

The Fall 714

Chapter 714: Unplugged

Zac knew he couldn't rely on Catheya at the moment. She had expelled enough pollen to move around freely, but there was still some left to restrict her abilities. Combined with her wounds and the environmental suppression, she was all but useless at the moment.

He wasn't confident in dealing with five Havarok Imperials even if going all-out. The leader was the biggest issue. His aura beneath that of Yanub Mettleleaf back on Cork Island, but it was definitely above Zac's own. Also, in contrast to the slightly naïve treeman, this man gave Zac the impression of a veteran of a hundred battles with stable and congealed killing intent.

Thankfully there was no way that Ykrodas Havarok, the second-place holder on the ladder, was part of this group, or any other of the rankers for that matter. They were most likely just some secondary squad who had been sent here to deal with the rock behind them. Zac immediately grabbed Catheya as he acted [Loamwalker], rushing around the rock to escape in the opposite direction of the squad.

"It's no use escaping," the man snorted as a shimmering dome enclosed the area five hundred meters around them.

Zac reached the barrier, and he could immediately sense that it would take a while for him to break through it without laying a siege. Both he and Catheya instantly threw out a general Array Breaker of their own, but Zac swore when he saw them fail to find a chink in the armor.

"It's futile. After the chaos all along the Living Pulse, we figured that someone would arrive here sooner or later," the leader continued, and Zac sighed as he turned around. The Havarok soldiers had followed them at a leisurely pace, and they now stood right between himself and the yellow rock. "I have turned this whole area into a sealed domain. If some general Array Breakers from the frontier could destroy our imperial arrays, wouldn't it be a huge joke? But I didn't expect the group to look like yours. A human and a Draugr?"

Zac understood the man's confusion. Mixed parties of both the living and undead were definitely uncommon, though not unheard of. But such a party wouldn't head to a place like the Living pulse. At least not unless they had some hidden objectives.

It was obvious that this group was here on a mission just like they were. Even worse, it looked like they had opposing objectives. Zac couldn't wait to be done with this mission and disappear into the ocean like some random trial taker. He had no interest in making the Havarok Empire into an enemy.

"You've betrayed the living and led this person here?" another member of the group asked as she glared at Zac. "Do you know the ramifications of what you are trying to do? Who you're trying to help?"

Zac sighed as he looked at her, as she actually reminded Zac a bit of Thea. She had similar features, and she even wore three thin swords over her back. One stark difference was the face tattoos, looking like a spider web of red fractals. He had read about the Havarok Empire before, and it was much more militant in nature than the Radiant Temple or even the Undead Empire.

They weren't like the Radiant Temple who didn't much care about their domain as long as they kept producing resources and talented seedlings. The Havarok Empire was one cohesive unit where strength trumped all, even birthright to a certain degree.

The tattoos were a designation of sorts, telling a story of their exploits. Apparently, they weren't completely cosmetic either, but the patterns rather formed proper arrays. Zac had almost gotten his hands on a similar method in the Tower of Eternity, but he ultimately gave up on that method.

"I think this is all a misunderstanding," Zac said with a light smile, though he didn't relax in the slightest. "We are just allies of circumstance. A series of unfortunate events brought both of us beneath the surface, and we decided to team up to find a way out of this place."

"Well, it's a possibility you are telling the truth, though my guts say you're lying," the man smiled. "But it is clear that you are not beyond redemption. Your class is related to nature, which means you're not a traitor of life. A local guide, I assume? To help these Draugr abominations with their goals. But you should know, whatever she's paying you, it's not enough. They want to destroy your home."

"So, what do you propose?" Zac eventually asked with a small frown.

"You should have known better than to intermingle with an Imperial. The Draugr clans have destroyed thousands of worlds within the Havarok Empire alone, afflicting trillions with the curse of undeath. Some punishment is due, but I'm not unreasonable. I don't think you're part of this struggle. Hand her over, and you can leave after paying a ransom," the man said. "90% should do. I will also give back half if you join us as a guide for three months."

Collecting ransom was a pretty rare concept, at least in the frontiers. But it did work to a certain degree. After all, robbery of Nexus Coins was impossible, and extortionists would lose the money and even get fined if they didn't honor their part of the agreement by killing or robbing the victim afterward.

In the frontier, people were pretty poor so robbers would just target Cosmos Sacks and Spatial Rings instead in search of loot. Zac guessed the concept of ransom was more common in the Havarok Empire, where there were stricter rules and people had bigger wallets. The problem was, what did he mean by 90%? Were they actually expecting him to show his status screen?

