

The Fall 741

Chapter 741: Gathering Strength

Zac eventually woke up from his comatose state, and his eyes feeling like they were full of gravel as every part of his body hurt. He swallowed another Healing Pill with a grimace as he stowed away the Void Beast organ. It looked shriveled like an oversized raisin compared to when he bought it, and Zac guessed that it had lost more than eighty percent of its remaining energy while he was unconscious.

Part of it was probably because of him absorbing some of it while unconscious, but most had most likely been eroded by the extremely dense ambient energy in the tunnels. It was a bit of a blow, but not the end of the world. Some of the energy that entered [Void Heart] was always turned into Void Energy. Certainly, it wasn't nearly as efficient as absorbing the energy from the Void Heart, but it was enough as long as he didn't constantly use it.

The tunnels were completely silent, and there were no immediate threats. So Zac didn't immediately set out, instead opting to go over the situation. First of all, he opened his quest screen since he didn't get a proper chance to go over things before.

Reciprocity (Unique, Limited): Surrender a glimpse of Chaos. Reward: - (0/1) [590d]

[NOTE: Failure to comply will result in loss of 10 levels and one random Dao.]

Eight days.

He had been unconscious eight days after almost becoming a treat for the enormous snake. Even then, his body was in a pretty wretched state. That wasn't to say there hadn't been any gains from the ordeal. First of all, he had gained another huge chunk of Contribution Points, further cementing his lead on the ladder.

He had no idea what the source of the points was though. Just maiming the octopus wasn't enough. Zac's thoughts turned to those mysterious mountains that had risen from the depths of the chasm to assist the enormous snake, and he felt it might be connected to them. They had clearly contained a lot of mysterious energy, and they had in a way been destroyed because of his actions.

Another gain was that he had actually managed to push [Abyssal Phase] from middle to high mastery. Being chased by a primordial beast was clearly an effective method to squeeze out one's potential, though Zac definitely wouldn't try something like that again.

With the Void Beast organ being mostly depleted, Zac instead opted to crush a Supreme Nexus Crystal as he started using [Surging Vitality]. Progress was slow, and he sighed in regret that he hadn't upgraded the skill along with class skills back in the Greengrove Archipelago.

The slow recuperation at least gave him some time to reorient himself and plan his next step. The situation was pretty complicated before, and things had only gotten even more convoluted after he managed to mess with the Twilight Lord. With his ladder position being exposed to the world, he was probably not only the target of Uona, but also the other top rankers.

Zac wasn't as worried about them as he was about the Twilight Lord though. It didn't take a genius to realize that the elusive master of the Twilight Harbor was mixed up with the odd events in this trial, and

the formation flags that Zac had destroyed might have been integral to his plans. After all, they were not only planted so deep in the chasm that no trial-taker could mess with them, but they even had that terrifying guardian beast.

Not only that, but Zac had been forced into making a deal with the System, and he knew the odds of coming out on top in such an endeavor pretty slim. Certainly, Zac didn't need some quest to tell him to get the two remnants. He had already planned to do so as soon as he got out of the Twilight Chasm.

But it had only been an opportunity to become stronger before. If it didn't work out, then fine, but now he once more found himself with his back against the wall. Before, it was still possible for him to sneak out through one of the exits if things proved too volatile on the surface, but that was out of the question with the looming punishment.

There was also the issue of the Glimpse of Chaos. While he had planned on snatching the two remnants, he hadn't planned on using them to conjure another one of those Chaos Patterns. Not only had it messed with his pathways last time, just gazing on it had almost destroyed his soul.

Besides, the scene was extremely attention-grabbing. Last time he'd at least been inside the Tower of Eternity where not even an Autarch could spy on him, but if he unleashed a Chaos Pattern in this place, there was a good chance someone would notice, and possibly even record the events.

There wasn't much to do about it though, since he simply refused to lose one of his Daos. Seeing as it was a punishment from the System, Zac doubted he'd be able to simply "regrow" the Dao with some treasures in case it was taken from him. The question was how to complete the mission without getting himself killed or his real identity exposed.

Luckily, the System wouldn't send the repo man for his Dao Fragment just yet. He had almost two years before the time limit, and he was already planning on being long gone from this place by then. It also gave him some wiggle-room to prepare himself for what waited on the surface.

There was no reason to leave the Twilight Chasm just yet. His scheduled rendezvous with Catheya was more than half a year away, and he was better off using that time to empower himself than setting out as is. Forming a Dao Branch was his best option to gain an edge against the top contestants of the trial, but he knew that goal was all but impossible right now.

Just a few months had passed since evolving all three of his Fragments, and he was severely lacking the foundation to immediately push toward a branch. It was one thing if he was planning to fuse his Daos, but this time he was aiming for evolutions. That meant he would have to essentially double his insights in one go.

