

The Fall 757

Chapter 757: Second Set

Zac looked at the receding backs of Catheya and her two companions, sighing before he set out alone again in his submersible. As he looked at the empty chamber of the vessel, his thoughts drifted back to Triv's list of necessities for cultivation. One of them was companions, and Zac felt that today.

It was easy to get engrossed in your own world when secluded in cultivation. But while that kind of life had its benefits, it lacked the color of pursuing the Dao in the company of others. He had only spent a day with the trio to catch up and plan his next step, and nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Yet that single day was more memorable than traveling through the Twilight Ocean for the past three months, seeing all kinds of marvels. Certainly, it was hard to stay indifferent when being the constant focus of attention to a great beauty like Catheya. He was even starting to get used to the abyssal eyes that he and she shared, and they no longer simply felt like gates to the underworld.

While the situation was flattering, it was a bit hard to deal with. He knew he was a bit dense, but he wasn't blind. There was a streak of something real mixed in when Catheya teasingly flirted with him, and that truthfully scared him. Certainly, part of it was because he was still raw from what happened to Thea, but there was something else.

It almost felt like he was cursed. Hannah had a mental breakdown and tried to murder him, and she was the one that was the best off among his romantic interests. Alea had been reduced to a Spiritual Tool, and Thea had been straight-up murdered by his own family. The Multiverse was a dangerous place, but part of him couldn't help but wonder if it was the System's machinations at play.

What if the System wanted him focused solely on cultivation so he could keep conjuring chaos patterns for it, and it nudged fate to remove all distractions from his path?

There was, unfortunately, no way to know, and he soon dropped the matter to refocus on the task at hand. The volcano was two weeks away, and it would take another two months to reach the ravine afterward. By then, over two years would have passed in the trial, and only the confident would remain.

After all, people weren't automatically teleported out from this trial. The final three months were a safe zone when anyone could leave without getting contribution points deducted for not staying the full trial. Those who were too late would be stuck inside, and none had ever survived such an ordeal.

There were only so many exits as well, and most would be guarded by hunters looking for wealth and contribution points. Some warriors were mostly here for wealth, and they'd start looking for a way out before the hunters gathered.

The trip was thankfully not too eventful. The appearance of the City of Ancients had drawn a lot of attention, and the number of cultivators that had flocked in that area was approaching a million according to Varo. That left the other regions of the middle reaches pretty desolate in comparison, which suited Zac's purposes perfectly. Encountering cultivators in this area would only waste time without bringing any benefits, considering his [Ocean Chart] had already been filled in by Catheya.

Zac wasn't just sitting around during this time. He set his vessel to autopilot the moment he reached a desolate stretch before he took out a pile of boxes. Inside were the Attribute Fruits Catheya had identified.

Wasting no time, Zac immediately bit into the first of the fruits, though it rather looked like a fleshy pinecone. It was one of the fruits that should boost his Luck, and Zac ate it stem and all. There was no stream of energy spreading through his body after eating the thing, but he rather gained an odd sense of interconnectedness with the world around him.

He felt like a Buddhist monk who had become one with the universe, but the feeling only lasted for a moment before the feeling passed. Soon enough he was back to normal, but he still opened his Status Screen to see the results. A smile immediately spread across his face as he saw that his Luck had increased by 12 points in one go, meaning the fruit had provided a full 6 points before his titles boosted the number.

Of course, if the fruit had rather provided something like 50 points like normal Peak E-grade Attribute fruits did, that would have been far preferable, but Luck fruits didn't scale like that. Perhaps that was for the best, considering that let Zac maintain his advantage even against higher-grade enemies.

The Monarchs already gained enough Luck through their Daos as is. If they could gain thousands of points into the mysterious attribute through simply eating some fruit, then his enemies would simply stumble upon Earth by chance sooner or later.

After having eaten the first, Zac kept going, working his way through the Luck Fruits until moving onto the other stats. It was lucky the Natural Treasures were almost instantly refined to the essence needed to boost his physique, considering he stuffed himself with over 20 kilos of fruits before he was done.

And the result was pretty impressive. He had already set a small foundation with the Technocrat mixtures he looted from the Mystic Realm, but this was his first palpable step forward. Altogether, he had gained over 100 base attributes per stat, a massive step forward that was essentially the attribute equivalent to a High Mastery Dao Fragment.

That might not be enough to make a difference against someone like Uona or Ykrodas, but every little bit counted. The real prize was his boost to Luck though, and the benefits that it brought.

