

The Fall 873

Chapter 873: Treasures in the Depths

The signal urged Zac to jump into the waters and claim what almost felt like his birthright, but he kept himself in check. Zac could somewhat sense where the aura originated from, and it was somewhere in the center of the lake. Since the barges were heading in that general direction, there was no point in diving too early. After all, he could only explore a couple of hours at most before he needed to get back.

Zac didn't want to look too eager, so he started to prepare an excuse to join in on the fun. Luckily, an opportunity presented itself just an hour later, with a small commotion breaking out on the neighboring barge. Zac and a few of the other wandering cultivators stood up to see what was going on, only to find Uzu grinning from ear to ear with a shimmering item in his hands.

"Luckily, I have some experience with both flame-attuned realms," Uzu boisterously laughed as he showcased a large red pearl. "And reading the missives on the way, I realized there might be a few Infernal Longevity Clams here. By a stroke of luck, I managed to encounter a clam which had just reached Hegemony."

"An Early D-grade Fire-Attuned Longevity Pearl," one of the cultivators next to Zac muttered, his face green with envy. "A Fire Cultivator would pay a small fortune for that, or he can exchange it for a pearl that suits himself. What filthy luck."

"If there's one, there might be two," Zac muttered as he looked down at the radiant waters.

"Don't get your hopes up. There might be some Infernal Clams down there, but that guy was simply too lucky," Havasa muttered with a shake of her head. "It takes a long, long time for those pearls to form – how could we possibly leave too many of them lying around? Just like Uzu said, he must have stumbled onto a clam that had just broken through and used the breakthrough to finalize its pearl."

Clearly, she wanted to avoid a scenario where a bunch of people got themselves killed out of greed, and she even threw Uzu an annoyed glare.

"It's not often you see someone flaunting their wealth like that," she perfunctorily added before sitting down.

Her comment didn't really taper the excitement in some of the warrior's eyes, but a few others thoughtfully looked over at Uzu who looked as excited as a child as he showed the pearl to anyone willing to look. Just like most of the other warriors, Zac wasn't convinced by the straightforward and innocent act. No wandering cultivator who reached Hegemony was simple.

There was no real reason for him to showcase that pearl. It was not a bounty item, so he wouldn't have to present it to the Void Gate either. Normally, you'd just stow that thing away and pretend nothing happened, as to avoid getting a target on your back. But here he was, waving the pearl while hinting there were more treasures in the depths.

Uzu wanted more people to dive into the waters – he wanted more wandering cultivators to get themselves killed. Problem was that while most knew that was the case, his lure was still effective. The existence of a Longevity Pearl proved that the energies at the bottom of the lake were dense enough to form Early D-grade treasures, and they weren't all snatched by those who had come before them.

And even if they couldn't find something of that quality, there might still be peak E-grade items up for grabs.

"Are you going?" Vai asked with worry in her eyes. "There really aren't that many pearls down there, but there are large schools of carnivorous fish. Even if they're only E-grade, there are schools with thousands of beasts."

"This is what I came for. If I don't push myself now, then when?" Zac eventually said. "I'll wait a few hours until some of the others return before I try my luck. Don't worry, you'll be safe on the barge."

"I'm not worried about myself," Vai said with a roll of her eyes.

"It's alright, I'm pretty good at taking a beating," Zac smiled before closing his eyes in meditation.

In reality, he was trying to pinpoint the source of the signal, but it was hard getting a proper read on it. It just provided a vague sense of direction. Thankfully, it was clear that it was steadily getting closer, and as the hours passed, the impression started to point down as much as it did ahead.

Zac knew it was time to go. This way he could swim ahead of the vessels as he dove deeper, giving him more time to search for the treasure. He waited another two minutes until another wandering cultivator jumped out of the oily water, his arms and face covered in bleeding lacerations.

"Well, I guess that's my cue," Zac said to Vai.

"Be careful," she whispered. "There are still many layers to go – no need to overdo it."

"I know what I'm about," Zac laughed.

With that, he dove into the water, and he immediately grimaced with disgust. The liquid was oily and scorching hot, and utterly uncomfortable to swim around in. Fiery energy tried to burrow into his cells as well, but the little that made it past his sturdy skin was immediately gobbled up by his [Void Heart]. Having explored the Twilight Ocean, this invasion was nothing.

