

The Fall 761

Chapter 761: Eruptions

Zac dove into the Twilight Ocean and the scenery above was immediately replaced by a subaquatic hellscape. He had already been somewhat prepared considering the spectacle he had caused, but the pandemonium that met him was even beyond what he expected.

The whole ocean was a bubbling cauldron as tens of thousands of superheated boulders dropped into the waters from above. The falling debris was filled with fiery energy, and the rapid cooling by the ocean caused them to crack one by one, causing cataclysmic explosions that spread in deadly chain reactions.

Meanwhile, gouts of lava shot out from the hundreds of cracks in the volcano itself, turning into giant spears that decimated anything in their path. Zac could only keep going, desperately avoiding the mayhem best as he could. Even then, he was constantly wounded by flying shrapnel or boulders slamming into the waters from above.

If not for the abundant creation energy coursing through his body, he would be covered in wounds after just a minute.

Zac really missed [Profane Exponents] at this moment, his three loyal followers whose defensive properties were leagues beyond [Innate Ward] which he had gotten from his Dao Repository. He really needed to find a way to upgrade [Hatchetman's Spirit] soon, and it seemed like focusing on its defensive capabilities would be the smartest course of action.

The visibility was all but null from the soot and the fact that the ocean was boiling, so Zac was shocked to suddenly find himself in front of a squad of almost 20 undead warriors who had formed a protective circle. Most of them were Revenants, with five of them being Corpse Lords. It looked like they had decided to investigate the area but had gotten caught up by the chaos.

They had sacrificed speed to maintain a defensive shield as they moved further away from the volcano. Zac wanted nothing to do with them, but the opportunity to slip away had already passed since he almost entered their formation by accident, placing him just a few meters away from the undead warriors.

"You! What happened here? We hear-" one of the Revenants exclaimed, but his eyes widened after a second. "That bounty! Arcaz Black!"

"He's human?!" one of the Corpse Lords blurted, and the whole group stared in confusion, seemingly even forgetting the chaos that raged around them.

The confusion only lasted a moment though, with some of them charging attacks while others turned to run for their lives, not wanting to test their mettle against the first-place holder on the ladder. But they were too slow. An enormous wooden hand appeared through the boiling waters, the axe in its hand axe slamming down in their midst. Its edge radiated a blinding sharpness, but there was something different about [Arcadia's Judgement] this time.

Thick golden veins covered the wooden hand, adding a second set of inscriptions on top of those that seemingly naturally formed in the bark. The golden tendrils didn't stop at the hands either, but they covered the enormous axe as well, imbuing it with a unique power – the power of Creation.

Zac was normally unable to infuse his skills with the energy from his remnants, except for his newly created [Pillar of Desolation], but this time it had happened without him even trying. Perhaps it was unavoidable, with his Soul Aperture being filled with Creation Energy.

Adding the Branch of the Axe would probably have been enough to deal with this group of bog-common trial-takers, and more than ten streams of energy entered Zac as their bodies were turned to shreds from the initial swing. A few had almost managed to activate escape talismans by that point, but the second stage of the skill would soon take care of them.

Or that was what would normally happen.

Instead, a dense maze of golden scars shot out from the axe and covered the area, passing right through everything from boulders to corpses, and through the unlucky few who had survived the initial swing. Zac grimaced as he knew what would happen next, and a group of pained wails echoed out as the cultivators started to suffer horrifying transformations.

A few turned into grotesque clumps of uncoordinated flesh, others turned into base materials. Creation had entered their bodies, and there was no turning back for them. A series of fractal leaves flashed through the crowd as Zac ended the lives of the rest of the members, as much to ease their suffering as to protect his secrets.

Still, Zac wasn't very happy, either with being forced to slaughter a bunch of people or upon learning that there were cultivators in the area. He immediately swam away, afraid that the commotion would attract more people. As he fled, he looked inward to get a better understanding of the situation.

As expected, some Creation Energy had slipped through his Mental Energy cage when activating [Arcadia's Judgement]. He had tried to maintain a solid barrier around the still-hostile shard, but his ability to focus on multiple things at once was still just awful. His control had been loosened a bit when infusing his Dao into the attack, and a stream of Creation Energy had slipped through the cracks even if the shard was still held in place.

Some of it entered his skill, while some entered the golden ocean in his mind. However, most of it escaped his Soul Aperture, much to the delight of the various vortices in his body. It was a bit of a pain in the ass, but Zac believed it was unavoidable. He could see how the shard was already recuperating.

