

The Fall 734

Chapter 734: Crushing Pressure

Searing pain woke Zac up with a start and he found rampant energies wreaking havoc inside his body. It wasn't something Uona had done, but rather terrifying amounts of Twilight Energy, far more than his bloodline could handle. His whole body was barely holding together from all the wounds, but the energy was an even more immediate threat.

Perhaps he should consider it a relief that there was no kill energy occupying space inside his body. He had no idea how Uona had managed to survive blowing herself up in an eruption of blood of such epic proportions, but she should barely be hanging on just like him from the state he left her in. Unfortunately, that was not much of a comfort as he found himself on the verge of succumbing to the environment around him.

No matter what he did, things only got worse inside his body, and Zac tried to swim toward the surface where the density should be lower. However, as he looked around to get his bearings there was only darkness. Darkness so pervasive Zac even feared that he had been blinded by that final explosion.

Thankfully, the world lit with color to an almost blinding degree when he activated [Cosmic Gaze], and Zac immediately understood what was going on.

Uona's self-destruct skill had knocked him out, and he had been dragged God knows how far down into the depths by the currents. If the absolute lack of any light reaching this far below the surface was the first clue, then the terrifying amounts of Twilight Energy assaulting him was the second.

The density of Twilight Energy was multiple times more powerful than that of the surface of the Twilight Chasm, dozens of times greater than other parts of the Twilight Ocean. This was way beyond what he could handle, even with his unique set of advantages. And that was when he was in prime condition.

Just a stump remained of his right leg, and his left hand stopped a bit after his elbow. His pathways were broken and the little Miasma left in his body moved turbidly through the storms of Twilight Energy ravaging his innards. Normally, losing all his miasma would result in swapping over to his Human side, but he actually wasn't sure he'd survive the transformation in his harried form.

He was running out of time, and his feeble attempts at swimming upward were completely futile. The currents were shockingly powerful, and new wounds kept appearing across his body to add insult to injury. He needed to get out of this place, or at least find a spot to rest up and recover.

Zac was dizzy and high-delirious, but he suddenly saw a spot of even more condensed darkness rapidly approach, and he knew that his chance had arrived. Four chains shot forward, each of them empowered by [Blighted Cut] to give them greater penetrative force. One, two, three chains were claimed by the currents before they reached their target, but two hit true and embedded themselves in the wall just as Zac was swept by the underwater mountain.

Sharp pain in his midriff cost him his consciousness for an instant as he was suddenly forced to a halt, but being blasted by the furious waters didn't let him stay under for long. He arduously dragged himself to the wall, helplessly scanning for any caves or crevasses where he could take cover for just a bit.

There was none.

Zac wouldn't give in though, and [Verun's Bite] appeared in his hand as he frantically started carving a hole into stone. Any rock that was placed this deep into the Twilight Chasm and still remained was bound to be extremely durable, and Zac barely managed to leave marks deeper than a few centimeters even when going as hard as his condition allowed.

But he refused to stop, and one chipping after another was claimed by the streams as he dug further and further into the mountain. After five minutes, he had finally made a hole two meters deep, where the waters were blessedly calm. This place allowed him to avoid the currents, but it didn't solve his predicament with the Twilight Energy.

But he had an idea.

He properly secured himself in the stone with every single chain before he took out a spare shield to block out the few streams finding their way into his crevasse. Only when he and his spot were secured did he take out the small Array Disk for [Nine Reincarnations Manual] with shaky hands.

The Array hummed to life as Zac crammed a cocktail of Soldier Pills and Healing pills down his throat, and he almost cried with relief as the insanely condensed Twilight Energies assailing him rapidly decreased in density. He felt a powerful drain of Mental Energy in his mind, and he passively let the array siphon what it needed as he took stock of his situation.

He was in an absolutely horrid state, with deep lacerations covering his whole body. Even his pathways were damaged, not to speak of his missing limbs. For now, he could only bind a set of ropes around the stump of his leg and arm to stem the loss of Ichor as he focused on other issues.

The combination of pills and the array had at least allowed him to right the ship, albeit barely. [Void Heart] and [Purity of the Void] were fast at work dealing with the lethal levels of Twilight Energy that had already accumulated in his body. The real star was obviously the Life-Death Array.

Not only did it continuously swallow exorbitant amounts of Twilight Energy, but it also expelled huge amounts of Cosmic Energy. The Array only wanted the attunement to empower the Mental Energy going into the array, and it expelled the actual energy into the surroundings.

It wasn't a great feeling to sit in the middle of a cloud of Cosmic Energy as an undead, but it was far preferable to Twilight Energy. The Cosmic Energy that the array spat out didn't possess the weird ability to burrow into his body, and it essentially acted as a shield against the Twilight Energy in the surroundings.

