

## The Fall 720

### Chapter 720: Seclusion

"Alright," Catheya nodded, not looking surprised in the slightest that Zac would head off on his way now that the pearls were collected. "I'll take you out of this place before we find our own paths."

The descent from the mountain was just as nerve-wracking as the ascent, but thirty minutes later they stood in a secluded spot down by the foot of a mountain, covered by five-meter tall corals and Catheya's arrays in case any group of trial takers was lurking nearby.

"Remember to come look for me before this thing is over," Catheya said as she handed Zac a crystal and a sack of herbs. "This is a method to gain even more from the pearls than just eating them as is. And try to not do anything crazy after this, alright? No causing trouble that will cause ripples on the outside."

"Of course," Zac smiled. "I'm not crazy."

"Well, you seem to have a penchant for trouble," Catheya said with a pointed look, which made Zac scratch his chin with some embarrassment.

"Well, I'll be careful. I will find you in a year or so unless I've found some opportunity that'll delay me," Zac promised.

"I'll look for the places you wanted," Catheya nodded in return.

Zac swam away a moment later, heading for one of the pathways away from their current spot. A look back showed that Catheya and Qirai soon started moving toward another. There was no time to lose considering the pearls only lasted so long, but he had to find a good spot to seclude himself. Zac made good time as he swam through the valleys, and he didn't stop for three hours as he made his way forward with the help of his compass.

However, Zac didn't head back in the direction they came from, but rather the opposite. He was planning on passing straight through the mountain range on the way to the inner parts of the ocean, finding a cultivation cave on the way. Eventually, he found what he was looking for; a small crack in the rock which released air bubbles.

Zac hid in a dense patch of bushes as he activated his movement skill. Two seconds later the world shifted into one of death and he flashed forward toward the crack. The intangible form of [Abyssal Phase] had its benefits, and he effortlessly squeezed through the path that normally wouldn't even fit his hand.

The tunnel kept going for thousands of meters into the depths without widening, but just as Zac started to consider turning back, he found himself in a large cave that was mostly filled with air. The place was roughly one hundred meters across and a bit reminiscent of his cultivation cave back home, except the land was on a ledge five meters above the waters.

The Twilight Ocean formed a small subterranean river that just passed by below the ledge and left through another crack on the other side. The walls and ceiling were covered with the same sort of moss that had dried out the tunnels beneath the Living Pulse. There was also a lone mysterious flower that

grew on the edge of the ledge; and Zac could soon match it with [Palvae Granulosa], a medicinal plant used in top-quality race-upgrading medicinal baths.

It was a peak E-grade plant, and each one of its 20-some leaves was worth upwards of 5,000 E-grade Nexus Coins. It wasn't a bad haul, though not something that mattered all-too-much to Zac. It did spread a nice aroma in the small cave though, and Zac decided to leave it for now.

First thing first; he needed to turn this place into a cultivation cave. He swam beneath the waters again swiftly sealed both the inlet and outlet to the river both with arrays and by physically filling them with stones. It would turn the fresh water in the small river stagnant in a few months, but it didn't really matter.

Zac secondly added a layer of isolation arrays to the cave. He was over a thousand meters below the valley, but there were perhaps more tunnels in the mountain above. This way he was completely shut off from the rest of the world, and he would be able to work on his cultivation in peace.

He cleared out a patch of moss and placed down his new prayer mat before he took out two boxes. One of them held the death-attuned pearls he had purchased from Catheya and Qirai, and the other held the Death-attuned pearls he generated with the help of the Fragment of the Coffin. The coffin on his back was veritably vibrating by this point, Zac took out one pearl from each box.

It thankfully didn't look like [Love's Bond] cared about what it was fed as it opened its casket by a small degree. Zac threw one purchased pearl after another inside until he had thrown a full thirty of them into the shrouded insides. That was three times more than what most cultivators managed to absorb, and he realized was lucky that he had purchased a set of spares.

The lid snapped shut after swallowing the thirtieth pearl, and Zac sensed that the coffin had entered some sort of hibernation on his back. He would probably be able to use it in a pinch, but he preferred not to disturb Alea. Instead, he focused on the second box as he took out a set of tools. He essentially had gathered base items for over twenty professions over his years of fighting, including a few alchemy sets, he took out a large pestle from one of these sets before he poured ten pearls into it in one go.

