

The Fall 701

Chapter 701: Clashing Seas

Zac wasn't too surprised about the first destination being Cork Island. The Twilight Ocean shared the same odd feature as many other Mystic Realms that were actively managed by the System; it was randomized between trials, just like Earth upon the Integration. However, a lot of features were constant even after the randomization, and Cork Island was one location that always appeared somewhere in the early parts of the Twilight Ocean.

People had tried for ages to create vessels that worked in this odd place, but they were either restricted by the system or simply didn't work while submersed in the mystic waters of this place. But the place was simply too big to just randomly travel around by foot, and people had found some workarounds; one was to jump into the powerful streams that passed through the Mystic Realm.

Another way to build vessels with the help of pre-fabricated runes and locally sourced materials.

The trees at Cork Island were quite popular as a material for making underwater vessels. The trees had a diameter of up to twenty meters, which allowed you to hollow one out and create roomy submersibles. Even better, the thick bark both had strong defensive properties while also isolating some of the Twilight Energies permeating the air.

Finding Cork Island and building a vessel would give you a leg up against the competition, though it wasn't the only solution people had found over the ages. Rocks, shells, corals, even large beasts. People had managed to turn all kinds of things into odd submarines that only worked in this world. A few even managed to create flying vessels, but those were less popular as over 90% of the valuables were hidden in the depths of the ocean.

"How come Cork Island instead of the Monolith Forest?" Sharpo asked with a hollow voice, which gave Zac a start. "Why are we traveling along the Living Pulse?"

It was a good question, and one Zac would have thought to ask if he didn't still think from the perspective of a human. Cork Island was a pretty decent spot, but it was ultimately preferred by the living factions since it was filled with trees. Meanwhile, the undead factions gravitated more toward unliving materials such as the stalagmites that the ghost mentioned.

Neither material was better than the other, but the risk of being caught up in a conflict was lower if they aimed for the Monolith Forest instead.

As for the Living Pulse, it was one of the more famous underwater currents. This one, in particular, had been given the name the Living Pulse since it could take cultivators to a series of decent opportunities for the living. It was pretty dangerous though, so it required both knowledge of the stream and some defensive means.

The pulse was often erratic, lashing out with force even exceeding the E-grade. Similarly, there was a Death Pulse that passed by the Monolith Forest. Both pulses would ultimately lead into the outer waters where the group could start looking for the Life-Death Pearls or continue toward the Twilight Chasm.

"That's the path the esteemed numerologist found for us," Catheya shrugged. "Don't worry. Those who reach that place as quickly as we will are more focused on reaching the depths of the ocean than

fighting it out with other groups. We only need to be careful after having built our vessel in case someone wants to snatch it."

"What's the matter, ghost?" Qirai grinned. "Didn't we come to this place to hone ourselves? Barging through the Living Pulse sounds a lot more exciting than going the other way. It's the path of the elite."

Sharpo didn't respond nor inquire further, and neither did Zac. However, he knew the explanations were mostly excuses. He was willing to bet his right arm that this route had something to do with the additional mission of Catheya's, the one that he had been enlisted to help out with in return for dealing with the Veilplume Monarch.

Zac wasn't overly worried about heading to the Living Pulse though. If things went downhill he could always use his escape talismans and swap to his human form, blending in with the living. His Array would lose its efficacy for a month, but that didn't really matter now that he was inside the Mystic Realm.

Of course, he didn't want to use his Specialty Core unless necessary. The System shielded others from looking inside, but who knew if the brand he had been marked with was recording his actions. If possible, he wanted to rid himself of that egg along with the brand before swapping between races.

"Alright, the quicker we move the less likely it's for trouble to appear," Catheya said. "Let's go. Feel free to pick up loot on the way, but don't cause trouble for the others."

The group immediately sped up after sinking to the ocean floor, and they spread out a bit with Catheya in the middle so they could trawl a thin stretch of seabed for valuables. Zac didn't find anything interesting over the first two hours, but he eventually spotted an odd plant that looked like a tall grey coral that grew grey seaweed that resembled palm leaves. It didn't look very exciting, but he could sense some spiritual fluctuation hidden beneath the long grey leaves.

Zac immediately shot forward, feeling he had finally found something of value. However, he wasn't the only one as Qirai blasted forward with enough force to cause a small whirlwind in the water behind her. The plant was slightly closer to Zac, but the Titan was surprisingly quick so they reached the plant at the same time.

"Mine," Qirai said while trying to stare down Zac, but he only snorted and ripped up the plant by its roots and threw it into his spatial ring.

"Keep to your own lane, Titan," Zac spat, which caused the aura of Qirai to veritably explode as she took a threatening step forward.