That definitely couldn't happen since he was sitting on over 900,000 D-grade Nexus Coins.

"I accept," Zac nodded with a fearful look as he took a few steps away from Catheya, causing her to look over with an open mouth. "I have 300,00 E-grade nexus coins on me, how about I—"

Zac didn't get any further before a massive hand appeared out of nowhere, radiating a terrifying might. There hadn't been any fluctuations from either him or Catheya, which allowed him to catch the group unaware. They barely had time to look up before an enormous primal axe was upon them.

The stone edge was emitting a terrifyingly sharp gleam as it was infused with his recently upgraded Fragment of the Axe. If possible, he would have preferred to form one of his basic Dao Braids, but Zac was afraid that even the slightest delay would give these people the chance to turn things around.

"No!" the man roared as barriers sprung up above them, but how could hastily erected shields match up to a finisher conjured by almost a quarter of Zac's energy reserves?

Another in the group was more decisive and immediately crushed an escape talisman. However, it was clearly not a supreme escape treasure as the swirls of wind from the talisman didn't even get the chance to swallow him up before Zac's attack landed.

Four massive surges of energy entered his body as cultivators were turned to mush the moment the enormous axe slammed into the ground. The whole cave heaved and shook as a scar almost five hundred meters long cut both the mystic stone and half the forest in two, and frantic winds full of extremely sharp force ripped the remaining flora to shreds.

One cultivator actually possessed an Earth-escape skill, and he had quickly sunk into the ground to avoid most of the skill. Unfortunately for him, this was [Arcadia's Judgement], and the axe swing was just the first half.

The whole cave floor shuddered for a second before a tremendous shockwave spread out, which was followed by the whole cave breaking apart. Zac felt another stream of energy enter his body a moment later, but Zac still rushed forward with finality in his eyes as a fractal forest sprung up to replace the destroyed one.

He suddenly disappeared as the ground beneath his feet cracked, and he appeared in an empty spot a hundred meters away a moment later. [Verun's Bite] already radiated a sanguine luster that lit up half the cave, and the air howled as the edge cut through the air. It looked like he was aiming at nothing, but space suddenly flickered as a wretched-looking man appeared out of nowhere.

The final Havarok warrior had lost both an arm and a leg, and it looked like he would topple from a gust of wind. His aura was erratic, but he still managed to generate a undulating ball of chaotic power in his remaining hand as an intricate talisman appeared above his head. The rampant energies didn't even phase Zac, and he only slightly angled his torso as he continued his swing. He felt a sixth and final surge of energy while a chunk of his torso was blasted to smithereens.

The pain was blinding, and Zac fell over with a groan. His defensive skill was no match by the final blast of a dying warrior, but at least he got the last of them in one go. There would be no one to spread the news of what happened here. There was no time to rest though as the shakes from his finisher didn't stop after even a few seconds. In fact, they grew more intense as the seconds passed.

"It's the living pulse!" Catheya screamed with dismay. "It's being rerouted!"

"Uh," Zac grunted and spat out a mouthful of blood as he saw one geyser after another sprout up from the cracks he had caused. "Well, find a way out of here."

"What the hell! Do I look like a Geomancer to you?!" she huffed as Zac looted the corpse next to him with shaky hands, but she still conjured a series of ice crystals and closed her eyes.

Zac guessed she was using some sort of scouting ability to find a way out. Zac was focused on something else though; booty. He had been forced to burn his whole [Force of the Void]-reserves to take these guys out before they had a chance to react, and he still had another hole blasted in his body. He needed some sort of compensation for his suffering.

The largest scar in the ground was fast filling up with water, and the ground was still heaving ominously. Still, Zac ate one of his peak healing pills as he shuffled forward, and the chains of [Love's Bond] shot

into the waters while Zac dug through the meaty pulp on the ground until he fished out a couple of Cosmos Sacks, a few Spirit Tools and a Spatial ring. The chains rose out from the water a moment later, dragging up another corpse.

It was the cultivator who had used an earth-escape skill. He was the only body that retained a semblance of its original form apart from the leader's. Both corpses looked gruesome, but they might be salvageable with the help of his Mark of Creation and some Corpse-lord methods. They were probably too maimed to become Revenants, but it was high time for Zac to learn the method to create the second common form of the undead.

"Hurry!" Catheya shouted as she started running in the opposite direction where they came from. "I found the path they came from. Hopefully, it leads to the surface!"

