected to the patterns outside, and it gave Zac a grand view of the outsides. Sometimes it was just hazy waters, but at other times there were beautiful corals or schools of fish flashing by. Right now it was turned off though, as Zac didn't want to be disturbed during his breakthrough.

"It's you," Zac said as he opened the outer door, and he wasn't surprised to see that it was Catheya who had arrived. "Come in."

"Congratulations are in order," she smiled as she sat down at the table and activated the window array.

"Were you spying on me?" Zac said with a slight frown as he sat down opposite her.

"Hardly," Catheya laughed as she took out a decanter of wine and two glasses. "I could feel your breakthrough through the door. A weapon-based fragment, no?"

"Axe," Zac shrugged as he took a swig of the wine. "So, what brings you here?"

"What a boorish fellow. A beautiful girl comes to your chambers and you scrunch up your brows like you've been asked to lend money to a stranger," she sighed. "We have been in this place almost a month now, and I was bored. Besides, you have an air of loneliness around you, I figured you could use the company."

"That's just how cultivation is," Zac shrugged as he looked outside. "What are your plans after we've messed up the trial ground and snatched those pearls?"

"We'll see," Catheya slowly said. "Probably keep going a bit further and look for inheritances or Troves as we make our way toward neutral waters. Why, you want to travel with us?"

"Just making conversation," Zac said, neither confirming nor denying. "How far are we from the next spot of our mission?"

"We're pretty close, but this one might take a few days," Catheya said. "It's deep underground."

Zac nodded noncommittally, and the two sat in silence for a moment until Catheya suddenly changed the subject.

"Are you able to send a message to my Ancestor?"

“... If I could, what would you provide in return?” Zac retorted.

“How about an adorable wife?” Catheya said with a sweet smile.

Zac answered the proposition with a blank look saying all that needed to be said, causing Catheya to hump in annoyance.

“Whatever, who’d want such a boorish husband as yourself? I’d spend my days wilting away all alone while you were locked away in a cultivation cave,” she snorted before downed her glass. “Well, let’s go. We need to recoat the vessel before setting off toward the next target. The energies are getting pretty powerful, and we can’t have the ship breaking apart in this area.”

She sashayed toward the door, and Zac found his eyes drift toward her lithe waist and swaying hips illuminated by the ambient light of the Twilight Ocean. However, he froze when he found Catheya had stopped as she looked at him with a victorious smile.

“Maybe you’re not a complete blockhead aft...” she said with a smug grin, but her voice drifted off as she looked at the window with a confused frown. “What are they...”

Her eyes widened in alarm the next moment as she took out an array crystal and frantically infused it with energy. Zac immediately got a sinking feeling as he whipped out his axe. But he only had time to hear a horrified ‘NO!’ from Catheya before the wall to his chambers were ripped apart, and they both were dragged out by an unrelenting force.

The world turned into a confusing blur as Zac suddenly found himself plunged into the Twilight Ocean. It didn’t take long for him to figure out what was going on though. It hadn’t been a powerful cultivator that attacked their vessel. It had rather been destroyed by the Living Pulse itself, and Zac was completely caught by it.

He tried to swim out toward the calmer waters, but the force in the stream was just too much even for him. Zac was constantly dragged back and forth by the chaotic swirls within, but he did spot a few scraps of their broken submarine in the waters around him.

What the hell had happened? Why were they this close to the Living Pulse? They had always kept a respectable distance, only taking advantage of the power of the stream without actually getting close. Had some piece of debris shot out from the Living pulse and slammed into their ship with enough force to overpower the shields? Or did the steering arrays malfunction?

A huge piece of rock suddenly slammed into his back with enough force to make him see stars. It reminded him of the simple fact that this was no time to worry about the reason for the ship failing. Even worse, the hit along with the frantic current actually made him lose his grip of [Rakan’s Roar], and the Spirit Tool was immediately swallowed by the stream.

Zac felt a pang of loss, but he quickly regained his wits as he took out a random spare axe and a shield before activating [Vanguard of Undeath]. He hoped it would provide an additional layer of protection, but he was shocked to find his armor instantly ripped apart from the rampant energies inside the stream.

The same happened to the three poor pygmy skeletons when he tried conjuring them. They desperately held on for just a second before they couldn’t take the torrential force contained in the waters and fell

apart. Zac was left to defend with his body alone, but he already felt a bit delirious from the insane amounts of life-attuned energies in the stream.

