

## The Fall 711

### Chapter 711: Traitor

Catheya's left arm was clearly broken, and multiple wounds covered her body. Her complexion was pallid even for a Draugr, and Zac sensed her aura was very unstable. She neither had his durability nor the ability to deal with the dense life-attuned energies from what he knew.

Encasing herself in ice was probably a desperate measure of hers to block out the surrounding energies, but it was just a stopgap. The block of ice was bobbing in a lake full of life-attuned energies, and it was gradually being whittled down.

Zac wasn't exactly sure how he could help with her situation, but he began by lifting the block out of the waters and carrying it over to an adjoining cave that wasn't submerged. He put Catheya in the middle before taking out a series of arrays. One was a dispenser array that he had prepared for when he would travel alone.

He placed it around the block of ice and put a series of Supreme Quality Miasma Crystals into it. Soon enough the block of ice was covered in dense clouds of miasma. The array didn't really purify the Twilight Energy like Catheya's array did, but it did push some away. It was the most common way to deal with the Twilight Energy, but it was far more expensive to run compared to Catheya's purification array.

In fact, such an array wasn't publicly available.

Zac himself sat down facing the Catheya within the ice, and he essentially used himself as a purification array by absorbing some of the Twilight Energy close by. The hours passed, and Zac put one Miasma Crystal after another into the array as he waited. Sitting inside the cloud did a lot of good for him as well, and after the better part of a day, he was pretty much back in prime condition.

Catheya's aura was slowly growing stable as well, partly thanks to Zac occasionally crushing Soul Crystals in addition to the miasma crystals. Finally, she opened her eyes, but Zac actually felt a pang of danger prompting him to jump out in the way. It was just in time as well as the block of ice exploded, launching shards in all directions like a cluster bomb.

Thankfully he had reacted in time, and a coffin-shaped barrier blocked the fallout. His array wasn't so lucky, and Zac grimaced when the miasmic cloud dispersed.

"You owe me an array, you know," Zac said with a grimace.

"You! Stay back!" she answered with a ferocious glint in her eyes as a spike appeared in her hand.

"What's the matter with you? What the hell happened?" Zac sighed, but he followed Catheya's instructions.

It really looked like Catheya would attack him if he got any further, and he was in no mood for a fight at the moment.

"You think there was a traitor?" Zac said, soon understanding why she was so stand-offish.

"You, Sharpo, and Yod. One of you three did this," she said.

"Well, Sharpo or Yod," Zac corrected.

"Oh, I should just take your word for it?" she snorted.

"I mean, you were standing right in front of me. I was the first one to get screwed over," Zac said with exasperation. "Besides, I dragged you out of the waters and spent a small fortune to block out the surrounding energies for a while."

Catheya looked at him for a few seconds until she eventually snorted and put away her spike. "Well, I am pretty sure it's not you. For one, you have a connection to my ancestor. Secondly, I honestly doubt you'd have the skill to fiddle with arrays without me or Varo noticing."

"Well, whatever," Zac said, a bit miffed at being looked down on. Even if it was true. "I'm still young, I have plenty of time to pick up side-skills."

Catheya laughed a bit, but her face froze into a grimace as she looked down on her arm. She took out a pill and swallowed it, closing her eyes for a few seconds before looking up at Zac with an unusually serious expression. "Thank you, I owe you my life. And I'm sorry about just now, I wasn't in my right mind when I woke up, and I panicked when sensing a strong aura right next to me."

"Well, don't sweat it," Zac shrugged. "Though you do owe me for the array."

"How can someone be such a miser when walking around with enough wealth to topple nations," Catheya wryly smiled, but she still took out an array that seemed even better than the one Zac had used. "Here."

"Great," Zac smiled as he stowed away the array. "Now, do you know how to get out of here?"

"This is a repeater point of the Living Pulse, where it goes below ground and then reemerges stronger," Catheya sighed. "It was actually our next stop, but we obviously weren't supposed to enter this way. Or go this deep."

"So, we just need to make our way up?" Zac muttered.

"Wait," Catheya said as she took out a black core.

Zac immediately recognized it, seeing it was the gathering array meant for when they arrived in this place.

"There's another mark down here," Catheya said.

"Wait, it works?" Zac said with confusion as he took out his shard again. Still nothing. "I think mine broke."

"I obviously deactivated the daughter-arrays after realizing there was a traitor among us," Catheya snorted. "There weren't any signals active when I was forced to seal myself though. How long have we been down here?"

"Oh, right," Zac said. "We've been here around two days now. I was knocked out as well, then it took me a while to find you and stabilize your aura."

"Two days," Catheya muttered. "I doubt the traitor allowed themselves to get caught by the stream and dragged down here, but it's more than enough time to get down here through the tunnel system. But even if they did, would they take out the tracking array like this?"

"Could be a trap," Zac said.

"Either it's one of our people who needs rescue, or it's the traitor trying to lure us out. In either case, we should check it out," Catheya slowly said, a ruthless gleam shimmering in her abyssal eyes.

