

The Fall 722

Chapter 722: Marked for Death

Zac glanced at the lonesome plant some distance away, and he eventually decided to let it live out its life. It had accompanied him for over a month in this place, and it had even been marked by his Dao. It felt like a waste to harvest it, and Zac instead turned to the large coffin leaning against the wall.

[Love's Bond] hadn't changed outwardly over the past month, but it felt more corporeal in some way that he couldn't really explain. He walked over to see if it was done absorbing the pearls, and it shuddered when he placed his hand against the lid. Zac's eyes widened as two of the chains extended from the holes on the side of their own accord, each of them gently caressing him before they were retracted once more.

Almost...

It was just a whisper in his mind and he felt the connection break immediately after, but it made Zac's heart shudder. It was undeniable; it was Alea's voice. As for the meaning, he understood it after inspecting the Spirit Tool. It looked like [Love's Bond] was on the verge of some sort of evolution.

He still wasn't completely certain, but he believed that the Spirit Tool was still just Peak Quality F-grade, where it still could keep up with him with some difficulty. Then again, he had seen how the chains weren't really powerful enough to restrain warriors like Yanub Mettleleaf, and he wasn't too sure its skills would much good against the enemies he faced nowadays.

A proper evolution would let [Love's Bond] explode with power, but more importantly, such an evolution might actually help heal Alea's soul. Tool Spirits' grades were based on the grade of the Spirit Tool, so upgrading [Love's Bond] would essentially mean a Soul Awakening for the Poison Mistress unless there were some hidden restrictions Zac didn't know about.

For now, she was still in a dormant state, though the Spirit Tool had finished its absorption. He equipped the coffin on his back again, filled with a renewed sense of motivation. He didn't have anything else to feed her at the moment, but the place where he was heading supposedly had the greatest number of hidden treasures.

Zac had gone back and forth on whether he should head straight to the Twilight Chasm and get rid of the weird egg, or if he should first travel the inner reaches for a bit in search of opportunities. Eventually, he had decided to go straight for the Chasm. First of all, the hidden brand felt like a sword hanging over his head, and he was extremely eager to get rid of it.

Secondly, it was a matter of being able to deal with the energies inside the chasm. He could feel that [Void Heart] was approaching its limits in being able to deal with the Twilight Energy this far into the trial, and he needed his soul oceans to pick up some of the slack. If he waited too long, the oceans would already have been filled, and he would have lost part of what made him so resilient against the Twilight Energy.

Finally, it was a matter of caution when it came to the remnants. Things had gotten out of hand when he absorbed the Shard of Creation, and he was afraid something similar would happen again when he took

on the second set. He might even be forced to leave the Twilight Ascent early, which would be a death sentence if the egg was still in his Spatial Ring.

He didn't want to wait a moment longer, and he soon shot through the narrow cracks after clearing the blockages to let water once more flow through the cave. Zac didn't immediately return to his corporeal form upon exiting the nondescript crack though, but he kept speeding away from where he emerged. He didn't know why, but he had felt a tinge of danger the moment he exited even if he didn't see anything amiss.

It was like the pressure of a looming threat, and Zac figured it was because there were cultivators nearby. Spotting him was extremely difficult in his intangible form, but he trusted his instincts in not reappearing right in front of the crack, and he only transformed after having moved thousands of meters away.

However, his carefulness soon proved futile. He only had time to swim for five minutes before he sensed a number of auras bearing down on him, and he frowned when he realized they seemed to be targeting him specifically. A moment later a group of four cultivators appeared in front of him, all of them clearly part of the same faction judging by their attire.

Zac's initial instinct was to escape, but he soon realized that these people's auras weren't too oppressive, and he instead adapted a wait-and-see approach.

"Finally, you appeared! We were starting to worry you had died in there!" the girl who looked like the leader said with annoyance. "You might have avoided our trap, but we've hunted far wiler prey than you."

Zac frowned as he looked up at the group of four, inwardly wondering what the hell she was talking about. What trap? It sounded like they had spotted him entering the crack in the mountain. Had they set something up right outside to catch him unaware when he emerged? Too bad for them his high Luck made a mockery of most such preparations.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Zac asked as he tried to get a read on the group.

The girl in the lead emitted an aura of a peak E-grade cultivator with decent accumulations, and the rest were not far behind. However, Zac's attributes were already starting to reach a state where he could match those at the peak E-grade, except the old bottlenecked elites and the Heaven's Chosen.

They might think they had the advantage since Zac's aura was at the same level as their leader's, but their effective combat strength should be halved this far into the trial grounds. They might see him as an easy target considering they called him prey, but they were in for a surprise.

"What do we want? Money, of course," the leader laughed as she projected an image showing Zac's face as his voice echoed out. The voice recording was from when he bought the [Stone of Hope]. "Did you think you could spend almost fifty thousand D-grade Nexus Coins and not cause any waves? You might have a Dao Guard outside, but that won't save you here."

Zac's expression sunk when he saw the image, but he ultimately wasn't too surprised. The events at the auction had spread far and wide, and he wasn't surprised some people had discovered his 'real' name

and face. His Arcaz Black-identity had no doubt been added to some information missive listing good candidates to rob during the trial.