Zac could only activate the defensive mode of his Tool Spirit, conjuring the shield for the first time in a while. The coffin lid was extremely sturdy, and the occasional beast carcass or piece of debris that shot toward him was diverted without too much effort. However, that didn't much help with his real predicament; he was getting poisoned by a degree that not even he could deal with.

He considered activating [Abyssal Phase] to move away, but he gave up on the idea. The life-attuned energies around him were dense enough to almost blind him, and he had no idea what would happen if he turned himself into an intangible ghost. He might find himself ground to dust the moment he lost his physical form. He was better off in his current form as his [Void Heart] which was furiously beating to convert the invasive life force into pure energy.

But he also knew it was just a temporary relief. The hidden node could only convert so much, and he was being continuously drowned in it. Zac had already tried to activate an escape talisman sown into his robes, but it simply fizzled out. He frantically looked for other solutions, but his surroundings were suddenly replaced by darkness before he found a solution.

The Living Pulse had burrowed underground. This was his chance.

His eyes soon adjusted to the darkness as [Love's Bond] transformed to its offensive form. The stream continuously split as it pushed into dozens of different caves, and Zac soon lost any sense of direction. He kept trying to stop his frantic journey with the help of his chains, but even a split-up Living Pulse contained too much force.

Half an hour passed until the submerged tunnel around him suddenly expanded into a proper cave. Two chains shot forward and embedded themselves in the ceiling, and Zac desperately dragged himself out from the stream before he was pulled even further.

Finally safe, if you could call it that.

There actually was a thin tunnel leading straight up where the waters weren't raging, and he only needed to follow the path for a few minutes before reaching a cave that was actually drained. He dragged himself up and activated an illusion array with shaky hands as he ate a healing pill. Even then, he fell unconscious a few seconds later.

Zac woke sore and nauseated, but a quick scan proved that there was nothing overly wrong with him. He had slept for over ten hours by the looks of it, and his constitution had gradually cleansed his body during this time. Only then did he get a proper look at the surroundings, and he had to admit it was beautiful.

The place he found himself in reminded Zac a lot of his life-attuned side of his cultivation cave. The ceiling and walls were absolutely covered in various plants emitting strong life-attuned energies. It wasn't a surprise. The Living Pulse ran straight through these subterranean tunnels, and the ambient energy was absolutely chock-full of Divine Energy in addition to Twilight Energy.

Still, the beauty didn't much help with his predicament, and Zac grunted as he got back on his feet. His constitution was barely able to deal with the energy in this place, but it still felt like he was standing in a field of poison. The sooner he got out of here the better.

Cutting his way out was a possibility if all else failed, but he was afraid of cutting his way through the stone left and right. The Living Pulse had clearly split up into dozens, perhaps hundreds, of streams. What if he suddenly broke the wall and found himself caught by the stream again?

There was also Catheya and the others to consider. Catheya had definitely been swallowed up by the stream just like he was, and he wouldn't be too surprised if the same was true for the others. He took out the tracking array, but he sighed in disappointment when there was no response. Perhaps the streams of the Living Pulse created some sort of interference, or perhaps...

Not everyone was as durable as he was, nor as able to deal with this kind of environment.

He eventually went with his gut as he started to make his way forward in search of either his companions or a way out, harvesting all kinds of weird herbs on the way. The energy was dense, and it wasn't easy to get here. That was a perfect combination for rare herbs and treasures to appear, and Zac figured he might as well the best of a bad situation.

There was a clause in his employment contract that said that all obligations were voided if a situation like this arose, as long as the group couldn't reform within a week. It was a very real chance that his shot at the Life-Death Pearls was gone, but he would do his best to find at least Catheya before giving up.

The subterranean tunnels were really a hidden repository of wealth, and Zac had gained herbs valued at over 50,000 E-grade Nexus Coins in just over an hour. Most of them were only useful for the living, but that was just fine with Zac. Unfortunately, none of the items he'd found were any real treasures.

But after four hours he did sense something odd; a blistering cold. There was no reason for such a glacial cold to be this far underground, and a wave of relief hit him as he followed the clues into another cave.

Inside was a wretched-looking Catheya encased in a four-meter block of ice.