"Alright," Zac grunted as started running to catch up. Each step felt like getting stabbed, but it was better than getting swallowed by the Living Pulse.

Zac soon caught up with Catheya with the help of [Loamwalker], but the two only managed to get a few hundred meters inside before a shocking torrent of densely life-attuned waters burst through the ground, shooting rocks in all directions like a cluster bomb. The two jumped into the tunnel Catheya had chosen, and she hurriedly tried to erect an ice wall to keep the deluge away.

Unsurprisingly, it only withstood the pressure for a second before the ice was completely eroded.

The two kept up their frantic escape while trying to erect various roadblocks for the water. Catheya erected walls while he threw out everything from boulders to submersibles to block up the path. Still, the Living Pulse was undeniable, and it kept crashing through all barriers in its pursuit.

Catheya was clearly having trouble keeping up even when using some sort of frostblink ability, and Zac eventually had [Love's Bond] pick her up, which allowed her to focus on forming barriers without having to worry about running.

Zac eventually reached a wide chute that led straight up while also having multiple paths to choose from, and he quickly climbed up rather than continue down one of the other tunnels. Just a few seconds later the Life Pulse blasted into the area, but it was thankfully diverted through the three of the tunnels rather than continuing upward.

The two stopped at a terrace after climbing over two hundred meters, and they sat down to recuperate while watching the waters below. The Living Pulse was readjusting, and the cave kept shaking for over ten minutes until the situation stabilized.

"Thank you," Catheya eventually said.

"No problem," Zac shrugged. "Was better than being slowed down by your shuffling."

"Not that," Catheya said with a roll of her eyes. "For not giving me up. Would have made your life a lot easier."

"Oh, that. It's not like I could show them how much money I have," Zac said with a wry smile. "Besides, I need you to guide me to the Life-Death Pearls."

"Right," Catheya snorted. "Still, thank you."

"Well, no problem," Zac smiled.

The two rested up for a while longer, where Catheya focused on resetting her arm and expelling the last pollen in her body.

Meanwhile, Zac used some of his kill energy on [Surging Vitality] to close the gristly wound on his side before focusing on his Nodes. The remaining energy was enough to gain two levels, though that was only thanks to him already having opened the nodes in his undead form. After the energy was expended, Zac took out a Supreme-Grade Nexus Crystal and continued to fill up the remaining nodes.

Even with the physical wound being fixed, it would still take a while for [Purity of the Void] to remove the lingering Dao from the Havarok leader. He had actually left a mark as well, but Zac thankfully noticed it and crushed it with a continuous stream of mental energy.

It took him another ten hours to completely expel the foreign Dao, at which point Zac had also managed to activate the partially filled third node. At that point, he was level 105 in his human form, compared to level 109 as a Draugr.

Zac gave it some thought, and he allocated the 30 Free points into Strength, just like he did with the previous 10. Survivability was important, but the previous battle had proven that a strong offense was a viable type of defense as well.

"You fused the two big skills you used in the Base Town into one," Catheya eventually commented when Zac opened his eyes.

"Yeah," Zac nodded.

There was no point in denying it. Catheya had watched his battles outside the Tower of Eternity from the first row. She would have to be completely oblivious to not understand where [Arcadia's Judgement] came from.

"I don't understand how it just appeared out of nowhere though. I didn't sense a thing until it was there," Catheya said as her black eyes peered into Zac's, like she was trying to dig out his secrets hiding within his body. "The more I see the less I understand. Can you sell me the method?"

"It's impossible for you," Zac said with a shake of his head before he started lying through his teeth. "It's a trick on the senses."

"So natural endowment. A natal illusory Specialty Core perhaps? Is it related to your weird body?" Catheya asked, but she held up her hands upon seeing Zac's glare. "Alright, alright."

Zac didn't know if such a Specialty Core actually existed, but he was more than happy to let Catheya believe her guess to be wrong. Especially since it meant getting even further from the truth in regards to his double races.

"Still, such an ability is extremely handy if used right," she muttered. "There has to be a drawback for balance though."

Zac didn't really feel there was one, but he agreed that there probably should be one if not for his mother's meddling. For example, the Specialty Core called Overdrive empowered attacks almost as

much as a berserking skill or a Cultivation Manual, but you overdrafted your body by using it. Meanwhile, he only needed to absorb some energy to refill his reserves.

Or perhaps he simply didn't know the price of his action, and fate would sooner or later come to collect.