

The Fall 709

Chapter 709: Agent of Chaos

Catheya blankly looked back and forth between Zac and the firmly embedded nail that soon disappeared, clearly shocked at having her work being finished so crudely.

"You...!" Catheya stuttered, but she quickly regained her bearings. "Fine, it should still work. What a brute, so impatient."

She waved her hand and a blinding snowstorm suddenly spread out from their location, and Varo followed up with his shroud of darkness. Catheya then gripped both his and Varo's hands, and Zac felt his surroundings lurch. The next moment they were thousands of meters away, hidden among the normal Cork Trees.

Catheya hurriedly took out an array disk from her Spatial Ring, and it immediately started to emit soothing ripples into the surroundings as they started running. Zac felt a slight pressure on his mind a moment later, and he realized that someone was scanning the area. Thankfully, the pressure soon moved, no doubt thanks to the array Catheya had taken out.

"It passed us by," Catheya whispered, her mouth crooking upward as she looked at Zac. "You really got the job done. Though I might deduct some style points for being so crude with the array."

"You can't hold it against me. That guy was way too strong, and his helpers had arrived," Zac muttered with some helplessness. "We only succeeded at all since he wasn't willing to go all-out at the start."

"Don't worry, you went above and beyond what could be expected," Catheya laughed. "You were quite impressive. Your skillset is a bit disjointed, but you have clearly found a path of your own. I'm a bit jealous."

Zac snorted, not forgetting to keep vigil of the surroundings as they escaped in the same direction they came from. All in all, he was pretty happy with the outcome as well. He didn't manage to complete his combat style, but its framework was already formed. Zac had thought it would take months, but fighting one powerhouse could save a lot of time, it looks like.

Now he just needed to keep sharpening it against opponents, hopefully ones not as unkillable, or as gentle, as the treeman.

The trio kept running for another hour, avoiding any cultivator groups thanks to Catheya's uncanny senses. However, they stopped when they heard an extremely loud thunder that reached all the way to their bones. The group looked to the sky, but there was nothing but the occasional scattered cloud blocking an otherwise clear sky.

Catheya's eyes lit up, and she turned around toward where they came from. Zac followed suit, just in time to see the whole mother tree topple over with a deafening crash. Thousands of trees were pushed to the ground from the shockwave, and a storm of life-attuned energies reached for the sky as Zac and the other two were thrown off their feet.

The scene was almost blinding to Zac with his abyssal eyes, and it reminded him of the incursion pillars. The pillar didn't actually disappear either, but it rather kept spewing out energy as though the tree had

been a stopper to an underground geyser of pure life. It looked like the spike had worked as intended, though it took some time for it to finish the job.

Zac had opened his Ladder screen a couple of times over the past hour, but he was a lot more hopeful this time around.

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 39,746 Rank: 7,541. Value: 100-250.]

His contribution points had made a tremendous leap, increasing by almost five times thanks to getting roughly half of the contribution for felling the tree. Zac didn't know how the System calculated contribution, but he felt it was fair enough. He guessed that Varo only got a few percent while Catheya took the rest. It was great news since it proved that Zac didn't lose out even if he only acted as a meat shield.

The sudden boost had pushed him all the way to the top 10,000, which was a huge improvement since he had steadily dropped to the 300,000th spot as all the participants entered. It was impossible to make any exact assumptions since there were so many ways to gain contribution, but he guessed that there were at least 6,000 people who possessed a Life-or-Death Dao Branch in this trial.

The other ones ahead of him most likely had a combination of forming a Peak Dao Fragment along with points from slaughter and destruction.

"Isn't that something? I wasn't holding out much hope for the trial, but perhaps I'll be pleasantly surprised," Catheya smiled before she turned away from the fallen tree.

Zac understood what she was talking about. He had observed his employer over the past fights and he could make deductions by now. She most likely had two Daos, with the main one being related to ice. She had also used a death-attuned Dao a few times, mostly while tinkering with the corpses she had collected during the trial.

He had sensed that the terrifying ice flower she used to take out two ambushers was imbued with a braid of the two as well, with ice being the leader.

Her current bounty was 100-250, but Zac estimated that she was in the lower span of the range while he was in the upper part. That didn't make her weak, but rather that her main focus wasn't valued by the "Tapestry of Twilight". It was possible there were many other powerful warriors out there in a similar situation; holding powerful Daos that weren't related to Life or Death.

"So, any guesses why we did this? I mean topple the tree specifically," Zac finally asked. "Was it to release all that life energy?"

"I'm guessing it has something to do with the living pulse," Catheya eventually said after some thought. "The mothertree doesn't seem to have much value. Its wood is pretty durable, but it's not a treasure-wood."

"Then what?"

"If I had to guess, I'd venture the tree was a node in an enormous natural formation spanning either a part of the Twilight Ocean, or even the whole thing. We're either modifying or destroying that formation by hitting some of the nodes," Catheya said. "And don't ask me why, I have no idea."

"Won't that guy or someone else just fix it now that we're gone?" Zac curiously asked.

