

The Fall 702

Chapter 702: Trove

If the method of cultivating his soul was to cause storms to rage in his mind, then Zac's best guess was that Twilight Energy improved the base power of the storms. The more energy he managed to infuse into the seas, the greater storms would rage, and the faster his soul would be tempered.

That was his takeaway after almost a week of observation at least. The array only temporarily infused the soul oceans, but the effect of the Twilight Energy was permanent. It did seem like the energy helped expand the ocean by a small degree, but more importantly, it improved the quality of the ocean.

It was like Twilight Energy added the insights it contained to the waters, making them more complete representations of Life and Death. The energy in the waters was previously made from the ambient energy in his cultivation cave along with attuned crystals, so the insights they contained were no doubt quite basic.

Only a very small pocket of the deathly had been elevated so far, but more and more Twilight Energy kept pouring in. Sooner or later the oceans would be filled with the insights of Twilight, at which point Zac would probably need to find some other way to combat the suppressive energy around him.

Zac doubted that the Twilight Energy was the only method to improve his oceans as well, and he bet that he would be able to do the same with various treasures. After all, that vortex that formed didn't seem to have anything to do with his Bloodline or class, but it was rather that formed when his soul evolved.

There was no way to tell how many different attuned items he needed to collect, but he felt following Kenzie's lead would be the best. The more he could expand the oceans and the more complete their insight were, the better. In fact, the quality of his second reincarnation might hinge on the quality of the oceans to some degree.

Eventually, the energy from Zac's crystals dissipated, at which point Catheya took out an array sphere that looked extremely intricate. It was not hard to guess what he was looking at; the purification array.

"Everyone, get acquainted with this array controller over the next hour. We will constantly depend on this thing in the deeper parts of the Twilight Ocean, and it requires constant attention. We will install a daughter array in the vessel we'll build and take turns controlling it while the others can cultivate or look for treasures," Catheya explained.

It was soon Zac's turn, and he was truthfully a bit worried. Catheya had never directly showcased this thing during their meetings, calling its functionality a trade secret. Zac's Dao control was legendarily awful, impossibly so for a Draugr. What if he couldn't even run the array? But he still reached over to grasp the black orb, and a stream of information soon entered his mind which allowed him to breathe out in relief.

Using the array was straightforward enough. You only needed to continuously infuse some Dao and Miasma into it, and the array would do the rest. Zac was a bit surprised a purity array could utilize any sort of Death Dao to run, but it did explain why the surroundings slightly changed in flavor when the

others tried it out. Zac chose the Fragment of the Coffin and the miasma in their surroundings changed soon again, and it started to feel extra familiar and soothing to Zac.

There was just a hint of his Dao in the surroundings, but it still somehow transformed the Miasma to fit him even better. However, he was surprised at the expenditure. Even with his massive reserves, he'd be hard-pressed to run the array for a whole day, and he'd be completely wrung-dry after 30 hours or so.

Its effect was generally good though, with one caveat; it lessened the amount of Twilight Energy to just 20% of its original Density, replacing it with Miasma. And since Zac couldn't actually absorb miasma to cultivate, he was actually losing cultivation momentum from the array rather than gaining a respite.

Luckily he would only be under this thing's effect for a few months.

"We'll each run this array for six hours, which will give everyone over a day's rest after their turn," Catheya said. "It's a shame we lost a member the moment we entered this place, but it still shouldn't be too hard on anyone here. But you should prepare yourself. The effect will not be nearly as good at the inner parts of the ocean where the Twilight Energy is a lot denser."

The group set out after resting up for a few hours, and they soon settled in their slightly monotonous days of moving across the seemingly endless ocean floor and while occasionally picking up a low-grade natural treasure or a few Twilight Fruits. There was still the occasional attack, but they had grown a lot sparser after a week had passed.

However, the calm was suddenly broken as an Ice Crystal appeared next to Zac. "Gather up for a bit," Catheya's voice suddenly emerged from an ice crystal that appeared out of nowhere. "There's something interesting here."

Zac looked over in the direction of Catheya, but he didn't see anything special. She was standing on a small rocky formation sticking out of the seabed, and some corals and seaweed were growing on the mound. It didn't look much different from the hundreds of similar outcroppings Zac had passed over the past two days, but perhaps it was something different about that one?

Zac swam over, and he increased his speed a bit by shooting out small bursts of Miasma. Soon the group of six were all gathered, and they curiously looked around.

"Look," Catheya smiled as she pointed toward a pathway hidden behind a dense patch of seaweed.

"A hidden cave?" Qirai muttered. "Is it a den?"

"Better," Catheya laughed. "It's a trove."

"Oh?" Qirai exclaimed with interest, and Zac gave the dark cavern another look with surprise.

This was the first actual trove he had encountered unless you counted the castles during the Eastern Trigram Hunt. This was the kind left by a previous generation trial-taker. After all, the death rate of the Twilight Ocean was roughly 50%, which meant a lot of unclaimed bodies and loot since many deaths came from mutual destruction or fights against beasts.