Zac was almost dragged into a bout of inspiration from the sounds as the small pearls clashed together in the bowl, and the air was beset by such pure Dao fluctuations that he could discern small runes appearing and disappearing in turn. However, they suddenly disappeared as a set of runes lit up along the pestle's rim. It was an isolation array that would trap the medicinal properties of the items being processed, and it helped Zac snap back to reality as he started to work the materials.

He followed the instructions in Catheya's crystal, quickly grinding the pearls and a few dried herbs into a fine dust. However, he looked down at the compound with hesitation when he was done, and he eventually added ten more pearls. Twenty pearls was overkill, potentially harmful for most cultivators, but his body had always been greedy. He didn't want to sit down and refine another brew mid-epiphany because he made a too small a dose.

The next step said to simply pour the compound in a liquid of your choice, but Zac had the capability to be a bit extravagant at this point. He took out a Dao Fruit and turned it into a mush that he mixed with the powder and added some water, turning it into a proper Dao Smoothie.

The brew looked like a blueberry shake filled with gold flakes that swirled around inside, and it both smelled and looked delectable. Wasting no time, Zac downed the brew straight from the pestle as to not let any of the efficacy escape. He immediately closed his eyes, and he focused on the Dao Avatar in his mind.

He had thought long and hard on the route he should take with his Fragment of the Coffin over the past years, and he had made tons of revisions over the last half year he had spent in his Draugr form. Half of the origin of his Dao Fragment origin was Hardness, something that probably was once meant to become the Fragment of the Shield for his Undying Bulwark-class.

That didn't mean the insights he had gathered were useless though, and that they couldn't remain as a part of his path. He just needed to find a way to properly incorporate the concept into his path, and he felt like he had found the answer during his battle with Yanub Mettleleaf.

Death was the ultimate barrier that most cultivators dreamed of breaking past on their road to Eternity. But fight as they might, it was immutable and intractable, fiercely guarding the great beyond. It trapped the living in their slowly decaying bodies, and together with time turned everyone to dust.

It was inescapable, like unbreakable chains wrapping around the targets.

Zac barely had time to set the course before he was whisked away as a miraculous wave of understanding shot into his soul. It felt like the crude concoction he had just brewed had formed a clear line of communication with the Heavens themselves, and he sensed something vast and unending. It was just like when he glimpsed the corner of the Dao of Heaviness all those years ago, though what flickered in front of him now was on a far grander scale.

Thousands and thousands of insights had been melded together to form a coherent whole that far surpassed what Zac could grasp. Each part beckoned to him, tantalized him like nymphs luring him into deeper waters. He knew that he could follow the calls and meld with the nearby insights, and he would emerge stronger for it.

But that would be to passively take whatever you were given, and that was not his path. He needed to be the one in the driver's seat and his mind searched for the truth that he hoped existed, the part of the Dao of Death he wanted to incorporate into his Fragment of the coffin. He imagined the coffin-lid closing, creating a world of its own.

There was just the inside and the outside. The world outside the coffin would eventually move on no matter who had been interred, while the insides of the coffin would become a sealed world of its own, one where the outside world held no sway or influence. It was a world of silence and gradual decay, left forever to its own devices.

Zac held onto his truth, and it gradually matured and filled out as the Heavens themselves filled in the blanks. Things that had felt obscure and inscrutable before had become as clear as day thanks to the concoction that had expanded his mind to the size of the cosmos. Time passed, who knows for how long, but Zac eventually woke up and became cognizant of his surroundings again.

He was surprised to see that the cave had turned into a realm of utter death, with all the moss in the hidden cave having been reduced to various states of decay. The only thing unscathed was the spiritual flower, which rather seemed to have grown a few inches and gained a couple of new leaves.

A glance at an array showed that he had actually been out of it for seventeen full days, which shocked Zac wide awake. It was a lot longer than he had expected, but his gains weren't small either. Some of the efficacy would have been lost from the remaining pearls by this point, but there was not much he could do about it.

Luckily he had already considered this issue and he had only harvested pearls with the Fragment of the Bodhi by the end, which should have helped keep the freshness to some degree. But before using them he needed to stabilize his mind a bit, so Zac started to absorb energy from some Soul Crystals as he opened his status screen with anticipation.