"Perhaps, but does it really matter?" Catheya grinned. "We finished our job. If someone wants to undo the damage we caused, what do I care? Besides, that guy is powerful, but I don't think he has the means to revert our actions. The tree falling most likely set off a chain reaction that is hard to stem."

"There's quite some distance from the peak," Zac muttered. "I couldn't even hurt him, and we barely delayed him a minute."

"Why are you complaining? You know who that was?" Catheya chortled. "It was Yanub Mettleleaf, one of the top E-grade warriors in the whole Twilight Harbor. We're lucky it wasn't some life-or-death battle, and rather that he simply was upset about us harming the mothertree. We're also pretty lucky it was a young treant who arrived rather than a squad of killers. A lot of the treemen are pacifists, and not that skilled in killing arts. Of course, that's until you get them properly enraged."

Zac wasn't surprised to hear the treant was someone famous considering the power he unleashed by the end. Furthermore, he actually recognized the name from the information missives he had prepared. Yanub was ranked in the top thousand among the hundreds of millions of E-grade warriors in Twilight Harbor. He was over three hundred years old as well, and the consensus was that he had delayed his evolution almost a century to participate in this Twilight Ascent.

Such an action would rob most human cultivators of their momentum, but treemen could simply take root and go semi-comatose. They barely made any progress in cultivation that way, but their aging was drastically slowed as well. It was almost like entering a time dilation zone that sped time up rather than slowed it down.

Furthermore, those listings weren't too accurate, as the exact strength of all those peak characters was unknown, especially this close to a Twilight Ascent. Yanub might barely be in the top 5000, or he might be aiming for a top 100 spot. It was hard to tell for Zac who hadn't encountered too many elites at the peak of E-grade.

"How would you rank someone like that in this trial?" Zac curiously asked.

"He wasn't some peak character," Catheya slowly said. "He's a second seed talent who most likely has mostly exhausted his potential for the E-grade. In Twilight Harbor he might be considered a first seed due to having formed a Dao Branch, but I doubt it. His great power mostly comes from time rather than talent. I'd say he has a good shot at top 1000, even 500 if his experiences sharpen him a bit."

"Seeds?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Just a way to categorize potential. A second seed could be seen as one of the ten most talented cultivators of a generation. A first seed cultivator is someone who only appears once every few generations. Above that is the Heaven's Chosen, extreme talents who might only appear once every thousand generations in a clan," Catheya said. "These kinds of talents are often eligible for unique stipends and opportunities from the Empires they belong to."

"Alright," Zac nodded, but he frowned when Catheya stared at him expectantly. "... Thank you?"

"What thank you!" Catheya spat with annoyance. "Aren't you going to ask what seed I am?!"

Zac looked at Catheya for a few seconds as they kept running. "Second seed perhaps?"

"Well, whatever," Catheya huffed, which caused Zac to smile a bit since he felt he had hit bullseye. "We're here."

Zac looked around in confusion, but it was just the same river they had run along for the past ten minutes. He glanced at Catheya quizzically, but she just shot him a grimace before jumping into the waters. Varo was right on her heels, and Zac eventually followed suit. Zac soon found Catheya swimming toward a dense patch of seaweed, and he realized there was a hard-to-spot tunnel behind a boulder.

They swam inside, and the waters were soon replaced by a dry underground cave. It just looked like a decent hideout, but Catheya took out another array disk and put it against the wall, causing another entrance to emerge.

"A secret shipyard, there are thousands spread throughout the island," Catheya explained as they reached a large well-lit cave. "This one was created by an elder of the Eldritch Archivals a long time ago. The undead are always outnumbered in this place, and she figured she'd be safer when hiding beneath a life-stream."

In the middle, the huge tree trunk of the cork tree was placed on a few beams. Its crown was already cut off and thrown to the side, and there were three small mountains of wood chippings to indicate the hollowing-out were well underway.

Zac couldn't see Yod and Sharpo, but judging from the sawdust that kept being thrown out from a hatch in the trunk, he guessed they were fast at work hollowing the thing out. Qirai was instead holding a massive brush, and she was coating the coarse bark in some unknown black tar that held a strong and refreshing aroma of death.

"Oh, Mistress!" Qirai exclaimed when she saw the trio enter the shipyard, and two heads soon emerged from within the trunk. "Is it done? We felt an earthquake just before."

"It's done," Catheya nodded. "How are things going here?"

"It's not too bad. We just can't exert too much force on the wood without risking forming hidden cracks," Qirai said. "It'll be another hour or two."

"Good job," Catheya nodded before she imprinted some information into a crystal and turned to Zac. "These are the interior plans. Your sections are marked and you can change them as you wish as long as you don't weaken the structural integrity. Oh, and don't use your putrefying abilities to dig, I don't want our ship to turn into a rotten piece of scrap in two days."

Zac snorted before he jumped into the enormous trunk. He was pretty anxious to leave this place after the ruckus they caused, and if he needed to become a carpenter to make that happen, then so be it. The two had made some decent progress so far, but how could they compare to a Hatchetman? Zac's arm turned into a blur as huge shavings were cut off around him.