"This is just perfect," Zac said as [Verun's Bite] appeared in his hand. "I needed some targets to test a few things out."

The leader sneered and was about to retort, but her eyes widened when Zac suddenly was right in front of her, teleported forward by the initiator of [Profane Seal]. They had clearly been ready for battle though, and they instantly spread out the moment Zac made his move. Lucky for him, their thoughts were still on attack than escape, allowing the cage to trap them without issue.

This class didn't have any skill to take them all out in an instant like he did with the Havarok squad, so Zac had instead decided to target the leader with a blitz. The second fractal on [Verun's Bite] had already lit up, indicating that its cutting force had temporarily been boosted by a great degree, and the area was awash with sanguine luster as Zac swung the axe at the leader.

A wall of ice appeared to block his strike, but it was cut apart thanks to the terrifying sharpness of a peak mastery Fragment of the Axe. A dozen ice flowers appeared behind the broken wall, but Zac's attack was inexorable as it wove between them like a specter. Try as she might, she wouldn't be able to delay the inevitable. The odd movement didn't look fast, but it had passed through the second layer of defenses in an instant, striking straight at the ice-mage herself.

For an instant, it looked like Zac hit a crystal statue instead of a cultivator as she transformed through some means, but she was soon returned to flesh and blood as she was launched through the waters from the impact. Huge jagged wounds covered her body, and her aura was already unsteady from his initial attack. She managed to survive the ambush though, and she desperately fended off four spectral chains as she popped a healing pill.

Still, a wound like that wasn't something you'd recover from in a minute or two, and she had gone from the biggest threat to the weakest one in the bunch.

A deep crack spread on one of the towers of [Profane Seal] as a bulky warrior punched it as a black mountain hovered above his head, but he didn't manage to break out before Zac had a chance to release his other attacks. First came [Fields of Despair], followed by [Deathmark], [Vanguard of Undeath], and [Profane Exponents]. Waves after waves of suppression and death spread through the cage, though multiple beacons of life lit up to ward against Zac's layered domains.

However, Zac had not one but five domains active; three from his skills, his taunting aura making any action difficult, and finally a massive Dao Field from his recently evolved Fragment of the Coffin, which in turn was boosted almost a whole tier by [Spiritual Void]. Perhaps if they had some sort of War Array they'd be able to rip apart his domains like that terrifying treeman, but it didn't look that way.

"Break out!" the leader shouted as she looked around with trepidation. She had already felt the brunt of his might, and she clearly wanted nothing more to do with him. But how could Zac let them come and go as they pleased?

He immediately swam toward the man who seemed to possess the greatest pure offensive force, but the two others moved to intercept and give their ally time to break the cage. One of them appeared in a

flash, and she stabbed forward, forming a lance of condensed lightning. The coffin pygmy behind Zac's back conjured a large barrier just in time before the crackling spear of light slammed into him.

The lightning was relentless though, and while its main force was blocked, some tendrils still found their way around the barrier and through the cracks in Zac's armor. He felt his body getting scorched as he was inundated by a series of powerful lightning bolts. However, Zac's effective Endurance had actually passed 15,000 if he added in the boost from [Vanguard of Undeath]. It would take a lot more than a secondary blast to impede his path.

The lightning rogue seemed about to launch another attack, but she quickly had to flash away as a ruthless axe almost cut her head clean off. It was a spectral warrior from [Deathmark] who had made a silent entrance, and three more had already appeared close to others and forced them to split their attention.

The earth-aspected warrior had already received a first deathmark since he chose to forcibly block its strike by petrifying his arm, and his face had turned beet-red in pain because of the corrosive storm that flooded him through the mark. The others rather chose to dodge than to block, the far smarter option of the two.

Seeing that the target had turned into an arc of lightning to escape the axe, the wraith instead turned its attention to the final warrior who had stopped some distance away. He was currently forming an intricate fiery array that screamed of might, but his progress was stalled as he was forced to conjure barriers to block out both a number of spectral chains from [Profane Seal] along with the ghosts.

Zac was fast turning into an army of one as the chains of [Love's Bond] also joined the melee, and [Fields of Despair] provided him with nigh-omniscience inside the cage. It allowed him to be everywhere with his chains, wraiths, and attacks, keeping constant and unrelenting pressure on all four cultivators at once.

Their initial goal had been to escape his cage, but their efforts had quickly been reduced to a passive state of defending against a ceaseless assault from every direction.

The fire-aspected Array Master was constantly being interrupted in his work, but he was still desperately setting up what looked to be a massive attack. He needed to go, so Zac barreled toward him instead of chasing the lightning user. The Array Master erected a huge blockade to bar his path, but the barrier didn't even get a chance to show its might before a blue fire started to eat through it like a corrosive acid. A huge jagged scar appeared in front of Zac's bardiche from activating [Gorehew] as he closed the last distance.

A massive spike suddenly appeared out of the void, and it looked extremely reminiscent of the earth punishment of [Nature's Punishment]. It naturally came from the earthen warrior who had almost managed to destroy [Profane Seal] before. He had already destroyed the axe-wraiths harassing him while taking on another mark, and he now aimed to cause a breach in Zac's cage with a massive finisher.

