

The Fall 703

Chapter 703: Marked for Death

There wasn't anything else of interest within the small cave, and the group soon turned back after Catheya split the meager loot. As expected, there wasn't anything worthwhile in Cosmos Sack, except some random wealth. The guardian plant was ultimately more valuable than the trove itself since those coconuts apparently contained a liquid that could be used in some spirit-related concoctions.

"Alright, let's keep going," Catheya said as they emerged from the trove. "We should reach the pulse within six days. Prepare yourself, our first real battle might take place there."

The other nodded and they spread out again, and they once more resumed their individual hunt for treasures. Things were a bit monotone on the ocean bed, but Zac actually stumbled upon what might be a trove on the third day. It was hidden within a colony of giant clams that lived in a gully he passed.

He gave it some thought, but he eventually decided to go at it solo. He sent a short message to Catheya though, telling her to go ahead before he ripped open the shell of the suspicious clam. Inside was a hidden pathway, something which Zac had only noticed because of his special Draugr-sense.

The clam had looked like all the others around it, but it was completely dead. However, small bubbles still emerged from its mouth, which was definitely suspicious. Zac had expected a treasure to hide within the shell rather than a pathway, but he didn't care as he made his way down. He soon found himself in a hidden cultivation cave covered in moss and small seaweed.

The only thing remaining apart from the plant life was a skeleton sitting on a prayer mat. It had a decent-looking sword in its lap, but Zac was more interested in the Spatial Ring on the skeleton's finger. Spatial rings weren't anything special in a flourishing place like the Twilight Harbor, but it also wasn't something that common cultivators would own because of their price.

There should be a decent harvest waiting within.

[Rakan's Roar] appeared in Zac's hand as he inched closer, his eyes peering back and forth for any hint of what kind of danger this place could hold. However, he was surprised to see that the danger was the skeleton itself as it started to emit a powerful aura that made Zac think of the unfathomable depths of the ocean.

The skeleton rose to its feet before it swung its sword in a sharp arc that didn't seem impeded by the water at all. In fact, it was almost like the ocean was pushing the sword forward, increasing its speed rather than acting as an impediment.

Zac countered with a swing of his own, and the waters started to churn from corrosion as Zac activated [Blighted Cut], causing highly corrosive droplets to drip from his axe. The two weapons clashed, and a swirl of water clashed with an outburst of corruption. Zac was actually pushed back a few steps from the sheer power contained in the skeleton's swing, but he countered by lashing out with the chains of [Love's Bond]. The strike launched the skeleton across the cave, and it slammed into a wall with a heavy thud.

He had expected to rip the skeleton apart with the coffin-infused iron links, but neither the corrosive elements of his skill or the impacts themselves left as much as a mark on the glistening bones. Just how

sturdy was this thing? Thankfully, its combat technique was crude. It contained hints of some water-related Dao along with a brutish force, but the attacks themselves were without any finesse. Zac shot forward again, and he launched another barrage of strikes.

The basic path of war slowly merged with his fighting style again as Zac unleashed an unrelenting barrage of strikes. The skeleton was strong, but it was ultimately just a naïve recruit while he was a veteran seasoned through multiple campaigns. How couldn't there be openings to take advantage of? One strike after another targeted joints, vertebrae, or other weaknesses, but a frown spread across Zac's face when the thing seemed completely impervious to his attacks.

A sudden scream of danger made Zac quickly drag himself out of the way with the help of one of his chains, just in time to see a spear of something pierce the waters where his head was just a moment ago. A tentacle.

Zac looked at the appendage return to hiding inside the ribcage of the skeleton, and realization dawned on him. Only then did he notice weak hints of energy and life-force along its arms and legs, more tentacles which were almost perfectly blended in with the waters.

He was fighting with an octopus rather than a skeleton?

He had planned on simply dismantling the thing and pray that it didn't possess the ability to reassemble its bones, but it looked like the skeleton itself was just a puppet. It simply moved its body out of the way when Zac swung his axe, letting the supremely sturdy bones take the hit. It looked like he needed to adjust his tactic a bit. Four chains shot forward, all of them drenched in black tar that profaned the surroundings.

Each chain swung around the skeleton's limbs, but a storm of cutting water blades shot out from the skeleton the moment they tried to latch on. The blades were powerful, but thankfully not powerful enough to harm either Zac or the chains of [Love's Bond]. However, they formed a storm around the skeleton itself, preventing Zac from latching on to activate the finishing blow of [Blighted Cut].

It looked like the octopus had learned to be wary of the chains from the first lashing.

Still, the chains were not only useful for binding while [Blighted Cut] was active, and they kept spewing out more and more corrosive liquid into the cave. He hadn't managed to make much progress with the skill over the past years, but it had at least reached Middle Mastery. The upgrade increased the corrosive properties by a tier while also increasing the cost of keeping the skill active. Obviously, that was a worthy exchange for someone with a massive Miasma pool like him.

