

The Fall 758

Chapter 758: Magmatic Core

The seal hiding Zac's Duplicity Core was broken, and he immediately began the transformation process. Soon enough he stood at the cave mouth in his human form, and he closed his eyes to once more sense the remnant energies from the Creation pulse. The supercharged life-attuned energy in the area was still hostile to him, but its effect was not much worse than any other attack at the moment. It was definitely a better idea to enter the volcano in this form.

Zac wasn't stoked about using his human form and losing the protection of Leandra's array after finding out that the Eveningtide Asura was lurking in some corner of the Twilight Ascent. But what choice did he have? Not getting the Shard of Creation would lead to his cultivation being crippled, which trumped any unproven concerns over his privacy.

The life-attuned energies were now manageable just like the fiery energies that permeated the area, but that still left the weak motes of diluted Creation. The core force that had carried the pulse was different to the Creation Energy he usually dealt with, in that this energy was raw, wild, and still tainted by the will of the shard itself.

It was much more troublesome to deal with compared to the distilled energy that was extracted from his trapped shard, and it didn't take long for Zac to realize that he wouldn't be able to simply make the energy his own by absorbing it. However, he had another idea of how to deal with the pulses, and he once more waited at the edge of his chosen tunnel. Soon enough Zac sensed an identical build-up, though this one was slightly weaker.

It would still serve Zac's purposes, and he readied himself as he sensed the turbulent wave of Life and Creation ripple forward. At the same time, two streams of energy entered his shoulders, and a small shimmering globe appeared between his hands, shuddering with unbridled possibility.

Suddenly, Zac pushed his hands forward, and the mark pushed into the wave of creation heading through him. Zac imparted his will into the Mark of Creation, and the small walnut-sized ball instantly grew into the size of a cantaloupe as it stole the wild creation in the area to power its creation.

Zac could sense how the act had started a chain reaction that would only end in disaster, and he hurriedly threw the Mark of Creation away before he flashed to safety with [Earthstrider]. A blinding eruption of light illuminated the whole ocean for a moment before a fifteen-meter wide object wrought from an alloy of stones appeared where the Mark once was.

It was a chaotic mesh of patterns and materials, and it broke apart the moment it hit the rocky ocean bed. Zac looked at it thoughtfully before his gaze turned to the blistering welts that had appeared across his hands.

That bright light had released a wave of chaotic energies that had passed right through him, and while his body was already fast at work repairing itself, it was something both hard to defend against and lethal. Zac looked out across the field of crabs, and he could see how many of them shuddered with pain until they slumped down one after another.

Still, the experiment was a success. He had not been directly impacted by any of the Creation Energy in the wave at all when it passed through him, and even the amount of weaponized Life had been lessened by a good margin. As for the weird rock the bundle of creation turned into, it was the result of Zac's wish of the thing turning into a harmless boulder.

Why it didn't turn into a simple rock was harder to guess, and it could be anything from the influence of the Twilight Ocean, his lacking understanding of the Dao of Creation, or even the latent consciousness from the Spark of Creation. In either case, the Mark of Creation had turned extremely unstable the moment his purified energies had been joined by the wild energies in the pulse.

Seeing that he had found a method to push through the pulses, Zac sat down and rested for a few hours to restore himself to perfect condition. Using even a walnut-sized Mark of Creation left a small network of fine cracks across his neck, just like the Annihilation Spheres, and he knew he would have to conjure more of them to reach the heart of the volcano.

Those cracks were extremely hard to heal, but they solidified and became invisible after a few hours, lessening the risk of them worsening on their own. In an ideal world, Zac would have wanted to have already cleansed himself before that point, but he still hadn't found a method to do so. Only his natural healing along with the purified energy of opposing remnants worked, and the cracks generally disappeared after a week or two if it came from a small-sized mark like this.

Zac didn't have weeks to waste at the moment though, and he set out as soon as he felt his condition stable. He once more waited at the mouth of the volcano until yet another pulse erupted. This time he didn't interact with the wave of Creation at all, instead opting to slip into the tunnel in its wake.

He knew he had roughly five minutes before the next pulse would arrive, and he pushed his speed as much as he could with [Earthstrider]. He turned into a blur, rushing through one tunnel after another, but he swore when he ran into one barrier after another. Eventually, three minutes had passed without him making any real headway, forcing him to escape once more and wait for the next pulse to pass before continuing his scan.

This cycle continued for hours, which later turned to days. There was something odd about those tunnels. It wasn't the fact that they were completely devoid of living things, or that it was wrought from a confusing mesh of a million different materials rather than the rough stone of the exterior mountain.

It wasn't even the fact that the tunnels made no sense from a geological standpoint, though it was a bit related. There was something mysterious about these paths, and Zac almost felt like he was running along the lines of an array rather than paths that were supposed to be the result of heat expansion.