"Alright, that's enough, you two," an exasperated voice reached the two of them as the waters turned freezing. "No need to fight over one little fruit. You need tens of thousands to get a chance at a decent spot on the ladder. Everyone gets a two-kilometer berth. And Arcaz, don't rip out the whole tree. Just pluck the fruits. Don't you know about the rules of conservation?"

Zac nodded as he glanced in the direction of Catheya, but he still didn't take the tree out. It had already been harvested, and it would probably not survive even if replanted. Qirai glared one last time at Zac before she flashed away, her movement skill causing a massive shockwave that even pushed Zac a few steps back.

A small smile crept up along Zac's lips as he looked at the Titan swim away in a huff. He wondered if the Titan Revenant's predecessor was so irascible that it carried over through the awakening, or if it was just something that was hardwired into their muscles.

"According to my calculations, we'll reach an area where we can jump onto the pulse in a bit under two weeks," Catheya's voice continued, and Zac realized that it came from a small ice crystal that floated next to him. "In total it will take almost three months to reach the inner layer. You two only need to cooperate until then. After we've farmed our pearls, we can go our separate ways."

"No worries," Zac smiled. "People always compliment me on how well I work with others."

"Somehow I doubt that," Catheya laughed through the ice crystal, after which it melted and blended into the water in the surroundings.

Zac didn't immediately set out, but he rather waited a few seconds before he took out the coral-like tree and harvested the Twilight Fruit. It was the first time getting a good look at it in person, and it didn't look much for the world; just a grey peach-like fruit. However, the reason why he was ready to come to blows with Qirai over this low-tier item wasn't because of any goals related to the Fate-Plucking Ladder.

After almost four years, he had finally found an item that elicited a response from [Love's Bond].

The reaction was small, but it was definitely there. Alea wanted something from this tree, and it only took a few seconds to confirm that it was the fruit itself. Zac's heart beat in anticipation as he pressed the fruit against his amulet, and a smile spread across his face as he saw it getting drained in an instant, leaving just a husk behind.

This discovery was huge, and it brought even more excitement than the ability to ward off the Twilight Energy. He had no idea why Alea wanted the Twilight Fruits, but he thought it might be related to its reconciliatory effects. The items he had used when forming [Love's Bond] had ultimately been a mixed hodgepodge of things he had at hand.

Perhaps the fusion between her soul and the Spirit Tool wasn't perfect because he hadn't properly prepared all materials. After all, while the [Divine Investiture Array] would create an item without flaws, it was still ultimately dependant on the materials that were put into the process.

Now that his horizons had been broadened it didn't felt like he had spent a fortune on the formation of [Love's Bond], but rather almost like he had shortchanged Alea. But finally, he had a way to start improving her situation. Besides, if Twilight Fruits could help her, who knew what else in this place would work as well.

The only downside was the implications this discovery had for his ranking on the Fate-Plucking Ladder. But between some random treasure from the Twilight Vault and helping Alea while upgrading his Spirit Tool, he would obviously choose the latter.

The group kept an unrelenting pace for five whole days, not spending even an hour resting. Catheya wanted to break away from the main pack, and no one had any complaints. They were still embroiled in over thirty altercations, though more than half of the clashes ended immediately when neither side could gain an easy advantage.

Those who kept at the edge of their formation were those who usually got ambushed, so they kept a rolling scheme. Eventually, Varo and Sharpo had to give up on treasure hunting and instead accompany Catheya because of the pressure, leaving the other three to shore up their defenses. It wasn't really that the two were weak, but their skillset leaned in different directions.

Yod was ultimately a healer as well, so it mostly came down to Qirai and Zac to protect their flanks with Catheya providing support if needed. Qirai welcomed the challenge, and she essentially took it as a challenge who could gather the most contribution points. Zac didn't mind either, since it gave him a wider berth to collect Twilight Fruits, and the occasional attack provided both loot and Contribution Points.

Over the five days, Zac managed to rack up another 1,371 points from 14 kills, which was slightly below the Titan. Of course, Zac would have reached a higher number if he fought a bit harder, but he didn't want to expose his stronger attacks this early. He usually tried to ensnare any enemy that got close, but he didn't pursue if they got too far.

What was interesting was there didn't seem to be any hard or fast rules to the contribution points each trial taker provided. He fought one who clearly had a Death attuned Fragment, but he only got 18 contribution points from that person. Conversely, he got a whopping 281 contribution points by killing a treeman who seemed to have a Dao Fragment that was a mix of the Seed of Trees and Seed of Gust.

Part of the value definitely came from the stage of the Dao, but part seemed to come from something else. The quest was to perfect the 'Tapestry of Twilight', and Zac guessed that some insights were valued higher than others when it came to kills.