There were no beasts in the vicinity, probably thanks to his proximity to the barges. He still equipped his presence-weakening cowl to complement his energy-hiding bracelet. Then, Zac took out his axe as he made his way downward, heading for the ocean floor below, all the while looking out for both animals and other cultivators. Soon enough he spotted a feeding frenzy, where hundreds of smaller fish were ripping apart the carcass of a huge fish that had dozens of long whiskers that seemed as sharp as blades.

However, the weird creature had been cut in two by a bladed attack, and Zac guessed he had found the source of the previous cultivator's wounds. A few of the frenzied fishes chose to target him instead of fighting for the dead catfish, but it was nothing that couldn't be solved with a couple of swings.

Finally, Zac reached the bottom of the ocean, somewhat surprised it was covered in lustrous corals, seaweed, and all kinds of plants. It was a stark contrast to the desolate landscape above water, which made Zac wonder if there were some specific reasons for it. Perhaps some sort of tidal wave that killed everything on land every few years?

Of course, Zac was more interested in treasure than solving the geographical puzzle, but he was a bit confused as he still felt the signal coming from further down. Did he need to dig? Or was there some

tunnel in the area? Since the signal came from ahead as well, Zac stayed a few hundred meters away from the lakebed as he continued forward.

He could tell that there were quite a few creatures that lived among those corals, but he couldn't sense anything emitting the aura of a Beast King. Even then, there were the occasional ambushes, but Zac never slowed down as he drew closer and closer to his destination. And finally, he saw it – a deep crack in the ocean floor, leading into the depths of the Mystic Realm.

There was a weak pull coming from the chasm, forming a slight waterfall-like effect. However, it was nothing compared to the Twilight Chasm either in size or danger. This rather seemed to be a simple fissure created from an earthquake or tectonic plates moving, if that was even a thing inside a Mystic Realm.

In either case, Zac could sense the item was right below him, and his heart thumped with anticipation as he dove inside. Deeper and deeper he went, and he was surprised to find that the ambient energy grew more sparse the further he swam. Soon enough, it could barely be considered E-grade, and the fire attunement has all but disappeared from the orange water.

Eventually, the radiant glow from the waters had completely disappeared, and Zac could only make his way forward by his spiritual sense until he suddenly stopped. The pulse was so close he could touch it, but as he looked around, he couldn't spot anything out of place no matter what method he used.

He swam over to the rocky wall of the fissure, his hands searching the rough surface for any clues. It should be inside here, but there weren't any indications of a passage, and he couldn't sense or spot any palpable energy signatures from within. It almost made him feel as though he was going crazy, sensing a signal that wasn't there.

There was only one way to find out, and the water churned as Zac punched forward. The wall shuddered from the massive force as deep cracks spread for dozens of meters. The wall was a lot sturdier than he'd expected, but Zac's eyes still lit up – the thud was hollow. One punch after another assaulted the wall until it completely crumbled, but the scene of water rushing into the tunnel he'd exposed didn't take place.

Instead, as pieces of rocks tumbled toward the depths of the fissure, an invisible wall held the waters at bay. Zac couldn't make heads or tails of the scene, and even if the calling had suddenly grown a lot louder, he didn't dare rush inside. Instead, he took out a spear that he gingerly pushed inside the dark path.

The spear entered without issue, proving there wasn't any actual barrier that held the water at bay. Honestly, that only made the situation weirder, but Zac still slowly made his way inside. After all, he was hunting for remnants of an unfathomably powerful faction. So what if it scared the water to not enter?

That didn't mean Zac would just rush forward eyes shut, but no matter how he looked, he couldn't figure out what was going on. Even after taking a couple of steps inside, he could neither find what kept the water at bay, nor any other energy signature for that matter. There was simply nothing after having entered the path – like he had found a spot forgotten by the Heavens.

No energy, no Dao, no nothing. It was hollow, empty.

Growing even more curious about what he'd discovered, he turned toward the depths of the cave, toward the origin of the signal. The pathway itself wasn't a proper tunnel, but rather a narrow crack that Zac barely managed to squeeze through. Thankfully, it only continued for a hundred meters until Zac found himself at the edge of an extremely odd cave.

After entering the hidden chamber Zac finally had a pretty good idea of what was going on – how this place was created, and the origin of the call. The cave wasn't very big, just fifty meters across, and it was almost completely spherical. But the walls were definitely not natural, with twisted formations and patterns that would never appear in nature.

Neither were the patterns arrays or something manmade. It rather looked like the result of an eruption of a chaotic mixture of energies. Zac wasn't skilled enough to analyze the patterns, especially with all lingering hints of energy removed from the area, but he was pretty sure that spatial energies were heavily involved. With the Void Star being so chaotic, there was a simple explanation.

