The Fall 732

Chapter 732: Twilight Chasm

The enormous chasm quickly grew closer, and Zac immediately steered his vessel away from the stream and stowed it away after swapping to his Draugr form. His undead soul ocean was even more filled compared to his living one, but he had still chosen to travel the final stretch in his Draugr form, at least until he got a better lay of the land.

When comparing his two classes, Fetters Of Desolation currently had greater survivability. With [Force of the Void] and [Abyssal Phase] working together, he could instantly escape from most perilous situations to an even larger degree than his upgraded [Earthstrider]. But more importantly, this final task of his was definitely related to whatever the bigshots outside had planned, and he didn't want to get his human persona involved in this mess.

He'd drop off the odd egg before swapping over to his human form, completely washing his hands of whatever schemes the Monarchs had.

Zac had read about the Twilight Chasm, but seeing it with his own eyes was still something else. It looked like an endless hole that reached into eternity, far surpassing the Havenfort Chasm in scope. It wasn’t an empty hole though, as he spotted dozens of interconnected mountains sticking up from the depths. All-in-all, the chasm was almost as big as the starting continent, meaning it would take weeks to swim across it.

Of course, that was not really possible. Beasts and cultivators were one of the dangers in this place, but another was the unpredictable currents. Zac looked over to his left, and he saw the stream that he had hitched a ride from until this point. It looked like a waterfall that descended into the depths, and he vaguely spotted another similar situation far in the distance.

Overall, there were over a hundred streams that had the Twilight Chasm as their endpoint, where they plunged into the abyss heading god knows where. The best guess was that the streams formed a loop, and they'd emerge again where they started. Of course, no one had survived attempting to find out, as dropping into the depths of the Chasm was a death sentence.

Just the surface of the Twilight Chasm had an energy density far surpassing any other area of the Twilight Ocean, and it got worse the deeper you descended from what he'd gathered. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to go too far down to drop off this egg, as even he wouldn't survive down there.

Zac took out the odd stone from his spatial ring, looking between it and the ravine in front of him. He doubted the mission was as simple as just throwing the thing inside, but he never actually got any more detailed guidance from Va Tapek when he handed over this thing. A weak fluctuation suddenly appeared around his hand as the icy brand appeared on it again, and Zac groaned when he received a burst of energy into his mind.

His vision suddenly changed as he shot through turbulent waters and jagged cliffs. The scene took him to a secluded valley through a hidden pathway, where an ancient altar stood erected in the middle. On it, the stone in his hand pulsed, and each beat awakened a few mysterious runes around it.

Soon enough his vision was back to normal, and Zac looked down at the orb with exasperation. As expected, there was a specific drop-off site stored inside the brand. The bad news was that he would need to actually enter the Twilight Chasm, but the good news was that he didn't actually need to enter its heart.

The weird altar was located just a quarter into the twilight chasm, and it was actually not that far from his current location. Zac guessed that Va Tapek must have surmised that Zac would reach the Twilight Chasm from this general direction. Every second he loitered in this area was another second he was worn down a little bit more by the Twilight Energy, so Zac wasted no time before setting out.

Zac didn't immediately jump out into the vast unknown though, but he made his way back and forth along the precipice, constantly rooting his chains into the bedrock to make sure he wasn't suddenly ripped into the chasm by an unpredictable current. He was trying to find a patch of calmer waters to enter through, but it quickly became apparent there was no such thing.

Going above water served no purpose either. He knew that place was even scarier than below the surface. Hundreds of streams converging into one spot didn't just do a number on the environment in the waters, it was even worse up there. Hundreds of hurricanes and insanely powerful winds made the environment deadly even for Hegemons. The chaotic currents in the chasm were safe in comparison, at least unless you had something like a Branch of Gale to protect you from the winds.

Eventually, Zac found a somewhat decent spot and jumped off from the ledge, and he instantly found himself assaulted by sharp waves from every direction. They tried to rip him down to the depths, and he was forced to keep expelling large amounts of Miasma to move forward. If he relented for even a second, he would be swept up by the waters and dragged god knows where.

His situation was luckily manageable thanks to the combination of his Draugr-vision and [Cosmic Gaze].

The more powerful the current, the more energy it also contained, which essentially turned the danger spots into brightly lit streams that he could circumvent. That didn't mean he was safe though, as the streams constantly changed direction like a bucking horse, and Zac was forced to scramble out of the way more than once.