Even with all those kills and searching high and low, he had only managed to collect 74 Twilight Fruits, a pathetic number. The large number of kills had already put him at the threshold of gaining another level as well, but he reluctantly chose to wait. He had his [Stone of Hope] and [Chain-breaking Pills], but this was no time to test their efficacy. His body was still on the mend from forcing his way through eight consecutive levels, and bursting a node at this point might get him killed.

If not by his own doing, then by the attackers that were everywhere in the waters.

At the end of the fifth day, Catheya finally called for a break, and the group gathered in a hidden cave at the bottom of the ocean. Zac felt he could keep going, but he immediately realized that the others were in a bad way.

Sharpo looked a bit dim, and Yod had a small frown on his face. Even the hulking Titan looked a bit deflated after the marathon, though it wasn't surprising considering how she had constantly fought. She didn't have his luxury of a Hidden Node purifying the energies for her. Only Catheya looked like Zac, in somewhat good spirits. She erected a series of high-quality arrays that hid the cave and their auras, along with a diversion array and killing array.

The diversion array was a type of illusion array that made people subconsciously look over an area, to avoid it because they were made to feel that it held nothing of value. If someone still forced their way here, the Killing array would probably make short work of them considering the quality it held.

"This cursed energy," Qirai muttered as she crushed a Miasma Crystal. "It feels like I'm covered with burrowing maggots."

The energy released from the crystal purified the Titan's surroundings for half a minute, but it was ultimately assimilated the ambient energy again.

The density of Twilight Energy had increased a bit over the past five days as they were leaving the starting continent behind, but it was still well within what his body could handle. He might as well have been walking in one of the Dead Zones back on Earth thanks to the combined efforts of his Hidden Node and the whirlpool in his Soul Aperture.

As they had traveled the past days, Zac had constantly monitored the situation in his mind. Continuing his Soul Cultivation towards the Second Reincarnation was one of his goals coming to the Twilight Harbor. His most optimistic estimates had initially indicated that he might reach the threshold within a decade, but it looked like he might reach the Second Reincarnation much earlier than expected judging by the changes in his Soul Aperture.

This was as good a time as any, and since the others needed to rest for a few hours Zac had some time to see if his new arrays worked in this environment. He walked off to a corner of the cave, and he ignored the curious looks of the others as he started infusing Mental Energy into the array disk he took out. His eyes lit up when Twilight Energy started streaming into the array, but he sighed when his surroundings became almost desolate after ten minutes.

"Not a bad array," Catheya commented from the distance. "Though it is not possible to keep the Twilight Energy permanently at bay that way."

Zac looked over with some confusion, but he soon understood what it had to look like. He took out two Supreme Miasma Crystals and crushed them, which drowned the area in Miasma. One single Supreme Miasma Crystal held as much energy as roughly ten High-quality Miasma Crystals, and the whole cave was inundated in death for over fifteen minutes before balance was restored.

"Just wanted a breather," Zac smiled after he returned to the group.

"More money than sense," Qirai said, clearly with some jealousy. The crystal she crushed earlier was just of Medium Quality, or E-grade Miasma Crystals as they would have been called back in the Zecia Sector. The effect they had on their surroundings was unsurprisingly just a shadow of the Miasma storm Zac had caused.

"Thank you," Sharpo said from the side, and Zac noticed she looked a little better than before.

Zac smiled and closed his eyes, going over the results of the experiment. The cultivation method for the Second Reincarnation was pretty straightforward, and very much the same as the first one. He would infuse his mental energy into the array disk, and it would temper his soul.

The good news was that the Twilight Energy was useable as a fuel, but the ambient energy in the outer parts of the ocean was far insufficient to do the trick. He had barely managed to start cultivating before the area was drained, which was a testament to how power-hungry the process was.

More importantly, Zac felt he had made some insights into the process itself. The first reincarnation tempered him by causing clashes between life and death around his soul. He only managed to send a trickle through the array this time, but it was still passed through the whole array and returned into his mind.

Zac had obviously taken out the Array Disk that utilized Deathly Dao since he was sitting right in front of six undead cultivators, and what had been returned was a marginally deathlier Mental Energy. However, the energy hadn't floated around in his Soul Aperture, but it had rather entered the death-attuned Soul Sea.

The change was even more negligible than the addition of the purified Twilight Energy, but Zac sensed that the ocean got slightly rowdier after the infusion. He guessed that this was how the process would look. Each revolution would bolster the oceans in his mind, and by the time he had infused both oceans, he would have caused a full-fledged storm in his soul aperture.

The raging seas would clash, and the core in the middle of the oceans would be tempered in turn, like a rock being polished by the raging seas.