

The Fall 717

Chapter 717: Radiant Temple

Two signals were better than nothing, but it also meant that yet another one of their squad was down for the count. Only a month had passed, yet they were approaching the average 50% casualty rate for the Twilight Ascent. This trial was bound to be a bloody chapter in the history of the Twilight Harbor.

"Where do the signals from?" Zac asked as he scanned the surroundings for enemies.

"Half a day away, toward where the Living Pulse will emerge," Catheya said as she started to move in that direction. "They must have figured I'd appear somewhere close to the outlet."

Zac nodded and followed suit, and they started to make way through the dense underbrush of the ocean. Luckily, the area was full of seaweed growing over two meters wide and fifty meters tall, providing them with ample cover as long as they hid their energy signatures. That along with Catheya's node-empowered nose, they didn't encounter any trouble until they reached the spot.

It was a nondescript part of a ridge that ran along the direction of the living pulse, with neither any entrances nor cracks to show for it. Catheya was still sure it was the right spot, and she walked over and knocked with a certain pattern on the stone. A door appeared out of nowhere a few seconds later, and Qirai peered outside.

"It's good that you're fine," Qirai said with relief before she shot a glare at Zac. "You're still around?"

"Still around," Zac smiled as he looked the Titan up and down. "You look worse for the wear."

It was true, the Titan looked like she had been through a few tribulations to match Zac's own. Qirai sported a nasty burn on her left cheek, and it looked like it stretched down beneath her clothes all the way to her left hand. Her aura was also a bit unstable, and Zac guessed her soul was slightly wounded.

"Are you alright? What's going on?" Catheya asked with worry. "And where's Varo?"

"Varo's inside, sealed," Qirai sighed. "He's hurt pretty bad."

"Who did it? Sharpo?" Catheya asked as they stepped inside the hideout, a hint of killing intent leaking from her body.

"No. She's either dead or escaped," Qirai said with a shake of her head as she sealed the door behind them. "You think she was the traitor?"

"Probably not. We got dragged beneath the surface," Catheya said. "We met Yod there. If not for Mr. Black here, I would be dead."

"Oh?" Qirai exclaimed with surprise, her previously hostile gaze making a drastic turn. "Thank you."

"Nothing to it. I got caught in his trap as well, after all," Zac smiled.

"Take me to Varo," Catheya urged. "I'll see what I can do."

There were just two rooms in the dugout, with Varo being in the inner one. He was lying in a coffin that reminded Zac a lot of the one he had gotten for Alea back then. His state was in even worse shape than

expected, with extensive burns covering his body. His left arm essentially looked like a scorched twig, and Zac wasn't sure that was something that could be restored with healing pills, no matter how good they were.

Not only that, but there was a blistering heat coming from within Varo's body, no doubt from some fire-aspected Dao hidden inside the assassin's body. Zac figured the two must have met an incredibly powerful fire-based cultivator, considering he could cause such extensive damage even inside an ocean that should weaken his or her attacks a bit.

"Who did this?" Catheya asked again, the room temperature decreasing by a noticeable margin.

"After the ship broke apart, the two of us and the ghost found ourselves next to the Living Pulse without a ship," Qirai sighed. "Sharpo wanted to split up, but how could we let her just slink away? She might have been the traitor. We caught her and started making our way here. We figured that you'd appear around these parts one way or another as long as you survived getting dragged away by the stream.

"But this section is ultimately controlled by the living, and no one who has made it this far already is a weakling," Qirai continued with a grimace. "We got ambushed by a trio from the Kalvan Clan but managed to kill one and chase the other two away. We weren't as lucky when we ran into a group from the Radiant Temple."

"The Radiant Temple? Not one of their Subsidiaries?" Catheya exclaimed with surprise. "How..?"

Zac knew what she wanted to ask. The Radiant Empire was different than The Undead Empire in that it was a relatively small force. Certainly, they had billions and billions of members, but that was still nothing compared to the endless citizens of the Undead Empire or even the Havarok Empire.

The Radiant Temple rather ruled over tens of thousands of subsidiary clans, empires, and sects than having direct control. They only set up Subsidiary offices called Temples of Radiance in the subsidiary sectors, though it was more apt to call them tax collection agencies. Altogether, they controlled an area over fifty times the size of the Zecia sector, but those who were actually part of the Temple were vanishingly small in number compared to the actual number of cultivators within their domain.