That didn't mean he was out of options. There was still his soul, and he was thankfully ensconced in the perfect place to improve it. Doing so would bring all kinds of benefits, the most important of which was the ability to better withstand the Remnants. He wasn't too worried if it was just the one set, but he had no idea what would happen when with multiple sets in his body.

The only point of reference he had was the peak E-grade cultivator who caused the downfall of the Eastern Trigram Sect back in the hunt. He had absorbed two Splinters of Oblivion and had subsequently been reduced to an extremely powerful lunatic. In contrast, Anzonil's disciple had been able to withstand the madness for almost a decade after having absorbed one set.

The difference was remarkable, but there were too many variables involved to draw any clear conclusions. But it was clear that the effect of the remnants increased the more of them you swallowed. Anything he could do to better deal with such a situation was of utmost importance. Besides, the stronger his soul became, the better he would be able to utilize his Dao in battle.

His crude Dao Braids were extremely powerful, but it was a crutch that he needed to be in an excitable state like when he fought the Octopus for the braids to form fast enough. Another reincarnation would hopefully shore up that weakness, allowing him to freely use Dao Braids in battle.

Having decided on his course, Zac spent the next five days slowly getting back into shape, mixed with running his Soul Cultivation arrays to stave off the Twilight Energy. Resetting his bones wasn't too hard with his constitution, but there were quite a bit of the foreign energies stubbornly left in his body after his frantic escape, mostly the Dao from the snake.

The [Purity of the Void]-node was working hard at expelling it, but there was simply a difference of level between the two, making progress slow. Still, most of the damage from the two berserking treasures was dealt with while he was unconscious, and he had regained most of his fighting strength by now.

Completely recovering would take a bit longer, but he had already wasted over two weeks. He could technically stay here and cultivate, but it would cost unnecessary resources. Gaining [Void Zone] had allowed him to stay further down than he would before, but there was not much of a point doing so. The Twilight Energy was essentially poison even to him, and exposing himself to more than he had to was just foolish, especially now that he had lost his source of Void Energy.

Besides, he was too close for comfort to the area where he had encountered the snake. In a perfect world, he'd want to set off to a completely different section of the Twilight Chasm, but he'd settle for putting a few day's worth of travel between himself and this place, in case it decided to come knocking after recovering.

Before leaving Zac first doused himself in a healthy amount of a grey mixture. It made him look like he had rolled around in a pile of ash, but it was something far more expensive. It was a compound that helped weaken any potential karmic threads, a more potent version of what he had gotten from Catheya back in the Tower of Eternity.

He hadn't planned on using the compound until just before leaving the Twilight Ocean, but an extra application seemed pertinent after meeting the Twilight Lord's guardian. The mixture gradually dried across his body until it looked like pieces of clay that fell off one by one. Only then was he ready to leave the area.

The tunnel system he found himself in was just one confusing maze, and having run through them in a muddled state didn't make things any better. He simply kept going further into the mountain, away from where he came, occasionally changing paths into one that seemed to lead toward the surface. All the while he kept his [Void Zone] going, since traveling without it keeping the Twilight Energy at bay was extremely slow. It forced him to occasionally top up from his already dwindling reserves of Void Energy, but time was of the essence.

The area was just like the tunnels below the Living Pulse. Some of the sections were submerged, whereas others were kept dry thanks to a number of Spiritual Herbs producing gases. And it wasn't

always oxygen as Zac found out. He suddenly stumbled, his vision swimming as he breathed a sweet aroma.

His eyes widened, and he quickly swallowed an Antidote Pill before he dove into the waters of a nearby tunnel.

It was just in time as well as two previously lifeless roots barely missed snatching him up, moving with enough speed to cause small cracks in the air. Missing once wasn't enough to deter them though, and they dove into the tunnel after Zac. His mind was a bit muddled by the noxious mists, but not even Poison Masters would have as many points in Vitality as he did.

Coupled with his hidden node and the Antidote pill, he was almost instantly back in fighting condition, and [Verun's Bite] ripped through the roots as he made his way back into the poisonous tunnel. The source of the poison became apparent soon enough – there were actually a number of small flowers on the very roots that had tried to snatch him up.

The perpetrator was actually not even in the tunnel itself, and Zac followed a series of increasingly frantic roots hundreds of meters into a nearby tunnel where a massive tangled mess of a plant commanded most of the free space. It was a twenty-meter-tall ball of squirming roots, and it had appendages that stretched into over a dozen pathways.

Zac wasn't sure if it had planted itself on an intersection, or if it had actually dug the paths itself, but this was no time to worry about that as over fifty poisonous vines and roots shot out toward him. The power of the plant seemed to be equivalent of a bottom-rung Beast King, but Zac wasn't too worried. He was currently in his human form, and his class was almost tailor-made for this type of enemy.