The two other remnants were able to conjure energy out of nowhere while locked away by both the System and Be'Zi, so it was no surprise that his newly-acquired remnant could do the same. He would probably have to occasionally release the valves, so to speak, and expel some energy. Otherwise, his Soul Aperture was bound to blow up.

Luckily, the initial eruptions had only exhausted half of the life force locked inside the gemstone, meaning he wouldn't have to waste his own lifespan in the short run. Furthermore, he would only have to do this for a few months until he got his hands on the splinter. At that point, he would drain both remnants with a Glimpse of Chaos, and then shove them into the cage to join their siblings if all went according to plan.

Zac kept going for another fifteen minutes, utilizing [Earthstrider] to put more distance between himself and the volcano. Thankfully, it didn't seem his skills would get infected with creation unless he tried

infusing it with his Dao, allowing him to use the movement skill without worry. Soon enough he had left the direct danger zone of the volcano, and he immediately took out his submersible.

The large spiraled shell appeared next to him, and he quickly jumped into it and sped off before anyone else could spot him and his human form. He hadn't encountered anyone after that group of unlucky explorers, but the area was bound to be swarming with people soon enough. A lot of trial takers were gathering in the vicinity to the City of Ancients, but even more cherished their lives and stayed far away.

These people instead put their efforts into collecting the various herbs and treasures strewn across the ocean, and they might come this way to investigate. Zac's ears were still ringing from the eruption, and it could probably both be felt and heard across huge distances. A mortal might try to get as far away from an active volcano as possible, but cultivators were the opposite.

Who knew what kind of valuable metals and other treasures would be dragged from the depths when a volcano this massive erupted? Zac wouldn't be surprised if those explosive stones that had fallen into the ocean contained all kinds of nice things. Of course, it wasn't enough to pique Zac's interest. Instead, he immediately set course for the ravine marked on his [Ocean Chart].

The vessel was essentially put on autopilot, with Zac splitting his attention between monitoring the shard and keeping watch for an ambush. After some consideration, Zac decided to stay in his human form for the time being. He would probably have to use his Draugr form to enter the ravine if that place was anything like the volcano, but for now, it felt like an unnecessary risk to rock the boat by entering a weakened state.

Seeing that the situation had calmed down, he opened the ladder with some curiosity. He had only gained 30,000 contribution points for destroying that mysterious valley back in the Twilight Chasm, a pittance compared to what he thought he should have gained. That place held so many insights into Twilight, but he still only got what looked like a bounty by the System.

This time around, the result was thankfully a lot better.

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 1,754,274 Rank: 1. Value: 175,000 (Bounty)]

He had gained over 180,000 Contribution Points in one go, once more pushing past Uona to reclaim the first position. The vampire had passed him just one month ago, after steadily collecting Contribution Points while he was in secluded cultivation or traveling the vast distances of the ocean.

Ykrodas had been closing on him as well, though he had still lacked around 100,000 points. But now, Zac had claimed the crown once more. Honestly, he wasn't too excited about it. The boost was too small to matter in the long run. That Eternal Clan scion seemed a bit haughty, and he was afraid that him passing her on the ladder would make Uona redouble her efforts at capturing him.

Hopefully, it wouldn't result in Catheya getting in trouble again while she scouted ahead for him around the ravine and the City of Ancients.

Still, Zac was a bit confused. The energy eruption he had unleashed this time around was at least ten times that compared to when he felled the mothertree back on Cork Island. Not only that, but he had released massive quantities of Creation into the trial, and Creation should hold a lot of insights into Twilight.

So, 180,000 points felt a bit stingy, even if it was a huge chunk all things considered.

His best guess was that he hadn't gained a single point from the shard itself, and the reward rather came from the volcano and all that its eruption destroyed. Zac had known that was a possibility going in, considering that the remnants weren't part of the trial. They had found their way into this Mystic Realm some way, but they weren't actually related to Twilight.

They were on a different path altogether judging by what he had seen in the valley. In the Twilight Tapestry, Life was not Life, and Death was not Death. These two concepts had been fused into some other path, moving away from the peak leading toward the Daos of Oblivion and Creation.

Zac might have deduced a logical reason, but he was still quite disappointed with the result. Getting the first position in a trial like this would probably result in an amazing title, and perhaps even Title Permanence. But the remnants had been his last hope to cinch the position. There was no way he would stick around to the end of the trial, meaning his Contribution Points would get halved upon leaving.

For him to maintain the lead, he would have needed to get a crazy amount of Contribution Points from snatching the two remnants. That way he would have been able to maintain the lead even after getting points deducted. Now, he would be lucky if he could maintain a top-ten position by the time the trial ended.