Still, the skeleton seemed mostly impervious to his attempt to corrode the beast within since the octopus managed to move away all the tainted water with its ability to manipulate water. Its control of waters in the small cave was too great, and not a drop of it reached its almost intangible body. Zac gave it a thought and figured he'd try something else. Something new.

His body suddenly started to release a black cloud that spread through the waters with rapid speed. It just took a few seconds before it had filled the whole cave. The illumination from the seagrass and moss was drowned out, replaced by pervasive darkness and the chill of death. Not only that, but a sizzling sound echoed through the small cave.

It almost sounded like he stood in an enormous swarm of cicadas, but he knew that the sound was all the moss and even the cave wall being rapidly dissolved. The darkness was filled with decay, which was why Zac summoned it. He figured it would be hard for the octopus to keep away tainted water if everything became tainted.

Zac could see just fine in the shroud of darkness, and he saw how the skeleton had been covered from head to toe in water armor in an effort to block out the corrosive storm Zac had unleashed. It looked like it no longer felt as confident, and it immediately swam toward the exit. However, a chain lashed at the skeleton as Zac moved to block.

The skeleton still wore the Spatial Ring, and the sword was a treasure as well. How could he let the octopus simply leave?

Getting trapped had clearly enraged the beast as it unleashed a furious barrage at Zac, using both its sword and the skeleton's limbs as weaponry. The pure force in its strikes was nothing to scoff at, and Zac felt himself somewhat on the defensive from the onslaught. It wouldn't have been as bad if he activated [Vanguard of Undeath], but the cave was simply too small to freely fight in that state.

Still, there was no such thing as passively defending for his Fetters of Desolation Class.

The darkness suddenly congealed as Zac felt a drain on his Miasma. Out from it, a wraith wielding a nasty war axe appeared. Its features were obscured by a tattered robe, and its arms were in a state of advanced decay. The axe seemed to be wrought from black metal, and its head was covered in runes that shone in a sinister green radiance that spoke of putrefaction.

The octopus was a beast, and it followed its instincts as it fought. And its instincts probably told it that Zac was the true threat. It provided the opening the wraith needed, and it unleashed a massive two-handed swing toward the skeleton. A small green fractal edge appeared in front of the axehead, and it actually cut straight through the water armor.

The octopus reacted at the last moment and moved to intercept the attack with its arm. The axe wraith was unable to cut through the bone, and a storm of water soon pushed it away. But the wraith didn't completely lose out on that exchange as a series of small green runes suddenly covered the previously transparent tentacle.

Zac heard a high-pitched wail of pain from within the skeleton's skull, and Zac wasn't surprised. Those runes had already started absorbing the corrosion of the surroundings, and the water armor couldn't protect against that. It probably felt like its limb was rotting off for the octopus. The wraith quickly floated back after being pushed away, but the octopus was in no mood to fight it.

It knew it couldn't pass by Zac, so it swam to the opposite side of the cave, all while one of its tentacles kept sizzling. Unfortunately for the octopus, there was no escape from Zac's cage, and another wraith appeared, out of nowhere, launching an attack on one of the skeleton's legs. Another set of green runes appeared, and the wail from within the skull grew even louder.

The octopus was no doubt going insane from the pain, but pain sometimes brings strength.

The blue sword ripped through the darkness, cutting even Zac's domain apart as it tried to destroy the two wraiths. The first one didn't have time to react and was ripped apart in an instant, unable to

withstand such a suicidal attack. However, the original wraith which was about to catch up managed to dodge the wide swing before countering with an attack of its own. It slammed into the very same arm as before, and the green runes grew even denser.

A lightning-quick kick from the skeleton dispelled the wraith, but a third one appeared to take its place. As for Zac, he was happy to just observe the effect of his recently fused skill. The octopus should be in the late stages of the E-grade, and it had found itself an extremely durable skeleton for protection. It was pretty good target practice.

Zac knew he could manually control the skill, but he was happy just to observe as they slowly got smarter during the fight. Soon enough there were two of them harassing the octopus, and when there were three things started to become lopsided. The axe wraiths worked in tandem, with one drawing attention while the other two kept stacking more and more corrosive runes across the skeleton and its controller.

Three wraiths eventually turned to five, at which point the beast was already on the brink of collapse. It had already lost most of its tentacles, and the skeleton now simply floated in the air with its arms hanging down. The octopus knew it was on the brink of death, and Zac actually sensed the familiar energy emanations of self-destruction.

Four chains shot forward like spears, each of them targeting cracks or openings in the skeleton's skull. A surge of energy entered Zac's body a moment later, confirming that he had managed to kill the beast hiding inside the skull.