What happened to fallen cultivators differed. Some who had received a lethal wound were able to hang on for a while, and they used that time to set up an Inheritance trial like those back in his Dao

Repository. Many feared being forgotten as much as dying, and they didn't want their cultivation journey to end without making the slightest impression on the universe.

Setting up an Inheritance wasn't only done out of benevolence though. The System was very much in favor of the custom, and it had already been proven that it sowed positive Karma. Positive for one's descendants, and possibly even for oneself upon reincarnation.

After being set up, the Inheritance trials were then sanctioned by the System itself, and they then appeared in some following trial depending on what grade cultivator it was meant for.

It wasn't needed to actively do something for an inheritance trial to form though. The will of a dying Monarch, and sometimes even Hegemons, was powerful enough to impact their surroundings. Their latent will resonated with the Heavens, and a tomb was born that was guarded by natural formations affected by the dead cultivator's insights.

A small hidden realm might even appear after particularly powerful Monarchs, where cultivators could enter their crumbling inner world in search of treasure. Zac doubted that those kinds of realms could be found in the Twilight Ocean though, unless some had managed to survive since the last C-grade trial.

E-grade cultivators weren't powerful enough to leave such tombs or worlds behind, but the System often arranged something in places like Mystic Realms. There might be a small trial to get to the treasures, but nothing too special. It was just like how the palaces in the Eastern Trigram Hunt were guarded by barriers that needed to be breached before taking the loot within.

"So why did you call us here?" Zac asked with a raised brow. "Surely it's not to gloat?"

"So what if I am?" Catheya winked. "But no, I realized that we should decide on a system of distribution for troves and inheritances. Just going by finders keepers will be too chaotic in case we reach need to work together in cracking them open, and it might sow bad blood."

"What about auction-system?" Qirai suggested.

Auction-system was a type of distribution for adventuring groups. The one who found the trove would become the owner of it, but sometimes they needed help. That would start a bidding war, where the members of the group could sell their services for a percentage of the loot's value. The system was fair on the surface, but Zac frowned when he heard the suggestion.

"Doesn't seem good with this composition," Sharpo muttered, which got support from both Zac and Yod.

The group was simply too small, and half the group was solely controlled by Catheya. If Zac needed the help of anyone but the ghost scout or the stalwart Corpselord, Catheya would control the pricing.

"Let's keep it simple?" Catheya suggested. "Either get it yourself, or we do it as a group. Eight shares, three to the finder, one each to the rest. Of course, anyone can sit it out."

"Agreed," Sharpo quickly said, while Yod nodded in agreement.

"Agreed," Zac muttered as well.

“Good. This is the first one, so let’s do it together!” Catheya smiled. “It shouldn’t be anything too exciting this close to the entrance, but you never know. People have even found proper inheritances on the starting continent.”

Zac’s eyes flickered with interest, and the pendant around his neck grew into its coffin form. This drew the looks of the rest of the group, where they all sized up his Spirit Tool. They had most likely seen it from a distance as he guarded the flanks, but this was the first occasion they got a close-up.

“This thing is quite unique,” Catheya said with interest, not even trying to hide her curiosity. “Definitely a custom job, and a good one. Who did you hire?”

Zac only smiled in return, not deigning to comment.

The group entered the tunnel, and a Zac looked on with interest as hundreds of small spectral snakes emerged from Sharpo’s body. They simply covered the whole tunnel as they swam deeper, entering every nook and cranny. Zac guessed it was some sort of scouting skill that spotted traps and enemies. He didn’t know why the Mentalist’s skill was formed like small snakes, but it was possible that there might be a poisonous component to her skillset.

It was also possible that she could freely control their form, and chose snakes to give others the wrong impression about abilities.

A wave of Miasma emanated from Yod as well, and Zac felt empowered three consecutive times as three runes flashed above everyone’s head before disappearing. A quick look at his status screen indicated that his Strength and Endurance had both been increased by ten percent, while Vitality and Dexterity had been boosted by five.

“Power. Healing. Defense,” Yod muttered.

It was the first time Zac actually was part of a proper squad of elites, and it felt a bit like he was running a dungeon in an MMORPG game. The Paladin even provided buffs for the run.

The tunnel led just a hundred meters into the seabed, at which point it ended in an opaque barrier. Sharpo was already on it, and the swarm of spectral snakes dove inside. The shield rippled a bit, but it didn’t prevent the snakes from pushing forward.

A screen appeared in front of the ghost the next moment, displaying a large cavern. There were no signs of any movement on the other side, but that wasn’t any guarantee. There was almost always some sort of challenge attached to a trove.

Sometimes it would present itself as some beasts or dangerous plantlife who had made their base close to the treasure to benefit from its energy. If that didn’t happen, then the System would make some sort of arrangement. The law of balance required some suffering for any reward.