There was one silver lining though. That magnificent scene of creation and destruction might not have contributed much to the Path of Twilight, but it did feel relevant to his own cultivation. He still hadn't pieced together exactly how, but Zac felt his experience would be useful for his Fragment of the Bodhi.

He was still far from forming a branch the normal way, but he still felt there were some clues hidden in the vision of the volcano tree. He just needed to ponder on it for a while to figure out exactly what inspiration to draw from the experience. Unfortunately, a certain stowaway in his mind refused to give him the peace and quiet to ponder on the Dao.

The remnant was relentless, like a trapped beast that refused to give in.

The weird humming whispers were a constant annoyance in the back of Zac's mind as the days passed, and the shard kept exuding energy without stopping. Mostly, it was manageable, with Zac slightly opening the cage now and then to absorb the energy. His body was thankfully insatiable, never saying no to more of the high-grade energy.

That was another reason he didn't want to swap to his Draugr form prematurely. The odd node just below his throat was still absorbing energy, and Zac was afraid to do anything that might interrupt the process. There was still no information in his bloodline screen, and he couldn't tell if this node was connected to his Void Emperor bloodline, or if it was something that was actually being created by the shard.

With so little information impossible, he preferred to maintain the status quo.

Meanwhile, the struggle inside the cage abated after a couple of days. The Splinter of Oblivion had essentially taken up a position as a goalie in front of the crack where energy was being siphoned out. However, Zac could feel that the two were just as hostile as before. They were just waiting for an opportunity to turn the tables on the other.

His body was mostly in a good state thanks to the Creation energy healing him every time he got hurt during the mad escape. He did however feel a bit hollow, for a lack of a better word. It was most likely due to the constant transformations his body was put through. It couldn't possibly be good for you to be turned into a hundred different miscreations in a short span.

Meanwhile, there was also the issue of the numerous golden cracks between his head and shoulders. They had faded after a few days, but he could feel them more than ever before. It didn't seem like they were healing at all, with the constant waves of Creation being released by the shard. The situation wasn't ideal, but he did have some surprising gains from the ordeal.

Putting aside the matters of the new Hidden Node and his Contribution Points, he had also pushed [Force of the Void] another 4%. Not only that, but Zac actually felt like his bloodline had benefitted in general. His Hidden Nodes had all gobbled up some of the energy, and it seemed like they kept some for themselves.

And more energy kept pouring into his bloodline as time passed. However, his silent cultivation was suddenly interrupted as the two Shards of Creation suddenly went haywire at the same time. The one trapped inside the fractal prison unleashed a ferocious offense at the splinter while the one in his Soul Aperture started to rail against the Mental Energy cage as it spewed massive amounts of energy.

The constant droning in the back of his head had once more turned into a deafening chorus of insidious suggestions, and he felt his mind overcome by endless possibilities. Zac barely had time to jump out of his vessel before he erupted, causing a wave of chaotic creation to rip through the area.

Thousands of pillars wrought from everything between granite and gold were conjured out of nowhere, and they shot out in every direction like a cluster bomb. Only then did the chaotic voices subside, but not before the newly-acquired shard had managed to break out of its cage and slam into the pathway to the prison once more.

Zac hurriedly captured the remnant once more before he jumped into his submersible and sped off. The situation returned to normal soon enough, except for the murmurs that had grown a bit louder compared to before. He couldn't figure out what led to the outburst even after observing for a few days. It was like the two shards were linked, and suddenly decided to launch an ambush at him.

Yet, Zac soon came to find that it wasn't a one-off thing. Another eruption occurred just four days later, though Zac was better prepared this time. Then came a third, and a fourth as the shards refused to settle down.

It caused a massive commotion every time, but there wasn't anything Zac could do about it except make sure he traveled the more desolate parts of the ocean. The whispering murmurs kept growing louder as well, and Zac could almost feel a frustration building within the shards after a month had passed.

Zac forced the remnants down over and over, using his massive stores of Mental Energy to his advantage. If he hadn't started cultivating his soul when he did, he might have been in trouble from the whispers. But thanks to his hard work, it was now more of a constant annoyance than something that affected his mind. He doubted he would go on a rampage like a splinter had tricked him into, at least not in the short run.

Eventually, the journey reached its end. He was just a few days away from the ravine, and he had slowed down the submersible to a crawl by that point. Finally, he stopped altogether and stowed away the vessel with a frown. The surroundings looked exactly like Catheya had described, but that wasn't the point.

He was supposed to have made contact with Catheya two days ago, but his communication crystal was still unable to form a connection. Not only that, but the tracker was inert as well. Zac took out a blue talisman, and he swore when it turned black after infusing some Cosmic Energy into it.

The whole area was jammed.