The Radiant Temple used those subsidiary sectors for two things; generating resources through taxes and treasure collection, and to scout for talents. Most peak talents of the subsidiary factions were absorbed into the Temple, while the elders of the subsidiary faction got a hefty reward in return. That way they maintained control, while also got talented seedlings sent to them from left and right.

That also meant the true members of the Radiant Temple were the best of the best in not only a B-grade Empire, but also dozens of subsidiary Sectors. The Havarok squad they met could have been anything from some lowly clan to just soldiers in the Havarok Army, but members of the Radiant Temple were all the real deal.

How were Qirai and Varo still alive if these kinds of people came for them?

"It was luckily just a scouting party of three members, two of which were employed locals," Qirai said. "It was the real members who unleashed an attack that destroyed everything when we needed to flee. It was like a supernova that went off. I managed to block out most of it, but I think Sharpo got swallowed entirely. Varo is as... You can see."

Cathey nodded heavily as she took out a stopper and poured its contents over Varo's body, causing them to emit sizzling sounds. After that, she placed an ice-blue gem on his chest, and the fiery energy coming from his body was quickly getting suppressed.

"He'll heal, but he'll be out for a while. Even then, he might have to make a transition," Cathey sighed before she turned to Zac. "Do you have any means to help?"

The transition Cathey mentioned was either to shed his mortal coil to become a specter or become a Corpse-lord. Both came with demerits though. Few cultivator's classes skillsets were meant to be used as ghosts, and you'd lose a chunk of your power that way. Reaching Hegemony would become a lot harder as well.

Meanwhile, adding outsiders' body parts to your own unavoidably created some issues with affinities and rejection.

"I have some good pills I bought from the Karabas Pill house, but that's about it. My only healing skill is the one I got at your place," Zac said with a shake of his head.

Truthfully, Zac did believe that it might be possible to use his Mark of Creation to fix Varo's arm. The Revenant was in a coma, and his will shouldn't impact the process of creation unless he woke up. But Zac had already exposed two of his major secrets in just a few days, and he definitely wouldn't expose the third just to speed up Varo's recuperation.

Also, the Creation Energy was his personal ace that could both save his life or destroy an enemy.

"Alright," Cathey sighed as she turned to Qirai. "We can't stay here, especially not after the chaos we caused beneath the surface. Furthermore, more and more of the living will appear over the coming days, passing through toward the depths."

"So what's next?" Zac asked.

"We have lost three members of our party, and one is taken out of commission. The casualty rate is over 50%, allowing me to cancel the operation. There is one more node we should have visited originally, but we'll skip it. If anything, we've already performed above expectation. We have completed more than half of our assigned task," Cathey said.

"So, the pearls?" Zac said as a smile spread across his face.

"Right, greedy fellow," Cathey smiled with a shake of her head. "The pearls. Do you have any spare vessels we can use?"

Soon enough the group set out on the vessel that Zac had found in the Spatial ring of the leader of the Havorak group. It was made from a large spiraled shell, and it could thankfully be powered by anyone as long as it was fueled by Nexus Crystals. Varo had saved the purification array when the vessel sunk, and Zac was once more put in the awkward situation where his soul tempering was put on hold.

There was not much to do about the situation though as they had entered the middle reaches of the ocean.

The Twilight Energy had already gone from an uncomfortable annoyance to real suppression for Cathey and Qirai, and both needed a proper environment to focus on recuperation. It wasn't the end of the

world though, as it looked like Zac would ultimately save two weeks by skipping the final target on the side mission.

Instead, they were shooting straight toward the Life-Death Pearls with Qirai on the wheel while Catheya and Zac used the purification array for eight hours each in turn. Qirai would use it for four hours, after which they let it be turned off for the final four. The past weeks had been pretty boring while maintaining the array, but this time Zac was immersed in swallowing up all the knowledge Catheya had to offer.

First, they covered the basic knowledge of fractals and how they related to skills and arrays. A lot of what Catheya knew about the subject leaned toward Miasma and Ice, but the rules were still generally applicable. The most important was the large number of solutions, methods, and practical examples of upgrading skill fractals that Catheya provided.

