

The Fall 705

Chapter 705: Profane Exponents

The ultimate strike of the treeman's ally was diverted, allowing Zac to attack with reignited vigor as the normal shield pygmy kept him safe from the occasional attacks. The barriers it conjured just looked like coffins, but they were actually even sturdier compared to his old skill [Immutable Bulwark].

"I need assistance!" the treeman roared with a voice that sounded like dry bark, but there was no time for anyone to come to his assistance before the fight took a drastic turn.

However, the change didn't come from Zac, but rather someone else.

A small blue flower had appeared through a crack in the ground without anyone noticing, and it released a weak blue light that turned two of the assailants, a mage who held off Sharpo's snakes and the man who conjured crystal hands to protect the party, into frozen statues before anyone had the chance to react. The attackers had already been overpowered before, and instantly losing a third of their party utterly crushed their will to keep fighting.

Qirai took the opportunity when the defensive barriers fell to punch a third cultivator with a lightning-quick jab to her temple. Zac didn't feel it looked overly powerful, but his eyes widened a bit when he felt a sharp spiritual ripple passing out through the other side of the cultivator's head. Her eyes completely glazed over and she slumped onto the ground, her soul definitely crushed.

Only now did Zac realize that that the brutish Revenant had somehow combined pugilism with mental attacks. It was probably because of her master not wanting the Titan to destroy the corpses.

Half the party had fallen in an instant thanks to Catheya and Qirai's combo, and the others all used their ultimate escape means to get out of there. Zac had already broken through their defenses though, and two chains of [Love's Bond] shot out and caught the treant mid-teleportation. The man was ripped back to the battlefield, and he didn't get the chance to try again before he was cut in two by a swing of Zac's axe.

Two pieces of bleeding lumber fell onto the ground with a heavy thud, but the remains quickly crumbled as they had landed in the pool of corrosion that spread out around Zac's position.

"I can't believe your master let you get a class like that," Catheya muttered as she rose up to the cliff with the help of a pillar of ice, her eyes drawn to the rotten pool around Zac's feet. "What were you thinking walking the path of Decay? You're harming your own foundation if you keep destroying the bodies of those you defeat."

"I've never had any ambition to become a lich and raise large armies," Zac shrugged as he picked up a Cosmos Sack from the ground before it disintegrated. "And these guys weren't strong enough to become my right-hand-men."

"Still, it's like you're burning money," Catheya muttered as she gave the treeman a look of helplessness, but she didn't push the issue any further.

"What about the other two?" Zac asked.

"It's being handled," Catheya said, and she barely had time to finish her sentence before Varo returned with two bodies.

Zac hadn't expected that the Revenant was powerful enough to deal with both the escapees. Certainly, neither of them was in great shape after the battle, but it hadn't taken more than a few seconds. He had truthfully somewhat discounted the butleresque Revenant after seeing his performance when gathering up or entering the trove, but Zac realized that underestimating this guy could be deadly.

"Let's go. We should have alerted people in the surroundings even if the fight took less than a minute. Some bigshots have probably reached Cork Island already, no need to tempt fate," Catheya said.

The group nodded, and they quickly cleaned up the battlefield before they moved further into the island. Zac threw over the treant's Cosmos Sack to Catheya, and the others did the same. This had been a team battle, and resources would be allocated dependent on contribution. If they only went by who dealt killing blows, then people like Yod and Sharpo who filled other functions than directly killing would be left without a scrap.

The small pygmy skeletons followed Zac for a few hundred meters until they finally dissipated after bowing in his direction. Catheya looked at the trio curiously before her eyes turned toward Zac.

"An oddity for sure..." she smiled. "I guess they suit you."

Zac rolled his eyes in response, but he inwardly agreed with her sentiment. The trio came from the last of his skill fusions which resulted in a skill called [Profane Exponents]. It was the toughest one of all his fusions and the one that differed most from its original skills.

The fusion actually came from [Immutable Bulwark] and [Undying Legion], and they were Zac's solution to completely rehauling his defensive capabilities. [Undying Legion] had grown a lot more powerful as he had pushed it to peak mastery, but the change wasn't exactly what he hoped for.

Reaching high mastery had increased the army to 350 skeletons, and also added a dozen mages who launched fireballs somewhat similar to the turquoise flames of his pygmy. At peak mastery, the skill had conjured 500 skeletons while adding 5 captains and one extremely powerful general that would probably be able to defeat anyone else on Earth by himself.

They would be a mighty force that could aid most defensive cultivators, and [Undying Legion] was probably the skill that best personified his path. It combined both death and war in a very palpable way. Unfortunately, that didn't mean it really fit Zac's toolkit, and the skeletons were ultimately only used for their damage diversion.