However, just as the spike was about to slam into the cracked tower, a pitch-black haze swallowed it whole, and a wail echoed out as the lightning rogue suddenly found herself impaled on its sharp tip, her blood forming a crackling cloud at the opposite side of the cage.

The scream caused a slight distraction in the fire-attuned Array Master, and Zac's five-meter jagged edge empowered with the Fragment of the Axe ripped right through the final barrier before it continued into the body of the man. A fiery rune appeared to protect him, but it was dim and weak, perhaps from Zac's domains, perhaps because of the Mystic Realm. It just exhausted a small part of Zac's force before [Gorehew] pushed through and ripped his body into pieces.

Zac didn't stop there as he instantly turned into a puff through a bloodline-activated [Abyssal Phase], and the Earth Warrior found himself decapitated before he even had a chance to see who struck him. Zac was only easing his suffering though, as he was slowly dying from the two marks of [Deathmark].

A third surge of energy entered his body almost at the same time as the earth warrior died. The chains of [Profane Seal] had caught the rogue the moment she was unexpectedly stabbed through Zac's usage of [Profane Exponents].

Like most lightning cultivators, her forte was speed, and the moment she was caught a group of axe wraiths had finished her off. They might not have been a match to her outside the Trial, but since Zac wasn't suppressed in here, then neither were his summons. That left only the half-crippled leader, who desperately struggled to escape.

A storm of ice spread through the whole arena as she unleashed everything she had in an effort to destroy the cage before it was too late. She was clearly pushing herself as the wounds across her body worsened. Unfortunately for her, the whole area was suffused in the corrosion of [Deathmark], and over half of the ice shards were reduced to nothing before they could even hit anything.

The rest found their efficacy lowered because of the other restrictions, and many even veered away from hitting the walls, instead turning toward Zac because of the taunting effect of [Vanguard of Undeath]. Still, Zac felt that he would only be able to maintain his cage a bit longer. This was after all a peak E-grade warrior beating on an F-grade skill.

If not for his recently evolved Dao Fragment it would long have fallen apart between her and the Earth warrior's attacks. Zac once more activated [Abyssal Phase] with his bloodline and flashed over, but he suddenly felt a sharp pain as he was dragged back into his corporeal form with a few wounds.

It was the ice mage who had unleashed some a second even deadlier storm within twenty meters around her, and it contained enough force to disturb space itself.

"I'll pay! Just let me leave," she entreated with despair as she looked at the three unmoving bodies floating behind Zac.

"I'm a guy who spent tens of thousands of D-grade coins, remember?" Zac snorted. "What need do I have of your ransom?"

"You'll regret this!" she screamed with madness in her eyes as she shot toward the wall of [Profane Seal].

The inner storm around her was like a mobile meatgrinder, and it ripped apart the cage in less than a second. However, that small delay had allowed Zac to catch up, and four powerful chains braved the storm and gripped the cultivator tight. Her body emitted sizzling sounds as the corrosion of [Blighted

Cut] empowered by his upgraded Fragment of the Coffin rapidly corroded her body, and she screamed in pain as she fiercely struggled to get free.

Unfortunately for her, she was well and truly stuck, and Zac didn't waste any time as he activated the finishing function of the skill. Three extremely sharp cuts ripped the leader's body apart, but just before she died a weird crystal appeared in her hands.

It looked like a firework had gone off inside the red haze of her blood. Zac quickly dodged a shimmering projectile, but he swore with surprise when it suddenly changed trajectory and shot right toward him. A barrier from [Profane Exponents] appeared to block, but the light actually flew around it like it was a living thing.

Finally, the light entered Zac's body as thousands of small crystals shot out and soared across the mountain range, and Zac barely managed to catch one before it flew away. The bloody waters soon cleared, and he saw the head of the leader drift some distance away, her face locked in a twisted visage of reluctance and hatred.

"Shit."

He had a pretty good idea of what she had done just before losing her life, and infusing some energy into the crystal he caught confirmed it. She had used some sort of Tracking Array, or a Revenge Array as it was sometimes called. It was all-too-common for people to meet their end in Mystic Realms, and most would want to drag their killer with them down to hell as a final act of defiance. This array had marked him, while the shards could be used to find the mark.

Luckily, the message was short and succinct and didn't contain any of his secrets. The Elementalist had mostly focused on his wealth. The only mention of his skills was that he used chains and a cage. Zac understood her reasoning all too well. Justice wouldn't move many of the cultivators hiding in this mountain range, but wealth would. And if she made him out to sound like a Heaven's Chosen, who would dare attack him?

Time was of the essence, and Zac looked inward to find the brand with [Spiritual Anchor]. Thankfully it hadn't managed to blend with his pathways just yet, and he quickly moved to seal it with a layer of Mental Energy and his Dao. He was about to destroy it, but he suddenly stopped as he had an idea.

He would be able to remove the mark easily enough, but did he really need to? He was still a good distance from the depths of the Mystic Realm, and there shouldn't be too many peak warriors staying in this area by this point. If there were people ready to kill him for his wealth, why not rob them of theirs?