Fragment of the Coffin (Peak): All attributes +40, Endurance +1110, Vitality +650, Intelligence +60, Wisdom +150. Effectiveness of Endurance +20%.

There were no real increases to any attributes except Endurance and Vitality from upgrading the Dao Fragment, but Zac wasn't surprised with the result at all. His insights delved into the sealed world of the Coffin, and to some degree the gradual decay in this hidden domain. The aspect of the seal increased the Endurance of the coffin, and both Decay and Regeneration were linked to Vitality.

He hoped that this evolution would help consolidate the aspect of Hardness better with his path, while also increasing corrosive effect against anything caught within his domain. Most notably, it would hopefully empower the restrictive ability of skills like [Blighted Cut] and [Profane Seal]. He had already prepared the materials to help with a self-guided skill upgrade, but Zac was still leery about taking that step with his defining skills.

Zac knew the clock was ticking, but he still spent a few more hours consolidating his gains and restored his drained mind. Only when he felt like he was back in top shape did he transform to his human form and mixed a second Dao Smoothie. A moment later he found himself part of the grand cosmos again.

Unfortunately, he felt the effect wasn't as strong this time around, but he still gained insights and inspiration left and right. For his Fragment of the Bodhi, he knew the path to take as well, though that insight honestly wasn't quite as clear compared to his first one. It was unavoidable, he hadn't experienced much in his human form after setting the course. Meanwhile, he had lived as a Draugr in the Twilight Harbor and the Twilight Ocean for half a year now, encountering all kinds of tribulations.

During the years he had stayed back on Earth he had mostly pondered on the resilience aspect of the Fragment of the Bodhi or the Dao of Life in general. The ability to keep standing in the face of adversity. However, he felt the insights he had gained in the battle against the Twinruin Bloodstalker was more to his taste, the idea of the ruthless jungle where lives rose and fell like the tides.

His visions brought him back to the windswept badlands, where the consecrated Bodhi had created a kingdom of verdure within its canopy, where life was shielded from the harsh environment outside. However, even in such a paradise were there no such thing as peace. Space was limited, and stalks of grass vied for supremacy against bushels and small trees.

As the decades passed species came and went, where the weak were culled to give space to the strong. Life was everchanging, and so were all its creations. The great Bodhi could only set the stage, but the plants within would decide the outcome and the future. Zac witnessed the seasons pass, but a frown slowly spread across his face.

Something was lacking.

The vision was rife with meaning, but it also felt hollow, imperfect. He sensed he could breakthrough right now if he so desired by borrowing a bit from the vast tapestry of Life, but he couldn't guarantee that the result would be perfectly aligned with his path that way. Perhaps it was because of his lacking foundation, perhaps it was because of the reduced efficacy of the second batch of Life-Death Pills.

He felt himself heading toward a precipice, and he knew he had to make a decision. The next moment he forcibly dragged himself out of the epiphany as a huge vortex erupted in his soul. This wasn't the vortex of his Soul Strengthening Method, but rather the vortex hidden inside his Dao Avatar.

It was [Spiritual Void] that had finally been released from its shackles, and it greedily swallowed all the lingering medicinal efficacy of his smoothie. Zac noticed that another 11 days had passed, and the remaining pearls were close to going bad. [Love's Bond] was still in a state of fugue, so it looked like Alea had eaten her fill just like when Verun got its hands on some nice resources.

He didn't want to waste the remaining pearls, and he prepared a third and final smoothie, though he didn't waste one of his few remaining Dao treasures on this one. He had actually found three of them from his numerous battles inside the trial so he wasn't out quite just yet, but this smoothie wasn't for the Fragment of the Bodhi.

A surge of mysterious energies entered his mind as Zac swallowed the concoction, but and it was all swallowed by [Spiritual Void]. The node was already filled with his Mental Energy by this point, so he guessed that this extra energy would go toward pushing the Hidden Node toward an evolution.

The process was slow, and Zac slowly went over the result of his initial session. It was a bit of a let-down that he had not quite managed to get where he wanted to go with this session. But the final Dao Fragment was right at the precipice, just missing the final puzzle piece that would turn an incomplete picture into something perfect.

And Zac wasn't too worried. His cultivation path was one forged through combat, and he knew he would have ample chances to fight in his human form soon enough. There were plenty of targets to go around in this place.