[Grand Fate: Reach 500 Luck at E-Grade. Reward: Effect of Luck +6%]

Zac was hadn't expected to see a title like this, considering it was functionally the same as his old title called 'Fated'. Normally, the first title of a certain type would prevent him from getting a similar one at higher grades, yet he somehow got both.

His best guess was that things worked differently for things related to Luck, or that some title series simply followed their own rules. For example, the given effect of Luck this time around was 1% higher compared to the E-grade, making Zac believe it was a chain where he could get the succeeding one during every grade. Put together, they would provide a tremendous boost to Luck.

That was ultimately just a guess of his, but more Luck was always a welcome sight, and he was now solidly above 1,000 Effective Luck. Hopefully, that would mean an even stronger Danger Sense and even

greater instincts for opportunities. Who knew, the boost might even allow him to get the two remnants without issue, though Zac didn't hold much hope for that happening.

He knew that Uona was a disaster waiting to happen, and a couple of Attribute Fruits wasn't enough to give him any confidence he could withstand her furious revenge. That was mostly why he targeted the Shard of Creation first, apart from it being closer to where Catheya hid. Absorbing the first one had almost allowed him to fight a Technocrat Hegemon in F-grade, and this time his soul was far stronger compared to when he visited the Little Bean.

The Shard would hopefully become the ace that would allow him to complete his mission one way or another.

Catheya's information package was extremely detailed, with not only dangerous sites clearly marked, but also popular hunting grounds where one was bound to run into other trial takers. It allowed Zac to plot a course with minimal interruptions until he reached his target; the Ouroboros Loop. It was yet another current, this one running perpendicular along the middle reaches.

It took him along the middle ocean through all kinds of underwater environments, but Zac was more interested in going over various information packages than enjoying the view. He had seen it all by now, and these treasure spots were just a cheap mimicry of the dangers and opportunities he had encountered at the heart of the ocean.

His time was better spent working on his cultivation, but since he was a mortal that wasn't an option during downtimes like this. The long bouts of uneventful travel over the last three months had even made him seriously consider taking up some sort of side profession. Previously, he had put the matter aside to prioritize shoring up his lacking theoretical foundations, but he was fast catching up with the general level expected of a young E-grade scion.

The problem was that he couldn't figure out what kind of job to learn. It couldn't just be a hobby to pass time, but rather something that he could make use of during battle or his cultivation. The most obvious choice was alchemy, which would allow him to refine the mountains of herbs he kept collecting.

Unfortunately, that route was probably impossible. A vast majority of Alchemy Heritages were based around fire, of which he had no Dao. And even if he found a method where he could make use of his Dao of Life or Death, there was still the looming issue of his energy control. You needed extremely precise control over not only your Dao, but also over energy manipulation to extract the valuable parts from herbs and then fuse them into a pill.

Inscriptionists and Array Masters had similar requirements, putting Zac at a loss.

He was only good at using brute force, but what job was that good for? Zac had collected a couple of simple heritages by this point, but none of them seemed to be suited to his toolkit. For now, he just kept deepening his horizons while slowly shoring up the foundations of his insights.

The days passed, and Zac was fast closing in on his destination. He detached the vessel from the current and continued by foot. While doing so, he once more went over the reports that Catheya had written, a thoughtful frown on his face.

She had tried entering both the grounds to make sure they were the places he referred to, though Zac guessed curiosity played a big role in her decision. However, she had not managed to enter the volcano at all. Entering from above was impossible for various reasons. First of all, there were surprisingly powerful avian beasts circling the volcano above the ocean surface, even Beast Kings by the looks of it.

It made this place one of the deathtraps of the middle reaches. There were hundreds of these kinds of places in the trial, spots teeming with danger but no treasure. Sometimes there was simply no reward to go with the risk, and figuring when that was the case was one of the more valuable skills among explorers.

Apart from the occasional risk-taker hoping to discover something everyone else had missed, most people simply ignored places like these.

The beasts were not the only problem. Even if you managed to hide from the powerful birds that made the mountain their home, you still needed to find a way to deal with the terrifying heat. Resilient cultivators such as himself would be able to withstand the furious flames of the volcano for a while, but there was also an extremely powerful natural formation powered by the mountain itself.

Cathey believed you'd get stuck around the mouth and slowly get roasted if you tried to enter that way. Thankfully, there were many cracks in the volcano itself, and Cathey posited at least some of them should provide a path to the inner chamber of the volcano. Unfortunately, those entrances proved to be just as dangerous.