The large cave was soon filled with another source of verdure; the spectral forest of [Hatchetman's Spirit]. Zac's already sharp senses from [Forester's Constitution] were immediately supercharged, and he wove back and forth between the roots as large blades formed like leaves slashed into the frenzied leaves.

It was nature versus nature in a ruthless conquest for supremacy. Even in Zac's weakened state, the roots and vines simply had no way to reach him as [Verun's Bite] wove a tapestry of death around him. However, the poisonous mists were growing increasingly dense, to the point that even he was starting to have trouble dealing with it.

Out of better options, Zac quickly threw out five talismans which erupted into a conflagration of white-hot flames that consumed the whole cave. However, the flames didn't linger, but rather consumed the whole place before disappearing like a flash. The tangle was pretty much unscathed by the flames, but most of the toxic pollen was gone, incinerated by the offensive talismans.

Zac took the opportunity and started pushing toward the core of the plant. He had already cut enough roots to make a year's worth of firewood, yet they just kept coming. Just like a Beast King, a plant of this grade contained an immense amount of energy, and it would most likely be able to keep conjuring more roots long after Zac had exhausted himself. He needed to strike at its core.

His finishing skills would probably be able to take the thing out in one quick go, but Zac felt it was a waste. This was a proper D-grade Spiritual Herb, and some part of it was bound to be useful or valuable.

Completely shredding the plant was too much of a waste, and Zac instead waded into the depths of the tangle.

A frantic struggle ensued between Zac and the spirit herb. One minute later the roots started to wildly shudder before they lifelessly slumped down on the ground. Zac crawled out of the tangled mess a little bit later, an odd seed-like item in his hand.

It was around thirty centimeters across, and it was once the source of all the roots. There was a large crack across its surface, left after Zac had slammed his axe into it. It had released a lot of the stored energy, but Zac simply found no other way to “kill” the thing. He put the core in a jade box before stowing it away, quickly leaving in case some more powerful beast or plant was attracted by the noise.

Zac kept a slow pace over the next few days, taking the time to clean out the tunnels of anything of value. There was quite a bit of wildlife in the tunnels as well, most various types of insects at the peak of E-grade. He did meet two Beast Kings as well, but he was only forced to fight one, with the other one refusing to leave its nest. The latter one got to live, with the former was cleaved in two by [Raptorous Divide].

He did gain a few thousand contribution points through his efforts, but none of the treasures he found appeared as valuable as the things he had looted on the mountain peaks further down in the depths. Still, he had found quite a few herbs that would most likely raise some eyebrows in Twilight Harbor, many of which weren't even listed in his information missives.

More impressively, he had actually stumbled upon a vast submerged cave where almost four thousand Twilight Plants grew. He unhesitantly harvested every single fruit, increasing his store tenfold. He had already given up on the Fate Plucking-ladder, but these things were still pretty useful even outside of the competition.

The ambient energy in the tunnels was gradually decreasing, but it was still far too powerful to deal with without using [Void Zone] while traveling, and the organ was fast running dry. He had initially wanted to travel for a while longer, but it was time to start looking for a good spot to cultivate. As long as he stopped, he would be able to withstand the Twilight Energy easier while stationary, since he could simply crush Nexus Crystals then.

But for some reason, the ambient energy was actually increasing rather than decreasing, even though he kept ascending through the tunnels. The reason soon became apparent as he spotted a crude golden-green crystal embedded in the tunnel wall. He had actually stumbled upon a Twilight Crystal Vein.

Most people would be pretty happy to find money growing out of the walls, but Zac swore in annoyance as he increased his pace, flashing through the tunnels in hopes of making it through the energy-dense area as soon as possible. However, he suddenly stopped after thirty minutes as he spotted something curious; a small crack in the wall.

The crack itself wasn't very interesting, but it was rather the fact that Twilight Energy was continuously being dragged into the small opening that was interesting. Was the density lower on the other side of this wall? Zac immediately swapped over to his Draugr form, and he activated [Abyssal Phase] and shot in. The wall actually hundreds of meters thick, but he shot through it in a second.

He returned to his physical form the moment the area opened up, and his eyes widened when he looked at the brightly illuminated chamber he found himself in. The walls were completely covered in Twilight Crystals, every single one of them of supreme grade and at least as large as a football. There were tens of thousands of them too, a fortune for most E-grade cultivators.

Yet, the ambient energy was far lower in this chamber compared to outside, and it was all because of a massive crystal in the middle of the room. It was as large as Zac was and covered in esoteric markings that seemed to have formed naturally. More importantly, it continuously absorbed the energy that the Supreme Twilight Crystals exuded, causing a rapid drop in the invasive ambient energy.

Zac wasn't exactly sure what he was looking at, he knew two things for sure. First of all, that thing was a treasure, something even greater than the items he had looted on the mountain peaks.

Secondly, he had found the perfect cultivation cave.