Zac hesitated for a bit, but he eventually nodded. He wouldn't mind getting some revenge on the person who almost got him killed. But there were some things he needed to make sure of first.

"Are you still able to locate the Life-Death pearls?" Zac asked.

If she couldn't, then he might be better off just setting off on his own. This traitor was probably connected to Catheya's mission, and there was no point getting involved if there weren't benefits to match. Especially considering Catheya's current condition. Her aura had stabilized, but she was still wounded and heavily suppressed by the area. He would definitely have to do the heavy lifting in any clashes down here.

"Of course, that had no connection to the submersible," Catheya said. "And the reward has only increased. There's at least one traitor, and there might be casualties among the others. Setting off alone now would be a mistake."

"Right, let's go get that scoundrel," Zac immediately agreed.

"You know, next time you can at least pretend you're helping out of gentlemanly convictions rather than greed," Catheya muttered as the two set out toward the source of the signal.

"Like you'd buy something like that anyways," Zac retorted with a smile.

Sometimes they had to descend into submerged tunnels to continue on their way, and they were teeming with plant life to the point they couldn't even see the walls. Corals, Seaweed, large luminous fungi, and all kinds of underwater plants fought for space along the walls. There were also many types of smaller animals flitting about, all of them leaning toward life rather than death.

"This place," Catheya sighed as she took out a Miasma Crystal.

"Why not take out the purification array?" Zac asked.

"I don't have it," Catheya said with a helpless shake of her head. "It was connected to the submersible when it broke apart, and the core was far from your room. Varo should have been sitting right next to it though. Hopefully, he managed to take it."

"That's a shame," Zac muttered.

"Is it?" she said with a penetrating look. "For some reason, it looks like you're absolutely fine walking in this poisonous environment. Come to think of it, it was the same while you fought next to the mothertree. Did my ancestor provide something for protection? Can you share?"

"There's nothing like that," Zac coughed. "I'm simply a bit more durable than you. Besides, I wasn't really hurt on the way down here."

"...Right," Catheya muttered, but she didn't comment any further.

Catheya kept taking out one crystal after another to withstand the poisonous energies burrowing into her body, but Zac could see how she was struggling even with that. Zac couldn't be certain, but he believed she wouldn't even be able to exhibit half her normal strength in a place like this, and that was in her prime condition.

It was no wonder that the undead usually stayed away from the living pulse. The restrictions on them were a lot greater here, and they probably were lessened for the living.

"The signal started moving," Catheya suddenly said with a small frown. "Away from us."

"They might have decided to find their way out," Zac commented.

The two kept going for another twenty minutes, at which point the signal stopped again according to Catheya. Even before, it hadn't moved very quickly, meaning that the person on the other end might be in a bad way. It lent some credence to the theory that it was someone else who had been dragged down by the Living Pulse rather than descended through the tunnels. If it was Sharpo, an intangible death-attuned ghost, she might be on the brink of collapse by this point.

Soon they closed in on the source of the marker, and it seemed to come from a large cave that was simply teeming with life.

"Ready yourself," Catheya whispered as she ate what looked like a soldier pill to boost her energy reserves.

Zac nodded, but he froze when he realized he had lost [Rakan's Roar] to the living pulse earlier. He was pretty reluctant to take out [Verun's Bite] in front of Catheya unless absolutely necessary, so he ultimately just transformed [Love's Bond] to its back-pack form and took out a random spare axe. A moment later they entered the cave, and the scene inside was both beautiful and haunting.

An unmoving body on the ground in a vast field of flowers, and it was someone they knew: Yod.

A shimmering haze covered the whole cave, like motes of starlight. There was also a corpse lying a few meters away from Yod. A single glance indicated that the man had died not long ago, and the wounds on his body indicated that Yod was responsible for the man's death. There were also scars or burnt patches all over the cavern, indicating a heated battle.

Had the two people met by chance in this place and a brutal battle had ensued?

"It's really Yod," Catheya whispered. "He looks hurt."

"Are the flowers safe?" Zac asked hesitantly.

"Should be. I am pretty sure they're Vigorbloom Lilacs," Catheya muttered.

Hearing the name made Zac actually remember the plant, and he took out one of his compendiums to confirm. The image matched perfectly, and the description made Zac breathe out in relief. These flowers

were't poisonous, but rather medicine. They were the main component for creating some Berserking Pills for Dreamers, but their scarcity made the recipe unpopular. As for the unliving, their only value was resale.

"There might be more ambushers though," Catheya added with a pointed look.

Zac nodded, and he activated [Profane Exponents] as though he was afraid of ambush rather than leery about Yod's himself. The two walked closer, and Zac frowned at he looked at the haze around them. But his danger sense didn't give off any warning, so he followed Catheya to the core.

"We need to get him out of this place," Zac said. "With his wounds, it might be lethal to stay this close to a bunch of Spirit Herbs."

"I..." Catheya said, but the words got caught in her throat as she slumped down the ground.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm, by a wave of vertigo hit him before he had a chance to escape, and he found himself on the ground as well. Zac tried to get back on his feet, but he was shocked to find that something was wrong with the Miasma in his body. It had frozen in his body and it felt like the ichor had been turned into lead.