Suddenly, his mind screamed of imminent and deadly danger. A stream was veering straight toward him like a snake, and he saw no choice but to forcibly activate [Abyssal Phase] with the help of his bloodline talent. He was turned into a cloud of energy in an instant, but his whole being screamed with pain as he felt himself being ripped apart. Zac only managed to move a second in his abyssal form before he was forced out of it, but that second had thankfully put him out of harm's way.

He was still completely drenched in dripping ichor when returning into his physical form, a poignant reminder that he wasn't immortal in his energy form. He had already suspected as much when being trapped in the Living Pulse, but knowing what could and what couldn't harm him wasn't an exact science. Clearly, rampaging Twilight Energy was on the list of dangers to his intangible form.

Every second was a struggle as Zac slowly made his way toward the first mountain ridge inside the chasm, and his reserves actually started to dip to dangerous levels. Just traversing the empty space of the chasm was difficult enough, but he was constantly forced to put a great deal of effort into dealing with the Twilight Energy accumulating in his body as well.

The density had essentially doubled the moment he jumped from the ledge, and it seemed to only be getting worse as he traveled further toward the core. But finally, he reached the closest mountain, and four chains shot out from [Love's Bond] and embedded themselves into the wall.

He dragged himself over and breathed out in relief after finding a spot somewhat protected from the turbulent waters. Zac felt a bit like one of those mountain climbers camping on the side of sheer cliffs as he hung from his chains while he started restoring his Miasma with a Soldier Pill and crystals. Normally he wouldn't have wasted a Soldier Pill in a place like this, but the Twilight Energy was just too powerful.

It was a negative spiral. The more Twilight Energy he failed to expel, the greater the suppression would be. And as he got weaker and weaker, he eventually would succumb to the environment. This was why people didn't push beyond their means in the Twilight Ascent, even for a quick sojourn to search for booty. There was no guarantee you'd make it back even from a half-day trip in an area your constitution couldn't handle.

Zac thankfully had one final ace he hadn't been forced to use to deal with the Twilight Energy just yet, but he knew he was close to reaching that point. For now, he kept making his way forward among the sharp cliffs, using his sharp eyes and high Luck to navigate the treacherous waters. He did see both caves and some promising spots that might lead into secluded valleys, but he ultimately chose to focus on his main task.

He could go searching for treasure as soon as he was rid of this suspicious egg and the brand hiding in his body.

Quite a few Beast Kings lived in the chasm, but they thankfully stayed inside their caves most of the time. The chasm itself was actually quite desolate because of the dangerous currents, and few plants could survive for long on the surface. Instead, every single mountain was a cornucopia of hidden spots with valuable treasures that had grown in seclusion from the currents or other outside interference.

Apparently, there were many secluded valleys like the one where they harvested the life-death pearls as well, but he didn't have any way to find those spots except relying on dumb luck.

Zac had estimated his journey to take just three days, but it took him over a week to follow the path lined out in his vision. Some time was wasted from avoiding Beast Kings emerging from their caves to hunt, but most of it was a matter of having to stop and focus on expelling Twilight Energy for a few hours to prevent any dangerous build-up.

A new problem appeared the moment he reached the spot though, and Zac frowned as he looked at the sheer mountain wall in front of him where the hidden tunnel should be. It was either real or an illusion so good it had blended truth and false to a perfect degree. Was the map wrong? It shouldn't be. Everything else had matched his vision perfectly, except this wall which should be a tunnel leading into a hidden valley inside the mountain.

A thought suddenly struck him, and he took out the sphere. His eyes lit up when the response was immediate; the wall fluctuated for a few seconds before it just disappeared. He still had no idea whether the wall had been real or fake as he passed through the tunnel, but he guessed it didn't matter.

Soon enough he entered the valley, and it felt like a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. The density of Twilight Energy was even lower here compared to the Starting Continent, and a small haze

emerged from his pores as the large accumulations of toxins were being expelled by [Purity of the Void]. Between one Hidden node gobbling up the energy, and another expelling it, Zac figured that he would be good to go within a few hours or so.

The altar stood in the center of the valley just as advertised, but Zac only started to advance after having recovered to perfect condition. The procedure looked simple enough in the vision, but Zac wasn't as optimistic. Everything about this mission and this place was suspicious. For example, where did this altar and the inscriptions come from? Had someone built it? And what would actually happen when he placed the egg on it?