The natural formation didn't extend to those tunnels, but she had been forced to run for her life to avoid a terrifying ripple that she said was 'an antithesis to her very existence'. It didn't take a lot of guesswork to understand it was a wave of creation that had spread out. The question was how to deal with something like that.

Zac had been constantly inundated with purified motes of Creation for years by now. Would he prove immune to the ripples that Cathey felt would end her life? Or was he just as susceptible? Zac figured there was only one way to find out, and he pushed forward the next two days until he reached the towering mountain.

It pushed up through the surface of the ocean, reaching thousands of meters into the air according to the report. Zac didn't breach the surface though, but rather swam toward an area roughly 200 meters beneath the surface.

It wasn't based on fears of the avian beasts or something Cathey had written, but rather his instincts. He could feel it, almost as palpable as he had felt his Mark of Creation hidden in the Egg before it was dragged into the depths of the chasm. There really was a Shard of Creation in the heart of the volcano, and it was neither at the top or far beneath the surface.

It was somewhere in the middle, just at the height Zac was heading for. If he needed any further proof, he didn't need to look far either. The dormant remnants in his mind had woken up, and Zac felt war was brewing as they started vibrating while still locked in each other's embrace. The quicker Zac dealt with this matter, the sooner these troublesome things would calm down again.

The area around the volcano was quite desolate, with very little plant life growing. It was no surprise to Zac considering he saw ample proof of volcanic activity as he swam closer. The ocean bed was almost

covered in layers upon layers of lava rivers that had been frozen by the waters. In fact, the water itself was well beyond 100 degrees where Zac swam, and a normal mortal would be scalded to death in an instant if dropped into these waters.

Of course, it wasn't much of an issue to Zac by this point, and neither did it prove lethal for the crabs and mollusks crawling across the walls of the mountain, seemingly digging into the stone itself. Zac was confused for a moment until he spotted a crab unearthing a clump of a red clay-like substance and swallowed it in one bite.

It looked like this place had created a unique eco-system of its own, with the creatures beneath the surface eating actual mud filled with fire-attuned energies for sustenance. Meanwhile, the birds of prey above the surface most likely fed on the beasts below. The crabs still contained a lot of the Twilight Energy, but it was almost evenly matched with the fire of the mountain that fed them.

Zac eventually reached the mountain proper, and his very presence scared away the critters crawling around in search of food. It wasn't hard to find one of the cave entrances Catheya had mentioned either - they were practically everywhere. However, Zac did note that not a single one of the crabs entered those burrows, even when the availability of that fiery mud should be greater closer to the magma within.

It wasn't that hard to figure out the reason, and he posted up right at the edge of a tunnel, patiently waiting with his gaze turned toward the depths. Four minutes passed, and Zac started to wonder if he ultimately was too far out. But suddenly, he felt a shift. A wave of energy swept through the mountain, getting closer until it was almost upon him.

Initially, Zac had planned on withstanding the pulse here at the edge of its effective radius, but he immediately pushed back and created hundreds of meters of distance. It was just in time as well, as a wall of energy shot out through the cave mouth, creating havoc on the area before being dispersed by the Twilight Ocean.

Half a minute later any sign of its appearance was gone, but some of the energy lingered. Zac swam back with a frown on his face, and he felt the remains of the creation pulse burrow into his body along with the Twilight Energy. Thankfully, his Hidden Node found no difficulty gobbling the thing up, but Zac could feel pain all over his body until the wounds were healed.

It was like he had been instantly sunburnt by standing in the leftovers of the pulse. Or perhaps it was more apt to liken it to radiation poisoning. In either case, it spelled trouble. He finally understood what Catheya meant when she said an antithesis of her very existence. It was not just the energy of the Shard of Creation in that wave, it was much more.

First of all, there was fiery energy from the volcano itself, but it took a backseat to the two other powers. The first was unsurprisingly the tainted energy of creation stemming from the shard, but the second part was pure life. It looked like the wave had fused with the Twilight Energy somehow, supercharging and weaponizing the life aspect of the ambient energy.

It would be extremely perilous to take on that wave as a Draugr, even with his hidden nodes slowly absorbing the energy. It almost felt like he was in a video game, and he was one of the undead monsters

who could be harmed by players casting healing spells. It wouldn't help much that [Void Heart] could swallow Life-attuned energies if the pulse had already ripped him to pieces.

Thankfully, there was an easy fix to that problem, and a snap echoed out from within his body as Zac broke the seal to his Duplicity Core.