On a second look, there were some small white motes inside his veins, and it was these pollutants that seemed to have caused such a massive change. Zac didn't get it. His danger sense hadn't sensed anything amiss, and the plants should be benign. There also weren't any suspicious energy fluctuations.

Yet he hadn't noticed the infiltration at all. Normally, [Purity of the Void] would have been able to deal with this issue, but it was already busy dealing with the large amounts of life-attuned energies.

The problem wasn't only that he was completely unable to circulate his Miasma, it was like his whole body was frozen in place. He wasn't even able to move enough to put an antidote pill into his mouth. He wasn't able to drag himself to safety with the help of his Tool Spirit either. The chains ultimately required a little bit of his energy to control, and he couldn't even give them that.

"What is this? What's going on?" Zac grunted with a slurred voice as he tried to shake himself loose.

Catheya didn't even get the chance to respond before Zac felt a ruthless pull as his pores started to leak massive amounts of Miasma. He was lying face to face with Catheya, and he saw that she was in a similar situation, and her eyes widened in shock. Their energies merged in the air before they were dragged to a small sphere he hadn't noticed before.

Zac tried to forcibly keep the energy in his body and resist the drain, but he was only able to slightly slow down the speed at which he lost energy.

A muffled snicker echoed out from behind, and Zac recognized it to be Yod's voice.

"It's futile," Yod grunted, his voice just as slurred as Zac's own. "Even a Hegemon would find themselves locked down for a while with my preparations. You'll be drained long before your body acclimatizes to the poison here."

"You lunatic, you used yourself as bait to trap us?" Zac spat.

"Hardly. Would I be in this wretched state if this bastard didn't appear out of nowhere and wounded me? But it's worth it if I can take both of you Imperial bastards out. I'll recover in a month or two."

"How is this possible?" Catheya wheezed. "Is it not Vigorbloom Lilacs?"

"I'm not surprised you outsiders don't know," Yod grunted with a laugh. "You didn't misidentify the lilacs, but there are some things the missives won't tell you. They release a pollen that perfectly blends with the Twilight Energy and burrows into the bodies of others. It's really medicine for the Dreamers. But for us, it'll cause a little-known reaction if concentrated enough. Our order has used it for assassination for tens of thousands of years."

Zac tried one thing after another, but nothing he did worked. He could use his mental energy just fine, but there was nothing to channel it into. He could feel [Force of the Void] as well, but it was like his Skill Fractals were blocked out by the pollen, making him unable to activate [Abyssal Phase]. Catheya didn't seem to have any luck either, and the two could only lie down and helplessly look at each other.

"It's lucky. I planned on finishing you off, but Arcaz had already found you by the time I did. I planned on giving up until I found this place by chance," Yod grunted. "The rewards I will gain for stopping you will be shocking."

It looked like Yod had been a spy all along, working for some mysterious order. Not only that, it even seemed as though he was a proper Array Master, something he hadn't shown any indication of at all until now. He had the ability to tinker with the Submersible, and he could also manipulate catheya's tracker while setting up this trap.

It looked like Catheya's mission had been leaked somehow, considering Yod had been placed by her side even before they entered. Was it Yod who took out Ravan as well? Or perhaps he just divulged the locations of the people. Varo had barely survived as well, even though he was an assassin who should excel at stealth.

As for why Yod was doing this, it clearly was linked to their mission. He had been unable to hinder them at the first two locations, though it was a bit suspicious how quickly they had been spotted by those crabs now that Zac thought of it. Perhaps Yod felt forced to take action as they closed in on the third spot without any major issues, and he forcibly steered the submarine into the Living Pulse.

"I can pay you Ten thousand D-grade Nexus Coins to let us out of here," Zac eventually sighed. "I'm sure that's more than what your employers are paying you."

"I have a ticket to the Empire as well," Catheya hurriedly added with a weak voice.

The Corpselord didn't actually even bother to respond, and Zac was starting to get worried for real. Not for himself though. [Purity of the Void] was continuously cleansing some of the pollen that had burrowed into his body, and he should sooner or later be able to leave here on his own. Besides, even if he was drained of Miasma he would just revert to his human form.

But Catheya didn't have that kind of luxury. Running out of Miasma was a death sentence for her. What would happen to the brand hidden in his body if Catheya suddenly died right in front of him? Were there hidden measures added to its core functionality? Zac hesitated for a few second as he looked at the rapidly paling Catheya.

“Uh, if you’re going to do something, could you do it now?” Catheya said, her voice shaking a bit. “I have just a few minutes remaining before I enter my final slumber.”

Zac wanted to help, but the problem was whether he could. The Duplicity Core needed some energy to activate now that it was sealed, but he couldn’t infuse anything at all. But he did have his bloodline talent available, and his Specialty Core was no doubt protected from the pollen as thanks to Leandra’s array.

It should work.

“Oh well,” Zac sighed as the cage to his Duplicity Core snapped.