

The Fall 718

Chapter 718: Hollowtongue Mountains

“So this is the place?” Zac asked as he dragged his axe out of the head of the corpse.

They were currently at a depth of over three thousand meters, gazing at a submerged mountain range. It reminded Zac a bit of Earth back home, in the sense that it looked like this particular mountain had been dropped in the middle of nowhere through randomization. The seabed he stood on was made from the same golden-green sand as the rest of the Twilight Ocean, but the mountain in front of them was wrought from some completely different material.

It was neither the white or golden often synonymous with life, and neither did it have the murky hues of death. It was rather a deep blue, and Zac didn't feel like the area leaned toward either life or death. Yet it was undeniable that the energy in the area was the strongest they had encountered so far, like there was a Nexus Vein hiding beneath the mountain in front of them.

This could be both a good and a bad thing. Good in the sense that it probably meant there were a lot of valuable things growing in this place, a chance to pocket some valuables. Bad in the sense that the mountain was huge, and missing it was pretty hard. They had already spotted three parties in short order, one of which had tried to take them out only to find themselves outmatched.

It wasn't really thanks to Catheya or Qirai, though they had fought valiantly. It was he who had singlehandedly taken out more than half of the other group in a furious offense. Even in these conditions, he was completely fine, though he started to suspect that his cheat-like advantage had a best-before date.

His death-attuned ocean was fast filling up with the truths hidden in the Twilight Energy. In three months or so it'd reach saturation, perhaps even sooner if he kept going further toward the heart of the Twilight Ocean.

There was still the life-attuned half of his mind that had barely gained any improvements so far, but it was obvious that he would reach a limit long before the trial was over unless he stayed a Draugr the whole time. But for now, the situation gave him a huge advantage against the other competitors in the Mystic Realm.

Elites who would normally put up a tough fight got steamrolled as they could barely exhibit half of their strength.

“What's the matter with you?” Catheya sighed as she looked down at the corpses strewn around Zac, though Qirai looked a lot more appreciative.

The titan nodded with respect toward Zac as she handed her mistress the corpse of the cultivator she took out. Her demeanor in general had taken a complete turn since he and Catheya had returned from the underworld. Catheya had briefly gone over the events, though they had obviously been severely modified to protect his hidden identity.

Still, the fact that Zac had not only saved Qirai's master a few times, but also singlehandedly taken out a powerful squad in an adverse situation, was all she needed to open up. They hadn't spoken much on the

way here considering Zac had been busy with his studies and Qirai with steering the vessel and keeping a lookout for enemies, but she had often come by offering some liquor during their free time.

“Almost two months I’ve spent teaching you the basics of internment and necromancy. What’s the first rule?” Catheya continued as she stowed away Qirai’s and her own corpse.

“Don’t destroy the heads,” Zac said with a roll of his eyes. “There were seven of them, and they were pretty strong. Not much of a choice. If you always worry more about their bodies than taking enemies out as quickly and cleanly as possible, you’ll sooner or later get yourself killed.”

“Well, I guess you’re right in a sense. And to answer your question; yes, this should be the place,” Catheya nodded as she turned toward the sapphire-hued peaks. “This is the Hollowtongue Mountains, and the pearls are supposed to be hidden in a valley here.”

“Hollowtongue? Pretty weird name,” Zac muttered. “And how hidden can the valley be in the middle of an ocean? Can’t we just swim up to the surface and look around?”

“First of all, that’d make us a target for others staying within this mountain range. Secondly, this whole mountain is a natural formation. You can’t enter it from above, you need to go through one of the formation eyes,” Catheya explained.

“What happens if you try to cheat?” Zac asked curiously as he tried to find any clues of the formation she was talking about.

“If you’re lucky, you’ll just get trapped or thrown out. If unlucky, you’ll be led to a death zone,” Qirai said as she scratched her stomach lazily. “It’s the same with a lot of places like this. Unless you have the means to see through the natural formation or the power to force your way through, you better avoid messing around.”

“Passing through by skill is absolutely impossible considering your talent for arrays,” Catheya added with a wink. “Also, natural formations contain the power of nature itself, they are much harder to break open than a manufactured array.”

“So your map was essentially just to lead us to a well-known mountain range?” Zac asked with a raised brow. “I’ve even read about this place in my public information packet.”

“Well, first of all, the pearls appear at different spots, if they appear at all during a trial. Knowing they could be found in these mountains is a huge advantage. There are hundreds of places like this out there, along with endless stretches of nothingness,” Catheya said. “Secondly, I will be able to find the general direction we need to move in. For now, let’s go inside. Our battle might have drawn some attention.”

Zac took out his information packet to brush up as they swam toward one of the valleys that apparently acted as an entrance to the mountain range, but there wasn’t really much to go by. Nala’s package didn’t contain anything about this place, but another missive had a short excerpt.

The Hollowtongue Mountains were named after a specific beast that lived in large numbers in the caverns and trenches below the surface. They had tongues with stingers that contained extremely condensed Twilight Energy, which was essentially a poison to humans and the undead alike. It also mentioned that the whole place was a huge confusion array just like Catheya said, and that it was almost useless to simply trust your eyes.

