

## The Fall 700

### Chapter 700: First Culling

The situation with the Twilight Energy was even better than Zac had anticipated, but he wouldn't take anything for granted going forward. He was still at the outer edge of the Mystic Realm where the Twilight Energy was at its weakest. Who knew if he would be able to so effortlessly deal with the environment in the inner reaches. For example, his [Void Heart] couldn't infinitely swallow energy. It followed a cycle of absorption, purification, and release.

The same was true for his soul. He hadn't figured quite out what was going on, but his Soul Aperture wasn't a true world. There should be limits on how much energy it could absorb before it became satiated. Finally, the elites of the trial would still be able to exhibit pretty much their full power all the way to the midway point from what he had gathered, so he definitely wasn't able to run amok with this small advantage.

Putting the matter of Twilight Energy aside, Zac eventually reached the small forest of swaying seaweed, and his arm turned into a blur as he cut down over a dozen plants that emitted a weak hint of spirituality. His actions didn't garner him a single contribution point though, proving that there was no point in just wantonly destroying the surroundings to 'Release Dao'. It probably had to be real treasures to count.

Having gotten a decent understanding of the situation he finally took out the small black stone he got from Catheya and infused it with some Miasma. He soon sensed a number of distant presences, with one particular connection being far stronger than the others. It was hard to accurately estimate how far away Catheya was, but he felt it would take a couple of hours to get there.

Even then, her starting location seemed pretty lucky, just like his. Catheya should already be out in the ocean by the looks of things, while most of the markers were pointing toward the continent where most people were dropped off. They would probably have a much harder time gathering up with the ruthless rules of the trial. Of course, he didn't expect his own journey to be completely free from worries.

[Love's Bond] appeared on his back and he started to make his way forward, choosing to run on the bottom of the ocean, his movement slightly boosted by small bursts of Miasma. Moving on the beach would definitely be easier, but people would keep appearing one after another on the shores and further inside the continent. The entrance time was staggered, but it would still be a bloodbath as over ten million participants would come flooding inside.

A pang of danger suddenly erupted, and Zac looked down with surprise at a spear shooting out from the ocean floor. It was infused with a powerful penetrative force, but it wasn't at a level that that could kill him. Still, Zac pushed himself away by expelling a burst of Miasma, but his brows rose when he found himself stuck after moving just fifty meters.

An azure rope had appeared out of nowhere and attached itself to him, and it was connected to a large totem that had appeared right where the ambush took place. It was five meters in height, and it looked a bit like an anchor that was dug into the seabed. Zac immediately understood it was some sort of binding skill, not dissimilar from the array the cultists had used against him a long time ago.

A living humanoid rose from the sandy floor the next moment, and he gave Zac a look of superiority after confirming he was caught by the rope. He actually spoke up as well, another odd feature of the Twilight Ocean that Zac had read about before. Sound traveled just fine in the liquid, though voices appeared slightly muted.

“Good catch, a Draugr! I’m sorry, but you will have to become fertilizer for my pa- HEURK!” The man didn’t get any further as a black chain had exploded out from the sandy ground and wound itself around his leg.

The next moment he was dragged like a ragdoll toward Zac, who had already summoned [Rakan's Roar] and activated [Gorehew]. The man flailed about as he tried to stop the chain, and he even managed to launch an extremely powerful stab at the black links of [Love’s Bond]. Unfortunately for him, Zac had already infused the chain with the Fragment of the Coffin, allowing it to withstand the attack.

A moment later he was dragged right in front of Zac, and a haze of blood spread through the area a moment later as two pieces of a decapitated corpse slowly landed on the ocean floor. Zac shook his head in reproach as he quickly looted the corpse and his spatial ring before he ran away. He should have known that the contribution value of cultivators wouldn’t be visible unless he actually spotted targets, making it useless as a way to prevent ambushes.

Luckily, the attacker was most likely some young lordling who had never in a real struggle of life and death. His power wasn’t too bad; both his restrictive skill and the proficiency he displayed when striking his fetters were respectable. But his actual combat experience was utterly lacking.

What kind of fool stops to talk in the middle of a death match? It allowed Zac to send a chain into the ground and ambush the spearman right back. Certainly, Zac would still have defeated him soon enough, but it would have wasted some time. And any second wasted was another moment some real powerhouse might target him.

It was a good reminder of how dangerous things could get even out in the seemingly empty waters. The weaker cultivators were definitely just trying to hide and survive at this moment, while the more powerful and ruthless people took advantage of the early chaos to gather some wealth and contribution points.

At least he had gained 102 Contribution Points from the lesson, indicating that Zac should be in the upper part of his Value span of 100-250. After all, Zac doubted that the young lordling had anything better than a Middle-Stage Dao Fragment. Otherwise, he wouldn't have fallen so easily.