Meanwhile, [Immutable Bulwark] was very powerful, but it always required him to wield a shield, which didn't really suit Zac's taste. He'd much rather use [Love's Bond] in its offensive form, using the chains to bind and restrain his enemies as a means of defense through offense.

The result was a new supportive skill that was a lot more flexible compared to his old ones. The first pygmy was simply a pure fusion of the bulwark of his [Immutable Bulwark] and the skeletons in [Undying Legion]. It became a coffin-bearing skeleton, a representation of his path and Dao of the Coffin that could protect him or groups of people.

Meanwhile, the lantern-wielding pygmy specifically targeted defensive skills by corroding defensive fractals. Its weird burning light wouldn't be able to kill most E-grade cultivators, but it was extremely efficient at eating through defensive arrays and barriers. This pygmy drew inspiration from several sources. Part of it came from the skeletal mages that appeared when Zac upgraded [Undying Legion].

But a big part of the inspiration came from Kenzie and her array-breaking enterprise.

He had once asked Kenzie how her array breakers worked, and she said that a breaker and a barrier were essentially different sides of the same coin. Many of the patterns and runes the two used were the same, but they were just applied slightly differently. That was what gave him the guts to try having the System repurpose the overabundance of defensive patterns in the two skill fractals into something offensive.

Zac's undying side wasn't like his living one, where he had a few terrifying skills that could destroy all opposition. He was more like a spider trapping his targets in a web, slowly whittling them down until he launched a final strike. However, that combat style had a weakness; time. Anything could happen in a battle, and Zac had thought of various ways to increase the speed he could squeeze his enemies to death.

One route was to get a finisher skill like [Arcadia's Judgement], simply turning people to mush. Another way was to quickly destroy his enemies' defenses and allow skills like [Blighted Cut] and [Deathmark] to work a lot quicker. The result was shockingly effective. Any defense within his domain was quickly targeted and dissolved by the priest pygmy, and Zac believed the skeleton would even be able to destroy D-grade defenses when the skill reached Peak Mastery.

The third pygmy had taken on the power of displacement from [Undying Legion], but its usage was a lot more flexible. It could either transfer damage from Zac to the three pygmies, or displace an attack altogether as it did with the crystal Spire.

When used correctly, it could actually be considered an offensive skill, though the skill ultimately was under the control of the attacker. They would usually be able to dissipate the attack before they accidentally attacked themselves because of the displacement.

"Restrain your auras and follow me," Catheya said as she attached a series of talismans to individual ice crystals that floated above everyone's heads.

Zac didn't exactly understand how they worked, but it felt like their group was somewhat isolated from the surroundings, just like how the distraction array worked. Zac looked at the setup with interest, and he felt that the way Catheya used her Dao to create mobile array arrangements was pretty ingenious. Perhaps he could do something similar, if he ever could gain such control over his Dao.

The trees around them kept getting larger as they ran deeper into the forest, and they were soon overshadowed even than the massive Redwood trees back on Earth. Any tree around them would be large enough to be turned into a serviceable vessel, but Catheya kept going deeper for another hour until she stopped close to one tree that looked a bit sturdier than the others.

She took out a rope with small array disks attached every meter, and Varo started putting it around the root of the trunk. It almost looked like Christmas lights, but Zac understood it was a specialized array as the whole tree trunk suddenly was cut off as the dozens of miniature disks on the rope cracked. The tree

didn't even have the chance to tilt before it just disappeared, no doubt placed in a Cosmos Sack of Catheya's.

"Alright. We'll split up here," Catheya said as she took out another small array disk. "There is a hidden shipyard beneath the river somewhere around here. A few of us will start processing and hollowing out the tree, while a few others I continue further inside."

Varo and Qirai were clearly not surprised by Catheya's statement, but Zac could see that both Yod and Sharpo were caught unaware. It looked like neither of the two had made similar deals as he had. Of course, Sharpo seemed to have already figured something out earlier when they discussed the route.

As for Zac himself, he started to feel that the price for the [Stone of Hope] might have been even higher than he initially estimated.

"What is going on?" Yod eventually asked.

"I was tasked with a second goal when coming here," Catheya smiled. "I have been ordered to complete a small task on Cork Island. Don't ask why because I don't know."

"I agreed to help, but this place..." Zac sighed as he looked toward the heart of Cork Island.

The Living Pulse ran straight through the middle of the island, imbuing it with a surge of life-attuned energies. The large trees were not the only thing of value in this place, there were also all kinds of treasures. Right now the heart of the island was in a completely pristine state, and thousands of cultivators no doubt rushed toward the core to harvest the valuables before the mainstream cultivators reached this spot.

It was truly a no man's land for the unliving.

