

The Fall 752

Chapter 752: The Spider and the Fly

Zac knew he had been too reactive until now, dealing with things as they came. But he knew he needed to start making some moves on his own, or he'd eventually get trapped in someone's schemes, be it the Eveningtide Asura or the large factions. He needed to be the spider rather than the fly stuck in the web, and that feeling had been part of the motivation behind the formation of his new skill.

And it was with that conviction he needed to push forward through this trial, no longer staying passive. First off, Zac needed to get away from here. He had noticed a weak shimmer in the waters when he destroyed the pillar, like a spider web burning up, and he guessed that whatever array the Havarok erected had broken down in his section. He made use of that fact as he left the chasm behind, heading in the general direction of the Death Pulse.

The most pressing issue was that his [Ocean Chart] was completely blank in this area, and he wasn't really in a mood to waste more time than necessary. He was running behind schedule because of his extended cultivation session, and he was already a couple of months late to his rendezvous with Catheya.

Zac definitely couldn't get caught in some sort of trial or danger zone at this moment, wasting what precious time he had. He needed to catch someone and borrow their map, preferably gaining the route back to the middle reaches of the Twilight Ocean in one fell swoop. Unfortunately, the puppet-like cultivators didn't even have a Cosmos Sack, let alone an [Ocean Chart].

Furthermore, the ocean remained oddly desolate, with no cultivators in sight even after traveling for two hours. It almost started to feel like he had been thrown into an empty dimension, or that he had lost track of time and stayed beyond the closing of the trial. Thankfully, it didn't take much longer until Zac found his first clue.

A massive rune illuminated the ocean far in the distance, just beneath the surface. This wasn't an array like he had seen before, but rather a marker similar to the one Ventus had used for his settlement in the Greengrove Archipelago. However, this one said "Warning!" in the Multiverse general script rather than indicate a gathering spot.

Zac hesitated only for a second before he changed course, heading straight toward the marker. It was definitely worth the risk if he could get some answers. Finally, he saw the source of the glowing sign; an inscribed block of stone with hundreds of groves. In each grove, an information crystal was embedded, waiting for whomever to pick one like a flyer. Some of the crystals shone with a golden luster, whereas others glowed with the cold turquoise of Miasma.

It was hard to tell whether the block of stone had hidden arrays, so he had [Love's Bond] stretch through the vegetation he was hiding in and continue for hundreds of meters beneath the ground until it sprung up like a snake right in front of the marker. The fetters snatched one of the crystals radiating Miasma before it pulled back to where Zac waited.

He simply picked up the crystal before he flashed away, furiously swimming for thirty minutes before stopping. It was a small precaution in case the thing was a trap, and only after erecting a series of

isolation arrays did he infuse some Miasma into the gemstone, which clearly was a high-quality information crystal.

A large screen immediately appeared in front of him, showing a large group of cultivators. Standing in front of them was a burly cultivator standing as tall as Billy, with a massive sword draped across his back. He radiated an extremely ferocious aura as well, to the point that it could be sensed through the screen. Of course, Zac recognized the man since he was extensively covered in every information missive he owned.

'I am Aldus Venarun and I have a matter of grave importance to share with all the undead factions of the Twilight Harbor, along with our friends of among the wandering cultivators.'

Zac was a bit surprised as he listened to the message. Going by the odd tattooed cultivators and the array flag before, Zac had expected to see Ykrodis Havarok. But this notice was made by a local rather than an outsider. Zac calmly kept listening, though he never stopped scanning the area for any sort of threat closing in on him.

'Enemies of the Twilight Harbor are scheming to bring harm upon it. A few shortsighted families from the Undead Empire along with the Radiant Temple are bent on collapsing the Twilight Ocean upon itself, stealing its essence. We cannot allow this to happen. It would spell doom for our homes and true death for trillions. Everyone needs to do their part in protecting our homeland.'

The scene suddenly changed, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw it was a short clip of the enormous snake that had almost killed him in the depths of the Twilight Chasm. The clip was short, only showing the beast's head from a distance for an instant before a wave of destruction rippled toward the source of the video. It didn't take a genius to figure out that whoever filmed that clip was no longer of this world.

The Twilight Lord is fighting for our survival, Aldus said as the projection swapped back to show him again. 'He is risking his life by bending the rules, sending a guardian to seal off the Chasm. It is the heart of this ocean and the lifeline of the harbor, which makes it one of the targets of our enemies. The council and our allies have worked together to aid the Twilight Lord's efforts, by setting up a vast tracking array.'