Not only were paths extremely confusing and almost impossible to memorize, but it almost felt like they contained the secrets of the Dao of Creation. Sometimes he was even forced to stop as he felt a surge of inspiration coming on, but the feeling quickly passed. He was missing too much context to understand what was going on.

Thankfully, four days of ceaseless work bore some results. Zac started to gain some sort of inherent understanding, and he managed to make it deeper and deeper between each pulse. He had even managed to find two paths he believed had a good chance of leading into the volcanic core where he felt the Shard of Creation calling for him.

It wasn't only thanks to the fact he Creation-wrought tunnels started to make sense to him. He also had two rambunctious remnants locked in his mind that essentially functioned like compasses for him. They could definitely sense their sibling hidden in the heart of the Volcano, and their energies grew wilder the closer he got.

Those two tunnels he had found elicited a far greater response compared to any other pathway so far, making Zac believe they provided a direct path to the shard.

The problem was that the volcano was simply massive, and he would have to push through at least one pulse to confirm. He had already wasted one Mark of Creation on testing the viability of traversing the tunnels, and he couldn't keep racking up the damage to his body right before absorbing the second Shard.

If he wanted to go, then he had to go all in. There was some lingering hesitation if he was doing the right thing. After all, he might expend multiple Marks of Creation only to find a dead end. If he kept doing that, he would soon enough either run out of Creation Energy or the cracks would reach an irreparable state.

But what choice did he have? His forte lay in brute force, but that was of little help against the powerful Natural Formation guarding the mouth of the volcano. So Zac grit his teeth and once more set out the moment his opportunity arose, pushing straight toward the path he felt most likely to bear fruit.

The temperatures steadily rose as the tunnel turned to a blur. He almost felt like he was passing through a fever dream. One moment the walls were made from glistening alloys, which then seamlessly turned into a convoluted crystal cave where he was hounded by thousands of his own reflections.

Dark twisted tunnels, jagged paths he barely could squeeze through, even a spot where gravity itself was suspended, forcing him to fly forward with the help of Cosmic Energy. There was no rule or reason, only unfettered creation. Zac constantly used his evolved movement skill to keep maximum pace, occasionally stepping onto the walls or ground to reset it.

Even then, there was no end in sight after rushing for over four minutes, and he could feel the incoming threat.

Two more streams of energy entered the circuits on his shoulders, and he formed a small mark of creation in his hands. Soon enough, the wave of creation came crashing through the tunnel, and Zac pushed his hands forward to intercept. Once more it was a success, and Zac threw the ball behind him, creating a huge eruption of flames this time.

He was currently passing through a submerged patch of tunnel, but not submerged by the Twilight Ocean. It was rather a hard-to-traverse swamplike water, where the liquid seemed to grip him harder the quicker he moved. The inferno incinerated the water that filled the tunnel as it rushed to fill the tunnel in two directions.

Having the ball of creation turn into a storm of flames was a bit risky, but it was easy to imagine considering he was beset with fiery energies all-around. Zac would have preferred to create nothing, but that was simply impossible from what he had learned over the past years. Creation was the opposite of Oblivion, and nothingness was the one thing that could not be brought forth.

Zac was thrown forward by the enormous force, and he barely managed to avoid getting gored by a stalagmite that had appeared out of nowhere. In fact, the whole area ahead had transformed, going from a cubic hall full of engraved disks to a chamber filled with thousands of sharp spikes.

Thankfully, Zac could still sense that the path to the Shard of Creation was intact, so he kept running forward while diverting some of his attention to dealing with the alien energies that had entered his body in the wake of the pulse. The minutes passed as Zac continued his mad dash, and he forced his way through three more pulses before he reached a massive pool of magma that felt different compared to the endless biodomes he had just passed.

At least Zac hoped that was the case, considering the bubbling pool of lava was the endpoint of the tunnel. If that pool didn't lead into the heart of the volcano, he had just wasted weeks, perhaps months. After all, he was beset by a searing pain in by now, and he didn't need a mirror to know that his upper body was covered in a dense pattern of cracks.

There was no time to lose, and Zac rushed straight toward the pond, withstanding the searing heat. It wasn't to the point the combination of his Fragment of the Bodhi and a massive pool of Endurance was overwhelmed, but he still took out a talisman and infused some Cosmic Energy into it.

A blue film instantly covered his body, and the oppressive heat was lessened by a decent degree. He had hundreds of similar talismans neatly stacked in his ring after his visit to the volcanic trial back in the Zecia sector, but he knew that the heat was the least of his issues.

The rational part of his mind screamed that he was insane, but he still took a deep breath and jumped inside, using Cosmic Energy to burrow deeper and deeper into the magma. The heat was far greater compared to the volcano he had swum around in to get his Heart of Fire-title, but the more pressing issue was that its fire-attuned energies were infused with Creation.