"We're not here to go against the collective strength of the Dreamers," Catheya said with a shake of her head. "We go in, do our thing, and get out. Yod and Sharpo, you can begin preparations in the hidden shipyard with the help of Qirai."

"Safer to go together," Yod slowly muttered, and Sharpo seemed to agree.

"Perhaps so, but I'm just following my master's instructions. Initially, three were supposed to remain, and four go, but now we'll split three-three. Me, Varo, and Arcaz will go complete the mission," Catheya smiled.

Qirai had clearly been informed already, and she took both the array crystal and a Cosmos Sack from her master as she turned to the outsiders.

"Come on, let's go. The shipyard is some distance away," she said as she started running.

Yod and Sharpo exchanged a glance before they followed the Titan.

"So I guess I'm not privy to the shipyard's whereabouts if things go sideways here?" Zac sighed as he saw his teammates disappear among the trees.

“Well, would you even want to join those three in case things go wrong?” Catheya laughed in response as she started walking further toward the core of the island. “I have a feeling you’d rather stake it out yourself.”

“Do you even know the location of the pearls?” Zac asked with a suspicious glance. “Or are we just toiling in vain for this mystery mission of yours?”

“Of course,” Catheya nodded. “It’s the reward master negotiated for me in return for completing this mission. He said that there definitely aren’t any errors in the clues and path he got. There might even be an Autarch involved for him to be so certain.”

“Why you? There are millions of natives who could take up tasks for the undead factions. Why have an Imperial like you been given this task?” Zac asked.

Catheya didn’t really need to watch her words now that the two other outsiders were gone, and Zac really wanted to find out anything he could about this mission of theirs. He couldn’t directly ask about his own task because of the brand hiding in his body, but perhaps he could gather some clues from Catheya without directly asking.

“Who knows,” Catheya shrugged. “But you know, it doesn’t really matter. The old ancestors at the top will always play their games. Even Hegemons are just replaceable chess pieces to them. And that’s a good thing.”

“Sounds real good,” Zac snorted sarcastically.

“We might be expendable, but also not valuable enough to be specifically targeted. So, I will keep my head down and complete my mission like a good chess piece. I’ll take the rewards and empower myself, and one day I will be the player instead of the chess piece,” Catheya smiled. “Such is the way of the world.”

Zac hesitated for a few seconds as he looked toward the center of the island. Perhaps Catheya really didn’t know what was going on. Was this what life was like for those in established factions? Being pawns in schemes beyond their understanding, their lives not under their own control. Everyone hoping that they’d gain control over their own fates one day?

“You saw the auction. Quite a few of the items meant for E-grade cultivators weren’t even sold since not one of the old monsters was prepared to fork out even the minimum bid,” Catheya added. “If you want something really good you have to work for it yourself. Such is Heaven’s Path. The Boundless Heaven will only help those who help themselves.”

“Not sure if I want the Heaven’s help,” Zac muttered, but he understood her point.

Not every opportunity was a Mystic Realm. Simply being used as a chess piece by bigshots could be considered an opportunity since they sat on resources that lower-grade cultivators desperately wanted.

The trio kept a low profile as they pushed through the undergrowth between the towering trees. The forest floor was thankfully quite lush even with the massive canopies hundreds of meters in the air blocking out the sun, thanks to the fact that many plants only needed Cosmic Energy to thrive.

They heard the occasional battle in the distance, but Catheya thankfully showed no inclination of heading over to fish in muddy waters. They did run into a duo of beastkin, but the battle was over before it even started. The two were frozen in place in an instant, followed by Zac and Varo each dealing with one of them before they even had a chance to erect their defenses.

Their strength wasn't very impressive, and they had probably pushed themselves to the limit just to reach the island in hopes of getting a few valuable herbs. The environment worked against the undead in this place, but he and Catheya were pureblood Draugr with one very powerful advantage; their vision.

It was almost like sonar in this place, allowing Zac to see others long before they saw him. However, Catheya was somehow able to spot parties long before he did. She didn't seem to use any skills either, leaving him wondering if it had something to do with her race. Catheya had already inadvertently divulged that all Draugr had the same bloodline, and perhaps she had managed to strengthen her innate abilities through it.

Eventually, they approached the core of Cork Island where a gargantuan world tree proudly towered over its much smaller brethren. It had been visible even through the dense canopies since it almost split the sky in two. Now that they were getting closer, the trees were growing sparser. It was like the world tree had a domain on its own.

Zac hadn't really considered what they were here to do, but now that he got a better look at the unfathomably large tree he started to form a hypothesis.

"Don't tell me," Zac slowly said as he looked at the enormous tree with a grimace.

"Well, what do you think?" Catheya smiled.

"People are going to be pissed off if we cut down that thing."