Upgrading skills was actually a pretty straightforward subject if you simply wanted the same skill but stronger. The process was sort of a mini-test by the System, where you had to prove at least a basic understanding of the runes to succeed. It was essentially the same thing as redrawing pathways, but you had to figure out the new pattern yourself based on your knowledge and the general rules that the Apostate of Order had set up.

Of course, if you diligently followed a Heritage, your predecessors had already performed the heavy lifting for you. Everyone still needed to make some personal modifications though. Pathways were like a thumbprint; each one unique and based on one's body. If you completely followed the patterns of others, you were bound to end up with a skill that only partially matched your pathways.

Furthermore, the greater your understanding of the Dao and your skills were, the more you could do with the upgrade.

Skill fractals were somewhat rigid in most cases, where you couldn't just redraw them as you wanted like you could do with pathways. But if you cut off a skill fractal from your path network you could temporarily extract it from your body, at which point the fractal would turn malleable for a limited duration.

That way you could perform the changes you needed to perform to take the skill from F-grade to E-grade. The arrays that Zac had purchased back in the Twilight Harbor helped with this exact process, both providing suggestions and prolonging the duration that the skill fractal could stay out of the body without taking too much damage.

A skilled hand could use that window of time to also make changes to make the skill better fit your needs and pathways. That meant you could walk away with a skill that was not only a grade higher, but you could even get a skill that was higher quality and better suited to your path. But conversely, if you lacked proficiency and understanding, you could mess up so much that the skill was degraded to a lower-quality skill.

Or even destroy the skill fractal altogether.

Seeing as more than half of Zac's skills already were peak quality thanks to getting an Epic class at F-grade, it also meant that there was pretty only one way to go; down. So, the most important thing for

him was to gain an understanding of the process and gain enough proficiency that he could evolve the skill to the point that he could evolve them without them going from peak to high quality.

Zac had already read through a lot of materials on the subject, but it was still eye-opening to get access to the knowledge of a High-grade Monarch. A lot of the information he had gathered until this point was broad and only scratched the surface, but Catheya had given him a set of crystals that covered tens of thousands of different patterns, and how to properly upgrade them without losing efficacy on the upgrade.

After just three weeks Zac had already managed to form preliminary schematics for most of his skills, barring the more complex skill fractals between his two classes. There were no guarantees, but he felt like he was ready to start putting theory to practice as soon as he had upgraded his Daos and gained some better understanding.

Next was the general knowledge of necromancy. Zac already knew some parts, but he still learned a lot over the following two weeks. For example, Zac had assumed that all turned cultivators restarted at level one because of his experience, but that wasn't actually the case. Revenants naturally lost around one grade upon being turned, but that could be reduced by "locking" some of the energy inside the body quickly after killing them.

Conversely, you could actually make the bodies lose even more if you wanted to retrain the follower from the ground up. For example, getting the level-kill titles were a lot easier for low-leveled cultivators. The easiest way to do this was to place drainage arrays on the corpse that worked a lot like the one that almost killed Catheya before. Unfortunately, progress on this front wasn't quite as smooth as it was for his skill upgrades.

"I know I called you a meathead, but this is ridiculous!" Catheya said one day as she looked at Zac's 'array', which more looked like a series of squiggly lines. "How are you this bad at energy control? You're a pureblood!"

"You know my situation," Zac sighed as he shook the [Stone of Hope] in front of Catheya.

"Oh, right," Catheya said as she thought things over. "Well, I guess you technically don't need to make these arrays yourself. But you would be reliant on an array master to properly perform the arts. But if you get to that point, you might as well hand over the whole process to a subordinate, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess," Zac sighed. "Let's go back to the skill fractals."

The lessons kept going for another week, at which point Zac felt the vessel slow down. A minute later Qirai entered the study he and Catheya used.

"We're almost there. I think we should go the final bit on foot," the Titan said.

"How is Varo?" Catheya asked.

"Still unconscious," Qirai said with a grimace.

"Alright," Catheya said, looking a bit downcast before she turned to Zac. "You can't carry him in that coffin of yours, right?"

"Not if you want him to ever come out again," Zac wryly smiled.

"Alright. Well, we can't leave him here. Qirai, you'll fashion the casket into a backpack like Mr. Black's. Make it so that it's quickly detachable in case of battle," Catheya said. "We'll bring him with us that way. Harvesting the Pearls will take a week or two. Hopefully, he'll wake up in time."