The wood was pretty strong, but it was nothing to even [Rakan's Roar] when it was imbued with the Fragment of the Axe. One room after another was created with speed visible to the naked eye, each one crafted with pinpoint precision. Zac might not be able to craft things with fractals, but it wasn't anything difficult to cut out things following a map.

Qirai had thought it would take up to two hours to finish the preparations inside, but through Zac's effort, the interiors were done in less than thirty minutes. Sharpo and Yod had even decided to get out of his way and instead opted to help Qirai coat the hull. Soon enough it was all done, at which point Catheya produced a massive sheet of fabric.

It was covered in thousands and thousands of crystals and fractals, and Zac looked on with interest as she spread it across the vessel. Qirai, Yod and Zac eventually helped lift the whole tree, and Varo and Catheya finished the wrap to completely enclose the trunk. Catheya jumped inside the submersible a moment later, no doubt to install the inner components of the array.

The group waited for another 20 minutes, at which point they finally sensed the array come to life. The huge tarp changed color to look just like the pitch-black coating before it melded with the wood itself. Left behind were only inscribed patterns and embedded crystals on the bark.

The transformation wasn't done there, as the vessel shrunk to just a third of its original size, no doubt to make it more durable and harder to spot. He didn't know if there was a spatial array among the large number of fractals, but even if there were none, he knew the vessel wouldn't be cramped. He had hollowed out most of the rooms, and he knew that thirty people would comfortably fit inside even after the ship shrunk, let alone six.

"Impressive," Zac muttered.

"Our mistress has her means," Qirai proudly said to the side. "Come, make yourself useful and help carry this thing to the dock."

The dock was a large pool at the back end of the cave, and they simply threw their new vessel into the waters to make sure it wasn't leaking. Everything looked fine, and a minute later the whole group had boarded as the ship sailed at the bottom of the river, heading for the closest outlet into the Twilight Ocean.

The group, except Varo who was off somewhere steering the submarine, sat in a meeting hall, and most looked a lot more comfortable compared to before. The coating alone helped keep out some of the life attunement, and the purity array was already up and running as well, with Qirai holding the black orb that was its core.

"There we go, everything went according to plan," Catheya smiled.

"What's our next step?" Zac asked.

"There are three more places we need to visit on the way to the Life-Death Pearls. We will make use of the Living Pulse for speed between these spots, after which we'll head for the location of the pearls," Catheya explained.

"What about all the treasures around us?" Sharpo asked.

"We're still in the outer parts of the Twilight Ocean. Treasures are sparse, and chances of finding something good are pretty low. This vessel does have some scanning capabilities though, and we will stop if we spot something interesting. Otherwise, we'll proceed at full speed toward richer waters," Catheya said.

Sharpo looked a bit disappointed, no doubt hoping to make use of the safety of the group to find some more troves. Zac was more than fine with the current plan though. If anything, he wanted to head toward the deeper waters as soon as possible. The quicker he could get his hands on the life-death pearls, the quicker he could improve his Daos and move on toward his other goals.

In fact, he wanted to split off from the group as quickly as possible. Hanging around Catheya with her hidden goals was asking for trouble. This time it worked out fine with the Mettleleaf guy, to the point that Zac even gained some insights. But who knew who'd crop up the next time?

Also, the 'helpful' purification arrays that she had erected in this vessel actually did more harm than good for his cultivation.

The arrays were turning a part of the Twilight Energy into normal Miasma, which did nothing for him since he wasn't a cultivator. Twilight Energy had the odd ability to burrow into people whether they liked it or not, which was what allowed his soul and [Void Heart] to continuously absorb the energies.

The meeting went on for a few more minutes until Varo's voice echoed out through a speaker.

"We have left Cork Island."

"Alright," Catheya smiled. "Everyone is free for now. Remember the rolling schedule for the purification array. Each member's chambers have been equipped with a daughter node. Use that one to empower the Array when it's your turn."

Finally, things had calmed down, and the fifty-meter long tree trunk shot through the depths, its advance powered both by the arrays and the nearby stream cutting through the ocean. Two weeks passed without much happening until they closed in on a cave called the Divine Grotto.

It wasn't quite as impressive as it sounded though. The cave was just a mine that had a lot of life-attuned spiritual metals. No one in the party cared about those kinds of things even if there was a small chance of finding very valuable metals in the depths of the tunnels. It wasn't that people didn't like money, but rather that the Divine Grotto would soon quickly fill up with living cultivators looking for a relatively safe place to gather some wealth.

But the group still entered after stowing away the submersible. Three hours later they emerged again, swimming for their lives. This time their assailants weren't Dreamers, but rather a few thousand crab-like creatures that didn't take kindly to Catheya installing a weird gathering array that started drawing miasma into the whole grotto.

There was even a massive Half-Step D-grade boss in the mix, which forced everyone to throw out a series of defensive barriers to block the exit long enough to summon the submersible and escape. Zac wasn't certain what would happen to the Divine Grotto after their sabotage, but he guessed that the Divine Materials wouldn't be quite as divine after a year or two.

After that, it was on to the next one of Catheya's targets, and Zac felt he was fast becoming an agent of chaos.