A large amount of Miasma stormed into the skill fractal for the movement skill on his chest, and the world suddenly inverted after almost two seconds had passed. He had activated [Abyssal Phase] multiple times by now, but he was still filled with marvel as he felt his incorporeal form. He could barely be considered a ghost at the moment, rather a congregation of miasmic energies.

Activating the skill normally didn’t take him to that ancient darkness, but the skill rather turned the world monochrome the moment it activated. However, it turned out that the Twilight Ocean had an interesting effect on his augmented vision.

When he had used the skill in his courtyard everything mostly stayed the same except objects looked like they had turned into energy instead. The effect even allowed him to see through walls to some extent, but not pass through them. But here in the things had undergone a more drastic change.

Some plants and stones on the ocean floor shone like small beacons, whereas other items were so muted they almost seemed invisible. Other features on the seafloor looked mottled like they were full of faults and holes. Zac quickly realized what was going on.

Some of the items in the Twilight Ocean were like some trees in the Dead Zone; they had an extremely pure aura of life even when surrounded by death. Similarly, some plant life and even materials only retained half of the Twilight Energy, expelling the other half. And the purely life-attuned materials around him had turned extremely bleak when he entered his current form.

It was pretty interesting since it was almost the opposite of his normal Draugr-vision where life-force was clearly visible to his eyes unless it was masked. Still, Zac's main goal was currently to get away since it was possible more powerful warriors could arrive at any moment. His blob of energy pushed forward through the seemingly frozen water with amazing speed, each second taking him over five hundred meters from his original position.

Only when he had moved ten kilometers from where he fought did he stop. He looked around and saw no powerful signatures around, at which point he returned into his corporeal form. With a flash, the world turned back to normal, and a scan indicated he really was alone unless someone could hide from his peak mastery [Cosmic Gaze]. Zac activated [Spiritual Anchor] to scan his body just in case, but the spear wielder hadn't left any brands on him before dying.

Only then did Zac keep moving, this time working even harder to mask his aura. In normal situations, he would do the opposite and blast his killing intent to keep opportunists at bay, but he felt that might have an opposite effect in this place. It felt like a better idea to move along the lush undergrowth at the ocean floor while masking his aura.

Even then Zac was attacked twice over the following ten minutes among the corals and rocky outcroppings at the bottom of the Twilight Ocean, and the attackers were actually both undead this time around. One of the battles ended with a Corpselord getting trapped and bisected by [Blighted Cut], but the second attacker instantly fled the moment he realized that he had attacked someone far too powerful.

Zac snorted in annoyance but he didn't pursue. The attacker's Contribution Value was marked as 50-100, and Zac wouldn't follow him toward dry land for something like that. The previous two targets didn't possess many valuables except their equipment and pills either, except a few top-quality healing pills. He instead kept moving forward ignoring most people he saw in the distance.

Four hours passed, during which Zac found himself embroiled in eight consecutive battles, including one where he was forced to trap the attacker inside [Profane Seal] before using an escape talisman. It wasn't that Zac was completely overmatched, but the attacker was pretty powerful and she had activated some sort of communication crystal. It was better to get out of there before he found himself besieged.

Finally, Zac closed in on Catheya's location. She had been steadily been moving out from the shore at a middling pace, which no doubt was the best option considering how hectic things were on land at the

moment. He was moving further and further away from the starting continent, but he could still sense energy eruptions every single minute from desperate battles on the shores.

His ranking had steadily dropped over the past hours as well, and he was currently relegated all the way to 64,334. Part of it was no doubt thanks to the constant flow of participants, but he guessed that some had passed him by through slaughter as well. He only started with a bit over 6,000 Contribution Points, and he had already made five hundred points without even trying. Some fiends had probably accrued thousands of points by this point.

The best bet for Catheya's group was to keep a decent pace the first days and create some distance from the general mob. That tactic increased the odds of running into other powerful squads, but Zac doubted too many of the elites wanted to go all-out on the first day, even with the allure of Contribution Points in front of them. Even if they won, so what?

They might be forced to use up their aces with three years remaining on the trial. Besides, even if you planned on climbing the ranks through slaughter, it was better to wait a few months so that you would also gain Twilight Fruits from the kills. For now, innumerable treasures were waiting in the depths, and it was more important to gobble them up and gain powerups before targeting others.

Zac finally spotted his employer, who leisurely moved forward among the corals with a string of twelve frozen corpses forming a trail behind her. The Titan Revenant had caught up to Catheya already, and she grinned at Zac like she had won some sort of competition.

"You're here, that's pretty quick," Catheya smiled, but Zac only grunted as he looked at the corpse sculptures.

"What's this?" Zac asked curiously.

"Some deterrent and early contribution collection," Catheya laughed. "Besides, I saw a few good bodies on the way and decided to snatch them. Don't you know, it's best to perform repairs and alterations immediately after the Dreamers fall? Their bodies hold lingering spirituality, which helps the process even after their souls have departed."