Chaos had gripped the whole Trial, and it felt like the contraband he had brought in here was if not in the heart of it, then at least close. Which begged the question; what was Va Tapek doing with this thing? Catheya hadn't said anything out loud during the month they had traveled together after the events beneath the Living Pulse, but she was definitely troubled by the situation with her master. She either was an excellent liar, or she really wasn't clued in on the situation.

It almost felt like Va Tapek was breaking with the Sharva'Zi clan for whatever reason, joining a conspiracy that would potentially destroy one of their major revenue sources. And if he was, what did that mean for Catheya? Would she even still have a master when she came out from this thing? He remembered her words back on at Cork Island about chess pieces, and he really felt like one as he slowly walked up toward the altar.

There were no threats around, and none of his early warning methods indicated any danger. Zac still gripped his axe nervously as he placed the egg on the center of the altar, but his danger sense didn't even have a chance to wake up before a pulse threw him off the steps. It didn't hurt though, and Zac barely registered it as he looked at his right hand with glee.

The icy-blue brand appeared on the back of his hand again, and it even emerged and started to disintegrate into small ice crystals. Just as they were about to dissipate, they formed a simple sentence in the written script of the Undead Empire;

Such is balance restored and Karma severed.

"Balance my ass," Zac muttered. Va Tapek had only spoken a few words to the Veilplume Monarch, and he had been sent on a trip to the most dangerous place of the Twilight Ocean.

If not for his Bloodline, he would have been forced to train like his life depended on it for the whole trial before attempting to deliver this thing. Still, he knew complaining about Catheya's master was futile. It was just another indignity he had to push to the back of his mind, just like all other lower-rung cultivators. Instead, he turned to the egg to see if it brought some change.

It just sat silently on the podium for a few minutes, but suddenly it released the very same ripple as he saw in the vision, and it felt like the whole realm beat with it as a few runes lit up around it. Zac felt the pulse all the way to the depths of his bones, but he found he was neither harmed nor helped by it. It just passed him through, like an extremely deep bass.

However, there was one thing that had changed from the pulse; [Love's Bond] had woken up again. Alea hadn't spoken a word after that short message back in the Hollowtongue Mountains, but the Spirit Tool

woke up with a vengeance because of the egg. The whole coffin on his back hummed with intense desire, its hunger far eclipsing both the Twilight Fruits and Life-Death Pearls.

It even eclipsed the ardent craving that Verun had shown toward that mysterious stone or the Dragon's blood back then. Four chains shot toward the egg without Zac doing a thing, driving home just how much Alea wanted the mysterious treasure. It almost felt like he was fighting five frenzied snakes as he commanded the chains back into the coffin.

"You really want this thing, huh," Zac muttered as he looked at the stone in front of him.

It beat once more, causing another shudder to ripple through the valley. Zac hesitated for five minutes as he watch the egg beat over and over, each ripple empowering itself and the surroundings with a little bit more energy. It was like the treasure was slowly charging itself from a drained state, and the desire from [Love's Bond] increased with each passing moment.

Zac knew he was about to do something immeasurably stupid; he had to snatch it.

He had searched high and low for over three years, but [Love's Bond] was clearly extremely picky, not once having shown any interest before coming here. The Twilight Harbor had been the only place holding things Alea needed, and none of them even were close to this item. Who knew if he would ever find something like it again?

Alea was right at the precipice, and this might be the final key to the puzzle.

Doing so would definitely put him in harm's way, but the thought refused to leave him once it had taken root. One by one the people around him had fallen since the Integration. First was his dad, then Alea. Ogras, Billy, over a dozen Valkyries and followers in the hundreds. Even Thea had met her end, and he didn't know if he'd ever be able to see his sister again.

It felt like this egg represented a way for him to break the cycle, to at least bring one person back from the dead. And if he could do it with one, he felt more confident in helping the others as well. This opportunity didn't only provide a chance for him to evolve his Spirit Tool, it represented hope that his lofty goals weren't a fool's dream.

Besides, did stealing this odd object really change anything? He was already planning on slinking away in the darkness like a bandit, using his human form as a disguise from Va Tapek and any other prying eyes. So why not go all out now that things had come to this point?

Zac soon found a problem though as he jumped back onto the altar between heartbeats; he was completely unable to move the treasure now that it had been locked into place. Pulling with all the force he could muster didn't do a single thing, and [Love's Bond] was unable to absorb it while it was attached to the altar as well. He found himself at an impasse for a few minutes, until he had another idea.

"Brand it with your Mark of Creation, making it forever yours," Zac whispered, his eyes glimmering with a mix of madness and determination.