Of course, the Twilight Energy was endless and pervasive, and it continuously kept swallowing up the Cosmic Energy he generated. However, Zac had no lack of Nexus Crystals, and he started to continuously crush Miasma Crystals to bolster the effect from his Array. Those two actions together were just enough to keep the immediate Twilight Energy at bay to the point that he was expelling more than he was forced to take in.

It was a continuous drain on his resources, but it provided him with a stable environment as long as he kept the array running. There was enough Twilight Energy inside his body to kill ten peak E-grade Cultivators, and if not for his unusual bloodline he would probably already have died before waking up in the depths.

His Soul Ocean on his undead side had already reached sublimation after swallowing the mysterious energy in the valley, which slowed down the purification process somewhat. The Soul Strengthening Manual didn't need much of his attention though, and he managed to use some of his Mental Energy to start refining the Twilight Energy.

Twilight Energy was slowly turned into Miasma which replenished his pitifully low stock, and he felt himself slowly crawling away from the brink of death. Thirty minutes passed in this state of gradual recuperation until the first cycle of his Soul Strengthening Method ended. A storm of attuned mental energy came crashing back, filled with the power of the Mystic Realm itself.

The cultivation method was very much the same as before, so he had started with his death-attuned side since he was in his Draugr body at the moment.

Doing so would slow down and weaken the effect of the cultivation session compared to if cultivated as normal, infusing himself with death while living, and with life when dead. But that was exactly what he wanted in this situation. The less pressure he put on his mind, the better. The more time he could buy for himself, the better.

Still, a huge chunk of death-attuned mental energy poured into his soul aperture, and his deathly soul sea became even darker as it started to churn. The moment the first revolution ended, the ambient energy instantly exploded back to full force, and Zac quickly activated the second rotation to give himself another breather.

This process continued for six whole hours, at which point the black ocean was veritably shaking with barely restrained might. It looked like it would swallow the life-attuned waters and turn his soul into one vast ocean of the abyss, and Zac was forced to continuously expend a large amount of mental energy to keep the ocean in its lane.

Seeing as the first half of the session was done, Zac changed his race after making sure he was firmly attached to the wall. A bout of weakness later he found himself filled with life, but he was quickly filled with a wave of nausea from the large amount of deathly energies that filled his body. It came from [Void Heart] that had operated at maximum during the cultivation session.

He had tried to absorb or expel the runoff manually, but he obviously wasn't as efficient as his Hidden Node. It hadn't been a problem in his undead form, but now it was.

Still, there was not much to do about the situation, and Zac started working on expelling it as he activated the second round of Soul Cultivation. The density of Twilight Energy once more decreased, and some of that left-over death-attuned energy was suddenly swallowed by the [Void Heart] while some more was expelled by [Purity of the Void].

The minutes passed, and soon enough the energy had passed through the small array, bringing with it a surge of vivacious mental energy. It entered the golden ocean, and its churning waters rose up and started to push back the deathly ocean. The waves crashed against each other, and Zac felt a small tremor in his mind as his shimmering Soul Core was placed in the heart of the conflict.

One round after another had the battle only increase in ferocity, and waves were soon tall enough to completely submerge the soul core. His soul aperture was fast becoming a chaotic storm of life and death. All the while, Zac felt his soul being polished.

That was not the only change though. While some of the imperfections were being sanded off by the chaos, it also looked like the waters left something behind. It was like some sort of fine sand was brought from the depths of the oceans up into the waves, and a few of those barely discernable motes of energy landed on the soul core and quickly melded with it.

Altogether, it looked like the session added a bit more than it removed, though just barely. It wasn't too surprising though. It was his first proper Soul Cultivation session since he evolved his soul, and he hadn't done anything to empower the process. Besides, Zac figured that the number of impurities that were removed after each session would decrease over time as his soul became more perfected, which would lead to a greater effect.

Unfortunately, Zac quickly found himself in a worrying situation as the cultivation session was drawing to an end. The ambient energy would return to its terrifying density in just a moment, and Zac would once more find himself overwhelmed. Doing another round of Soul Cultivation was impossible, and it was impossible to activate the Array without actually connecting it with his mind.

His hours of hard work expelling all that accumulated energy inside his body would soon be undone unless he did something, but he had already found the solution. Another supreme Nexus Crystal Appeared in his hand, and he immediately crushed it before the Twilight Energy had a chance to rush back. The whole area was instantly drowned in dense waves of Cosmic Energy, though not quite as dense as when the Soul Strengthening Array was also helping.

The first time he tried this method it had worked for almost half an hour, and he had crushed one a minute while running the array. But this time the relief barely lasted ten seconds before the Twilight Energy had gobbled it all up. Zac immediately crushed a second crystal, and the Twilight Energy was once more pushed back.