'We have cordoned off the whole Twilight Chasm, and anyone entering will become an enemy of the whole Council. Even if the Twilight Lord's guardian doesn't manage to strike you down, we will hunt you down with everything we have. You might think it unfair, but this is a matter of life and death. So please, turn back, and look for opportunities elsewhere. If you wish to join our cause, you can do so at any one of our stations.'

The projection changed again, showing several locations on a surprisingly detailed map. Zac hurriedly copied the map, adding vast swathes to his [Ocean Chart] in one go. By the time Zac was done, the projection had died down, and the area was once more silent.

Zac looked around, and while the area was empty, he still activated another escape talisman, disappearing in a puff of smoke. He appeared among some 50-meter tall corals a moment later, startling a school of crabs who were busy picking apart a massive eel. A short but frenzied battle later, Zac shot

away through the reef, his Spatial Ring filled with a small mountain of high-quality crab meat. He didn't travel too far though, but rather stopped at a secluded spot to go over the information.

He finally understood why there were so few people in the area at least. The tracking array was a pretty strong deterrent, and Zac had experienced their methods himself, with the powerful puppets appearing out of nowhere. He guessed that anyone who passed through those runes would be branded, becoming a beacon for teleporting puppets.

And even if someone managed to pass through that outer layer of defense, there was still that terrifying snake to worry about. Zac wondered just what had happened while he was secluded in cultivation for eight months. Was that snake really guarding the Twilight Chasm? If so, why? Was it simply to prevent any more accidents from happening?

Zac was definitely suspicious about how the information was framed. From what Zac had gathered, the Council and the Eveningtide Asura shouldn't be on the same side. Alvod was using this Mystic Realm for his cultivation by the looks of it, draining it like he had done with so many worlds before. It was more likely that Aldun Venarun simply reframed the clip to suit their purposes when the snake was doing something else entirely.

He was pretty surprised that the undead clan with some Izh'Rak Reaver heritage had taken up with the Havarok Empire, but it ultimately didn't matter much to Zac's purposes. The chart the crystal had provided was far more useful. It had mapped out seven towns and their surroundings, the closest one being just over a week's travel away. There was another one in the inner reaches, though it wasn't located in the direction Zac had left the chasm.

The rest of the towns were located in the middle and early sections of the ocean, too far for Zac to reach anytime soon. Unfortunately, it didn't show any indication of where the Death Pulse was located, so Zac reluctantly steered toward the closest settlement. He figured he could catch someone there, finally getting an update of the state of the trial, hopefully an update that didn't take such liberties with the truth.

The days passed as Zac traversed the core region of the Twilight Ocean. This area was just one huge reef forest with massive corals that shone in all colors of the rainbow, making the experience almost psychedelic. He had tried traveling in a submersible to avoid prying eyes, but he had lost it to a Beast King's sneak attack after just 1 hour. He had ultimately been forced to travel the normal way, not wanting to lose any more of his ships.

The deathly silence of the Twilight Chasm didn't reach this area, and it seemed like every single coral was home to some powerful beast or deadly plant. Even when exuding a blood-drenched aura that marked him as a tough nut to crack, Zac found himself mired in dozens of battles over the next three days.

While this place was a ruthless place where only the strong could survive, it was also a place full of opportunities. Every time he was attacked by a beast at the precipice of reaching D-grade, Zac could almost be sure he'd find a valuable treasure in their den. Certainly, none of the items were anywhere close to the dumplings or the soul-nurturing grass he had found in the depths of the Twilight Chasm, but some would still be considered rare treasures if presented at an auction back in the Zecia sector.

On the fourth day, just as Zac was in the middle of looting the den of an overconfident mollusk monster, Zac felt his chest thump, but it was not his heart that beat at the prospect of treasure. It was [Void Heart] that was finally waking up after a month-long comatose state. He barely had time to seal the cave with a series of arrays before the hidden node beat again, and Zac hurriedly sat down as he was beset by a storm of lightning.

It was clear that his E-grade hidden node was incapable of completely refining Heavenly Lightning, and Zac screamed with pain as rippling currents coursed through his body, setting his world ablaze. Thankfully, he could feel that the lightning had been somewhat changed, and it didn't have the presence of the Heavens themselves, that ancient fury intent on killing those who walked the Boundless Path.

Zac's whole body twitched as more and more lightning was released by his Node, and soon enough his whole soul Aperture was beset by a calamitous storm as well. Thousands of lightning bolts struck down at the ocean, and his Soul Core was almost like a lightning rod that was constantly targeted.

However, while he was filled with agony, Zac didn't really lament the situation. Trauma was generally just trauma, but suffering sometimes had a silver lining. His whole body was spasmodically twitching on the ground, but he could feel how his cells were greedily swallowing the lightning, almost as quickly as [Void Heart] was spitting it out.