A chunk of space had been teleported inside the bedrock of this Mystic Realm, pulverizing the stone that had occupied the space before. There was even a thick layer of ashy powder on the ground to strengthen this thesis. It was just like when he and the Azh'Rezak Alpha Gwyllgi had taken up the same plot of space when the Integration descended on Earth.

Judging by the almost suffocating ancient aura in the cave, Zac had a strong suspicion it wasn't an even fight this time around either. However, this time it was the stronger party that won, and Zac's eyes turned to the only item inside the spherical cave.

A singular piece of rubble that lay on top of the dusty layer.

If he went by appearance alone, Zac wouldn't have given it a second glance if he passed by the area. It was a bit odd it was dark grey compared to the native red, though that could have all kinds of explanations. On its surface, a few white lines were added, but they didn't provide any tangible clues. Of course, with the stable signal it was emitting, Zac honed in on it the moment he reached the mouth of the crevasse.

And even if no one else could figure out what was so special about the stone, Zac knew exactly where it came from – after all, he had seen it before. It was exactly this material the enormous castle in his vision was made from.

Seeing it was both exciting and a bit disappointing. Exciting in the sense it had once been part of something amazing, a building that most likely housed true Supremacies once upon a time. Disappointing in the sense it was ultimately just a piece of rock. Perhaps it had been carved off from the outer wall during some ancient battle and fallen into a tear in space, carrying with it that ancient and inextinguishable aura.

But if that was the case, was this all there was to his supposed opportunity? Was it the latent aura in this piece of rock that had elicited the vision? How was he supposed to make use of a piece of stone? Even after standing right in front of it for a minute, he hadn't felt any benefits to any aspect of his cultivation.

The piece of rubble might not look like much, but its aura still beckoned him, telling Zac to take it and make it his. Even so, Zac stayed in place for a couple of minutes to scan both the stone and the cave for

any threats. It was just too eerie finding this thing here, waiting for anyone to take it, and he didn't trust his Danger Sense would work against items of this level.

But there was simply nothing, and Zac eventually chose to follow his instincts. He jumped down, but his eyes suddenly widened in alarm as his landing kicked up a plume of dust. However, it wasn't because of the stone, and Zac ferociously swung his axe in an overhead arc. Unfortunately, his attack missed, and Zac growled upon seeing a familiar figure appear right next to the piece of rubble.

It was the dour man who had tried to get him into trouble the day they set out. His name was Kuru Cera, and he was one of the cultivators whose job was to scout ahead of the group. Of course, that didn't mean Kuru Cera was harmless – apart from joining groups as a scout, he was also rumored to moonlight as an assassin.

"I knew I did the right thing following you," Kuru snickered as he looked down at the piece of rubble. "You moved with far too much purpose as you swam past the lakebed. I knew you had something profitable in mind."

Zac neither confirmed nor denied it, but he was inwardly extremely annoyed he had been exposed. He had kept a constant vigil to avoid this exact situation, but scouting simply wasn't his strong suit. Since the scout never had any intent to kill or even harm him, his Danger Sense hadn't warned him at all. And Kuru had surprisingly good skills to both hid his presence and his aura, allowing him to stalk Zac all the way here.

"You don't want to get involved in this," Zac eventually said as his killing intent started to permeate the cave.

"Not so fast," Kuru grinned as he tapped the token on his waist. "Were you asleep during the briefings? Attack me, and the Void Gate will hunt you down. And according to the rules of our employers, finder's keepers. I'm not sure what made you hunt down this shitty rock, but my gut tells me it's my ticket to prominence."

There was nothing else to say, and Zac suddenly flashed forward, propelled by [Earthstrider]. If he could snatch the piece, then great. If he failed... Then he might have to find out how accurate these tokens were. Unfortunately, while Zac was quick, the scout was a proper Dexterity-based cultivator.

Kuru's hand turned to a blur as he snatched the rock just before Zac's outstretched hand could reach it, prompting Zac to seamlessly transition his lunge into a swing.

"Wh-" Kuru said, clearly shocked Zac actually dared to attack.

However, the scout didn't get a chance to finish his sentence, but not because of Zac's killing blow. A silent pulse was suddenly released from the stone, and Kuru instantaneously turned into ashy dust that kicked up a storm as Zac's axe passed right through. At first, Zac was elated that bastard got his just desserts, but that feeling only lasted until he saw the particles falling from his own outstretched hand.

He, too, was falling apart.