The darkness that suffused the cave soon dissipated, and Zac noticed that over a meter of the wall had been completely corroded, leaving a smooth surface behind. Zac nodded in satisfaction at the scene, feeling that his new skill lived up to his expectations. The skill was called [Deathmark], and it was the fusion of [Deathwish] and [Winds of Decay].

[Deathwish] was one of Zac's favorite skills in his undead toolkit, but it had unsurprisingly fallen behind as the spectral projections had a ceiling strength that wasn't a threat to most E-grade cultivators. Furthermore, its method of activation wasn't really suited any longer. It was originally meant to be used in conjunction with [Immutable Bulwark], but Zac barely fought with a shield any longer.

He didn't want to keep getting hit to activate the skill, so he needed to change its trigger. Doing so through modifying the fractal was probably possible, but that was still out of his reach. So [Deathwish] became his first choice for a fusion, and he had considered [Vanguard of Undeath], [Fields of Despair], and even [Profane Seal] as potential targets.

But ultimately he instead landed on [Winds of Decay]. His idea was for [Deathwish] to represent the Fragment of the Axe, which was why the spectral projections had been replaced by axe-wraiths, and for [Winds of Decay] to represent death. The result was [Deathmark], a domain skill that both spread powerful corrosion while also adding the summoning ability.

One impressive difference between the old skills and the new was that the new wraiths didn't actually disappear after one strike. They would keep pelting away for half a minute unless they were destroyed by the enemy, each strike leaving a mark that left the target more susceptible to the corrosive domain.

Even better, Zac didn't actually need to be attacked for the wraiths to appear. As long as the target was within his corrosive domain, more and more would keep popping up. However, the rate at which they naturally formed was just half compared to how quickly they could form as a result of Zac getting hit.

So the skill still synergized very well by [Vanguard of Undeath] and its taunting ability. As long as he could force his enemy to focus on him through that mental manipulation or pressure alone, the wraiths would keep multiplying and increasing the danger for the enemy. Soon enough they'd look like the octopus, completely covered in green runes as they fell apart.

Even if they managed to withstand the powerful corrosion in [Deathmark], they would still be assaulted by a blinding pain that would impede most people's ability to bring out their full power. You could even say that the soul-wrenching pain was another type of restriction, one that might work even better than a suppression array in battle.

You could probably cleanse the mark, but that was like expelling foreign Dao that had invaded their body. Doing so in the middle of a fight could prove lethal. It wasn't like Zac would always watch on while his wraiths fought his battles for him. He had multiple other ways to harass the target while they tried to remove the brands.

A look around in the cave indicated there were no other threats, and he walked over to the skeleton. Its pristine bones had finally turned a bit mottled after being assaulted by the corrosive domain for half a minute, but they were still whole. Zac didn't care about the skeleton though, and instead dragged out the remains of a small octopus from the skull.

Its main body was a bit golden rather than translucent like its appendages, but it was just a mess now after being impaled by four corrosive chains. Only its maw was still intact, and it bit down on a small stone that emitted pretty powerful energy fluctuations. Zac's first thought was that it was a Beast Core, he soon realized it rather had to be a Cosmic Core.

No wonder the bones of the cultivator were so sturdy; they came from a fallen Hegemon that had become nourishment for the octopus. The core itself was more than halfway drained, which had helped push the octopus all the way to the Late E-grade. Zac could probably absorb the remaining energy through [Void Heart] as well, but he was loath to do so.

It felt a bit close to cannibalism, and he already had hundreds of Beast Cores prepared for that very purpose. After all, beast cores weren't very expensive, considering they were mostly useless for cultivators because of their chaotic energies. They weren't even efficient energy sources for bombs, since the explosions were extremely unpredictable.

Ultimately, they were mostly used as fertilizer in top-tier gardens. You'd bury a couple of cores of a suitable element beneath the soil, and they would slowly infuse the ground with energy over the years. That meant they were in high demand for certain elements that matched well with plants, whereas many other types of Beast Cores had almost no demand.

Zac's Hidden Node didn't care what element it ate, so Zac just paid a measly 50 Million Nexus Coins for Early-Stage Beast Core back in the Zecia sector. With his race upgrade dealt with and both pills and [Stone of Hope] bought, he was pretty eager to start using them, but it would have to wait until he reached immunity to the pills he'd brought.

The Hegemon skeleton went into his Spatial Ring, while his ring went on one of Zac's free fingers. He didn't linger in the hidden cave after that, and left after having scanned the small chamber a few times for hidden compartments or pathways. But it really looked like the Spatial Ring was the only thing of value, and Zac was soon moving across the seabed again to catch up with the others. He soon caught up with the others, at which point his attention turned to the ring.

Even a poverty-stricken Hegemon should have some stuff that was useful for him.