As to where it went, Zac wasn't sure, but he assumed it was the same place as all the other treasures he swallowed when evolving his bloodline. Not only that, but Zac also felt his soul being refined by the continuous lightning strikes. The process continued for over twenty minutes until it eventually stopped, and Zac shakily got back into a sitting position. His hair was singed and standing straight out and he smelled like a roasted pig, but he was filled with excitement as he started to check on his condition.

The most palpable change was his Bloodline Talent - [Force of the Void]. Until now, it had held 32% of his normal energy reserves, but that number had been pushed up to 38% in one go. It was just 6 more percent, but it was still an amazing step forward considering he had barely progressed that much after years of absorbing energy back on Earth.

His cells had long felt like billions of small black holes drawing energy to the void, and it seemed these small vortices had been slightly expanded by the tribulation lightning. Even better, some of the nigh-impossible-to-remove gunk from the [Chainbreaking Pills] had been singed clean from his nodes, saving him well over a month of work.

This was great news considering this was just one of the tribulations he would have to endure in the E-grade. With his path being formalized and pointing toward the Boundless, the System wouldn't protect him against the Heavens when forming his three branches, even if the Branch of the War Axe technically was within the System's purview.

If anything, the Minor Tribulations that would hit him for his other two branches might be even more powerful considering they were part of a strictly Boundless Peak. But Zac figured the Heavens could zap him every month if it meant getting these kinds of rewards, and he continued to go over his body.

His soul had improved as well, but it wasn't as palpable as the situation with his Bloodline Talent. The shimmering core in his Soul Aperture hadn't grown bigger or denser, but Zac felt its luster purer compared to before. Most likely, the lightning had zapped some of the impurities from it.

The Soul Core had been almost completely pure after performing his first reincarnation, but much had happened since then. For one, the energy of oblivion kept pouring into the core, slowly nurturing it while leaving a bit of its mark behind. But most of the accumulated impurities were ultimately that grass he had chewed raw for months down in the chasm.

That Spiritual Herb had been extremely pure, but each stalk no doubt left some impurities behind. And after eating almost a hundred, there was bound to be some detriments to come along with the detriments. Unfortunately, the [Purity of the Void] only dealt with the impurities in his body, leaving his Soul Aperture untouched.

So this boon, while not useful in the short run, was bound to help with his second reincarnation in the future. Apart from that, the two oceans seemed energized somehow, but Zac couldn't pinpoint exactly what the change stemmed from. Zac kept scanning his body for another couple of minutes, but there wasn't anything else to find.

His attributes were still the same, and he didn't feel any change or improvements to his Dao, unfortunately. Still, it was far better than what most could expect. For a boundless cultivator, simply surviving the punishment was all the benefits you could expect. And from what Zac had gathered, most were left bedridden for months, sometimes years, after getting blasted by the Heavenly Lightning.

Having unearthed all the benefits he could from the lightning, Zac soon set out again through the vast reef, this time looking for treasure with even greater fervor. The tribulation lightning had blasted away a lot of his impurities, making this a prime opportunity to stuff himself with treasure. Who knew, he might encounter another sudden bout of inspiration that would allow him to form a second Branch.

It would be a huge waste if he hadn't accumulated a bunch of impurities that he could powerwash out of his system by that time.

That's why Zac's eyes lit up when he saw a harried figure swim through the reef in the distance, and he quickly masked his aura as he crept closer. The creature in question was a weird 80-meter-long monstrosity that looked like a mix of a turtle and an alligator. The result was a Beast King with a spiked shell on its back and massive jaws with three rows of sharp teeth.

It was a creature bred for war, evidenced by the fact that it actually had another Beast King in its maw; a 40-meter long fish that still released an ominous aura even in death. However, that in itself was Zac's opportunity, since the victor hadn't come out of the battle unscathed.

A large crack ran across the spiked shell on the Beast King's back, and it had multiple deep wounds across its body. Its aura was a bit unstable as well, and Zac guessed it was rushing back toward its den to nurture its wounds. If that thing had been in perfect condition, Zac wouldn't have wasted his breath.

He might have been able to take it down even if it was a lot stronger than the Beast Kings he had fought in direct battle so far, but it might have forced him to use the energy of the Remnants to win. Now, the situation was different, and any treasure an apex predator like this kept in its den would have to be pretty impressive.

Zac had his goals, but a small detour shouldn't change the situation too much. He started to follow in the Beast King's wake, making sure he wasn't discovered, and the thrill of the hunt and the promise of treasure made adrenaline course through his veins.