There were few, if any, E-grade Cultivators who had the financial strength to burn almost 5,000 E-grade Nexus Coins every minute, but he had thankfully stocked up on a small mountain of Crystals before entering the trial. After all, he had no idea if he would have the chance to purchase another round after he left the Twilight Ascent. But even his stock wouldn't last the whole trial going at this rate.

Zac knew all-too-well that not even he could stay down here forever, but there was one more thing he needed to do before he set off. He looked down at his left leg ending just above his knee, and he grit his teeth as he loosened the rope keeping it closed. A thin layer of skin had already appeared over the wound thanks to his crazy Vitality, and Zac said a silent prayer as he cut off a thin slice with [Verun's Bite].

The waters quickly turned red, but Zac stanchly kept his focus as he crushed another Supreme Nexus Crystal before he roused the slumbering Creation Energy in his body. For this purpose, there wasn't even any need to create a Mark of Creation, and he just looked as a new leg rapidly regenerated to replace the missing one.

The pain of growing a limb was excruciating, but no more so than many other wounds he had suffered over the past years. It wasn't enough for him to lose his focus, and he kept picturing how his legs looked. He had known that this situation would happen sooner or later, so he had already memorized every last part of his body, both through scanning himself and by using [Spiritual Anchor].

He remembered every hair, every pore on his body, just so that he would be able to recreate them without any aberration. Soon enough the foot was added, and Zac was hit by a wave of weakness. Unfortunately, it was not the weakness of needing sleep, but rather something much more sinister.

He had once more lost a good chunk of his longevity.

Zac couldn't be certain, but he guessed that he had lost a few decades reforming his leg, which didn't feel too dreadful now that he had reached D-grade Race. Still, that was only one of two limbs missing, and he sighed as he turned toward his missing left hand.

Regrowing his left hand wasn't necessarily needed to get out of this place, and his combat effectiveness wasn't contingent on having it either. Needing to regrow it was rather a matter of his pathways. He was already disadvantaged as a Mortal, and now with his pathways broken in two places his energy was completely turbid, which made dealing with the Twilight Energy all that much harder.

He also had skill fractals on his Left arm. Luckily, skill fractals were protected by the System, and they would be back as soon as his spirit body recovered. However, he wouldn't be able to use them until his hand regrew.

The process repeated itself once more, and he barely had enough Creation Energy to complete the process. With him having used his Annihilation Energy on Uona, he was completely tapped out for this hidden ace. He would either have to wait a few months to slowly gather more energy or forcibly open his cage again if he wanted to make use of the two powers of the Remnants.

His limbs were successfully regrown, but he still rested another three hours at the cost of a small hill of Nexus Crystals. Only then did he feel his state stable enough to leave. His crystals would run out before the trial ended, and Zac knew that there was only one way to go. So he steeled himself as he slowly made his way out of the small alcove.

The chains of [Love's Bond] were still firmly embedded in the stone, but Zac still almost found himself dragged further into the depths the moment he was exposed to the torrential waters. But he ignored the pain as he started pulling himself up, moving meter by meter along the rock with the help of his chains.

However, progress was slow as he was climbing against the current. The chains were barely able to rise against the currents, and there were barely any footholds for him to climb using his own hands and legs. Swimming was out of the question as well. The second he let go of the wall, he would instantly be dragged to the depths.

Zac only managed to climb 100 meters or so before he felt himself approaching his limits, and he quickly started to cut another dugout in the wall. A minute later he had created another safe zone, and he blocked the pathway best as he could before started up the costly process of keeping the ambient energy at bay.

This cycle of short climbs and long durations of rest kept going for over ten hours, at which point he once more was ready for another round of soul cultivation. He had made decent progress in this time, climbing over a kilometer along the cliff wall. The strategy worked well enough, but he still worried a bit about his prospects. The waters above him were still utterly pitch black, making him wonder just how far down he had been dragged.

It wasn't like he couldn't stomach the cost, but he was burning almost 500 Supreme Nexus Crystals between each climb, and he only had so many of them. The real issue was the mountain he was climbing though; all his plans were contingent on the mountain he was climbing actually reaching all the way up, but there were no guarantees that actually was the case. If it abruptly ended before he'd climbed to a point where the currents weren't powerful enough to drag him back to the depths, he'd be screwed.

Two days passed, and Zac was making greater and greater progress as his climbing technique steadily improved. The bad news was that it was all still pitch-black above his head, but the good news was that the energy density was slowly decreasing. He could go a little bit further with each climb, and the rest periods cost a little bit less.

He believed that sooner or later he would reach a depth where he would barely be able to hang on with just his Soul Strengthening Array and Hidden Nodes, perhaps using the occasional crystal to tide him over. That would be the optimal place to hone his soul, easily fulfilling the harsh requirements on cultivation environment.

Who knew, he might even complete the Second Reincarnation in one go thanks to the unique environment of the depths of the Twilight Chasm. If he ever got out of this place, that is.