It felt like he was being beset by a series of hallucinations as his surroundings kept twisting while he sunk deeper into the magma, but he knew the reality was much more dangerous than he was dealing with some simple illusion arrays. Every second, more foreign Creation energy entered his body, pushing his [Void Heart] to the limit.

But his hidden node was ultimately limited, and it was also dealing with the Twilight Energy and fire-attuned energy of the volcano. Soon enough wild Creation would start accumulating in his body, and who knew what trouble that would cause. Zac hesitated a second, but he still conjured another Mark of Creation even if no pulse was incoming.

The ambient Creation was gradually being siphoned into the sphere rather than entering his body, and Zac hurried to make the most of the limited time he could keep it going. The Shard was further toward the center of the volcano, submerged a bit deeper, but Zac felt himself rapidly drawing closer now that there was no confusing pattern of tunnels keeping him at bay.

A sudden burst of light made him stop in his tracks, and he was shocked to find the lava simply ending. He threw the Mark of Creation far away before pushing his head through the final layer of magma, and he realized that the whole heart of the volcano was a massive but slow-moving whirlpool.

In the heart of the whirlpool, there was no lava, but there was something else.

The shard silently hovered in the heart of the swirl, the magma turning as the remnant did. With each turn, Zac saw a world of possibilities. In each refraction, he could sense the vastness of the cosmos. This was creation, true creation, not diminished or boxed in by his limited imagination.

Last time he hadn't been able to properly observe the remnant because of the force fields that the Technocrats had erected around it, but he was shocked at the beauty of it, and he almost felt like he was about to be dragged into an illusion. It was nothing like the shard in his cage. Certainly, he could still vaguely see a small crystal in the center, but the true value was the boundless insight it exuded.

If it had been him in the F-grade, Zac would probably already have jumped over to grasp the treasure in a daze. However, his soul was far stronger this time around, and he was able to dispel the desire burning in his heart. Of course, he was still going to snatch it, but at least it was his decision this time around.

At least he believed it was. Or was this yet another time he had been manipulated by the System? Ultimately, Zac guessed it didn't matter, and he made one final survey of the situation.

It was clear that the Shard of Creation wasn't in a passive state. It was constantly drawing fiery energies from the depths below, and Twilight Energy from the mouth of the volcano. Enormous amounts of energy entered the mysterious object every second, and Zac could feel how its aura was steadily growing. It had already been over four minutes since the last burst, and Zac sensed that another one would be unleashed any moment now.

The question was, wait for the pulse to pass, or go before he had to withstand another one?

Zac ultimately chose the former, and he ignored the painful maze of golden cracks. Just one more. It was either that or risk one of those terrifying pulses erupting from within his body.

The momentum grew, and Zac could sense that even the escaped motes of creation were being dragged back into the shard, like the water level sinking just before a tsunami. Then suddenly, it felt like the universe stopped for a moment, and Zac felt his mind drift as the remnant lit up with a terrifying splendor. It was too much, and Zac desperately closed his eyes as he pushed his mark of creation forward.

His final mark accomplished its task as well, but it instantly destabilized from the massive overload of energy. Zac barely had time to swim back into the magma before a terrifying explosion rocked the whole area as a gout of flames shot toward the sky. He felt a wave of unbearable heat turning his skin to charcoal, but that was the least of Zac's worries.

The final point-blank pulse was the straw that broke the camel's back, and the two remnants that had been locked in a hate-filled embrace for four years suddenly detached from each other. The two immediately entered a pitched struggle, but Zac immediately saw that it was different from normal.

The Shard of Creation railed against the cage with even greater vigor than the Splinter of Oblivion ever did before it got company. However, the splinter actually fought against the shard rather than the cage, over and over blocking the shard's attempts to break out.

And Zac could sense it - fear.

The Splinter of Oblivion was no longer concerned about victory or escape, it was fighting for survival. Zac's eyes lit up, feeling he had gained an unwilling ally in this task, and he shot forward before any

more variables had time to crop up. There were no barriers barring his path, and he effortlessly reached the shard.

First, he took out a box wrought from treasure jade, but it started to mutate and fall apart before he even had a chance to close the lid. He had somewhat expected this to happen, but it was still a disappointment that he couldn't store the thing. He would have to absorb it right now, and he instead grasped it with his left hand.

The crystal was cool to the touch, but Zac was still beset by terrifying agony as his arm started to rapidly mutate and take a series of grotesque shapes. Zac knew there was no stopping now though, so he pushed the small crystal straight toward his chest. A shudder spread out from his body as the crystal slipped inside without issue, the pulse pushing the swirling wall of magma over fifty meters away.

Zac had no time to worry about his surroundings though as he prepared to enter the fight of his life - it was now to eat or to be eaten.