Zac nodded as that was a matter of course, though he was a bit surprised at the news. He had always thought it didn't matter, and some of his followers had been kept in his Corpse Sack for years until Zac got his hands on the methods to turn them into undead followers.

Then again, Zac's method of raising followers was definitely not part of the orthodoxy. While other liches and morticians used all kinds of secret methods to restore and even improve the bodies of their flowers, Zac had the power of pure Creation.

Catheya obviously wouldn't have this kind of cheat-like ability, and it instead looked like she had added talismans and engravings onto the frozen bodies. Looking at the scene Zac felt that he finally could confirm her class. It had to be related to ice, one of the three great heritages of the Undead.

It wasn't a surprise considering her master's show of force, but it was still good to know what he was dealing with in case things went south.

As for the arrays covering the bodies, Zac had a feeling that they weren't for healing purposes considering the bodies looked mostly fine, but rather modifications. Zac wished he could learn the

methods if that really was the case. It might be too late for his original batch of Einherjar, but how would someone like him ever lack bodies to turn into followers?

"You know, it's considered rude to try and glean the modifications of others," Catheya said with a raised brow as she saw Zac studying the inscriptions covering their bodies.

"If it bothers you, you can throw a tarp over them," Zac shrugged, but he still turned away.

"No class," Qirai muttered angrily.

It looked like the Titan would keep talking, but they all suddenly froze and looked in the same direction.

"What happened?" Zac asked with surprise. "One of the connections broke."

"Ravan fell," Catheya said, confusion written all over her face.

"That fool had the guts to lust for the Perennial Vastness Token, and he didn't even make it off the shores?" Qirai blurted with incredulity.

"He was strongly recommended by the local branch. Ravan is somewhat renowned for both his survival and offensive capabilities, which is why I recruited him. The clan provided him with several high-quality talismans as well as part of his remuneration. He must have been unlucky to have run into someone way too powerful for him to fall like this," Catheya muttered. "Well, bad fortune is part of life."

"The trial is a bit bloodier than I expected," Zac commented.

"It's essentially a slaughter trial as well," Catheya agreed with some helplessness across her face. "We might meet more resistance than I expected along the way."

"Will the plan still work?" Zac asked with a frown.

"Every person we lose will increase our workload a bit. The strain right now is negligible, but in a few months, it will be extremely taxing without my array. If we lose another one we might have to enlist or enslave some new members," Catheya mused. "For now, let's keep on moving."

Zac nodded and the trio set out. The appearance of two pureblood Draugr and a Titan thankfully deterred any more attempts, which only served to annoy Catheya a bit. However, she ultimately chose to give up on collecting any more corpses, which was a pretty big relief to Zac. It wasn't really that he was worried about getting himself in trouble, but it proved that Catheya was at least not completely impulsive and temperamental as a leader.

He had heard too many stories about young scions with overblown egos kicking up all kinds of trouble while out exploring. They might be fine because their elders had stocked their bags full of life-saving treasures, but what about their followers?

The group moved at a brisk but not frantic pace, and the fourth member arrived after just twenty minutes. It was Sharpo, the spectral cultivator, and she looked essentially unscathed. Zac wasn't surprised at their Mentalist scout being able to make it through the culling without much problem. Zac was more surprised to see Yod appearing just an hour later looking mostly fine.

He was the second Corpselord of the group apart from the fallen Ravan, though Zac had only heard him speak two times. But from what Catheya had explained over the past week, he was essentially an undead Paladin, or perhaps more of a Shaman like Emily. He focused on both protective and healing skills, making him a welcome member of any team.

Another two hours passed, and Catheya finally started to display some worry. Zac understood she was thinking about Varo, the final missing member of the group. Thankfully he arrived 40 minutes later, though he sported pretty gristly wounds across his body.

His robes were completely ripped apart, and he formed a trail of black ichor in the waters behind him. Yod wordlessly stepped forward and a dark cloud surrounded the Revenant. The cloud didn't disperse but rather burrowed into Varo's body. The skill looked a bit like Zac's [Winds of Decay], but it was obviously a healing skill since Varo almost immediately looked a lot better.

"I'm sorry about the delay," Varo said after giving Yod a small bow. "I was ambushed by a group. I am afraid I had to expend one of the aces mistress prepared to escape."

"It's fine," Catheya said with a smile. "We're all here now. Let's set out. It's a long journey to our destination."

"Can you finally tell us where that is?" Zac asked. "You've kept us in suspense for months now."

"Well, no," Catheya said with a wink. "It wasn't easy for my master to hire a numerologist to divine the location of the Life-Death Pearls and the route to get there. I can't just give the information away, right? But our first stop on the journey is Cork Island."