“Alright, let’s go,” Catheya said as she glanced at Qirai.

The next moment a wall of opaque ice grew on her arm. The ice shield didn’t come from Qirai though, but it was rather something provided by Catheya. This type of teamwork wasn’t all that rare, but it required trust between both parties. For example, Zac definitely wouldn’t be comfortable letting Catheya enclose his whole right arm in a block of ice.

But it was a pretty smart tactic for a lich, or a lich-ice mage hybrid like what Catheya seemed to be. It allowed her to arm and empower her underlings on the go. The Titan walked through with steady steps, and the rest soon followed.

There wasn't much of interest inside. The cave was only a hundred meters across, and it reminded Zac of the maw of some enormous beast as it was covered in sharp stalagmites and stalactites. The only exception was cleared area in the middle, where an unmoving body lay in front of a large plant. The plant itself was actually protected by a barrier, and Zac guessed the thing was the guardian of the trove.

As for the unmoving man, he was definitely dead, but there was nothing outwardly wrong with him. He even looked peaceful. There were small remnants of lifeforce left in his body, which meant he shouldn't have been dead for too long.

"He's fresh. There's still some spirituality left behind. No more than five hours have passed since he fell," Catheya said thoughtfully, confirming Zac's assumption. "Can't see anything wrong though."

"Let me," Sharpo said as she pointed at the corpse.

Five of the spectral snakes burrowed into the corpse's body, but there were no signs of any damage being done to it. They emerged a few moments later and dissipated into Miasma that rejoined Sharpo's body.

"His soul aperture is cracked, signs of a mental attack," the ghost said after a few seconds.

"My runes provide no help against mental attacks," Yod immediately reminded.

No one really commented on it, but Zac could see that a few of the others put their guards up to some degree. Zac himself wasn't too worried since he was confident in his mental defenses nowadays. Of course, that didn't mean he didn't push [Indomitable] from its passively running state to its max efficiency.

Grinding his mental defense skill had been a pain in the ass, and it was one of the last skills of Zac's to reach Peak Mastery. The simplest way was to have Vilari attack him over and over while he defended, intermixed with meditation and expanding his understanding of the soul.

Still, it was worth the time spent as the skill had progressed by a huge degree. The first three levels just increased the strength of the defenses, but reaching Peak Mastery had added a fundamental change to the skill itself. Until that point, it had always been running, and Zac could infuse his Dao and some extra Miasma into it to increase its power by a small degree.

Now [Indomitable] had two proper states; passive defenses and active defenses. The passive defenses were just slightly weaker compared to the previous state of the skill. The active defenses, however, cost over fifty times as much Miasma to keep running, but its defenses were over five times greater as well.

The expenditure wasn't too much for someone like Zac, and he could definitely activate it without worry every time he entered battle. The only downside was that he could only keep it active 10 minutes every hour, but the passive protections would still keep going even after the timer ran out.

"Everyone ready?" Catheya asked as she looked at the barrier. "I think something might change the moment I attack the sphere."

Everyone nodded as they readied themselves for battle.

Catheyra pointed forward and conjured a series of small icicles that slammed into the barrier. Zac saw they weren't hitting it randomly though, but they rather formed a circle with some sort of constellation within. A moment later the whole barrier cracked, exposing the Spirit Plant within.

It was an odd underwater tree reaching almost three meters into the air. Instead of a canopy, it had dozens of long vines hanging down like a hairdo, each of the vines ending in what looked like a coconut. The moment the barrier broke, the vines started to shake. A rattling sound immediately spread through the cave as the coconuts slammed into each other.

The collisions weren't loud, but the sound still reached deep into the recesses of Zac's mind. Thankfully he already had his mental defense skill active, and Sharpo had started emitting some sort of ripples that made the sound far less piercing. Without those waves, the danger would at least be twofold.

The echoes just kept multiplying among the hundreds of stalagmites, causing them to rapidly increase in fervor. Sharpo looked unscathed from the barrage, as did Catheyra and Qirai. Yod and Varo both seemed to feel slightly affected by the sounds, but it clearly wasn't more than an annoyance for them.

By the looks of it, the dead man on the ground must have had below-average mental defenses, or he was too slow activating them. Such was the fate of many solitary warriors, even among elites. Very few were without any weaknesses, and it only took one unlucky encounter for their road of cultivation to end abruptly.

It didn't look like the tree had any other methods of attacking, and Catheyra ended things by sending a blade of ice to cut off the plant by its root. The tree was stowed away, and the clashing sounds thankfully subsided over the next minute. Hidden within its roots was a mottled Cosmos Sack. Catheyra grabbed the Cosmos Sack as well, after which she looked around with a smile.

"Everyone okay?" she smiled as she started inspecting the haul. "Well, that's our first adventure, I guess a bond has been forged? Let's hope the rest of our journey will be this smooth."