Furthermore, the mountain range was subtly rearranged between each trial, so preparing maps beforehand was futile. Everything was up to chance unless you had some means to traverse the mountain range, which it thankfully looked like Catheya had.

“The deal still holds. We’ll harvest pearls for a week before we leave. Remember, the pearls start losing efficacy after a month, and it will take a while to absorb each. You’ll probably want to find a secluded spot as quickly as possible,” Catheya said as she took out an astrolabe that looked a lot like the one she used to find her way in the tunnels a few months back.

“What about me?” Zac asked as he looked up at astrolabe. “You have that thing, but how will I get out of here afterward if it's a big confusion array? What if I’m stuck in here for three full years? I have other things on my plate.”

“We had a few simple spare compasses,” Catheya slowly said with an odd expression. “But it turns out we sort of lost them when Varo was attacked.”

“The compasses aren’t very rare though,” Qirai quickly said when she saw Zac eye Catheya’s astrolabe. “We’ll probably stumble into some people on the way, and we can pick up a compass from them. In fact, these people we fought might have one.”

“Even without, it’s not too difficult to leave,” Catheya added with a smile. “You just need to stay in the valleys rather than mountain tops and travel toward what looks like the exit. You’ll run into a few dead ends, but you’ll be out within a week or two.”

“That’s fine then,” Zac nodded as he started scanning the Cosmos Sacks of the fallen ambushers.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything like that in the four sacks he rummaged through. He did however gain over 80 Twilight Fruits in one go. It really started to become clear that killing was the most efficient method of harvesting these things. He had only gotten his hands on 30 or so through his own efforts while gaining more than ten times that number through kills.

In fact, the early and middle reaches were probably starting to get cleaned out by this point. If you wanted to harvest more the normal way, you’d have to enter the inner reaches where fewer cultivators roamed.

He was out of luck in his haul, but Catheya fared better, perhaps since she had targeted the leader. She threw over a wooden compass toward Zac with a smile. “Here you go. Now you don’t need to look at me with such scary eyes. This thing is not as nice as mine, but it is easy to use. If you reach a crossing, the markers will point along the energy flow. If you want to leave, go in the opposite direction.”

“Great,” Zac smiled as he fiddled with the compass a bit before he stowed it away.

The group entered the mountain range, and they didn’t even get the chance to move for more than a few minutes before a school of piranha-like fish shot toward them from what looked like a crystal beehive. Catheya tried to freeze them all, but they actually bit their way through the ice block.

Zac immediately activated [Deathmark], shrouding the area in a corrosive haze to take care of the frenzied beasts but he was shocked to find the little things scuttling through the black waters barely affected. They were barely phased as they swam straight toward their group, though a few wraiths appeared and took out a good chunk of them in a few wide swings.

"Persistent bastards," Qirai grunted as she released a mighty punch that contracted space itself.

Hundreds of piranhas were instantly crushed, and the rest were slowly whittled down over the next minute. Eventually, the whole area was filled with thousands of mangled carcasses. The toothy beats weren't very strong, but they possessed durability that far exceeded expectations. Their bite was quite powerful as well, and even Zac had a few marks that bled some ichor.

It was the same with Qirai, while Catheya didn't even dare to get bit by the things. She had enclosed herself in a frosty barrier while sending out icicles from within.

"Are these the Hollowtongues?" Zac asked he held the frenzied little fish in his hand, trying to see inside its maw.

"No," Catheya said with a shake of her head as she swam over to the beehive. "Just some local wildlife. You should prepare yourself. We have mostly traveled inside a submersible over the past months. The beasts we'll encounter from here on out will be far more powerful compared to the ones who lived by the shores of the starting continent."

She formed an icy blade and cut the whole thing off from the mountain wall it was attached to, prompting Zac to look over curiously.

"These guys don't seem very palatable, but I could smell some roe from inside. It seems pretty delicious," Catheya explained.

"I didn't take you for a foodie," Zac commented.

"What's the use of great longevity if you don't fill the years with interesting things?" Catheya laughed. "It wasn't that long since I gained the ability to eat, there are all kinds of things I haven't had the opportunity to try out yet."

With Qirai carrying the still-unconscious Varo on her back, the trio continued, and Zac quickly became completely lost. The natural formation was clearly messing with his senses, and it felt like the mountains were completely foreign to him when looking back. It was lucky he had found the compass in such a timely manner.

Catheya didn't seem to be thrown by the formation though, and they only occasionally stopped for her to find the direction with her astrolabe. They did also have to hide or detour a few times to avoid nearby groups. It wasn't really that they were afraid, but they were all far more interested in the Life-Death Pearls at the moment.

There would be plenty of time for looting and pillaging after they had made their Dao breakthroughs.

The state of the mountain range also filled them with some urgency. They passed spiritual trees now and then, including those which grew Twilight Fruits, but they had all been plucked clean. Some cultivators had probably rushed this place and plucked the whole mountain range clean of any easy-to-harvest treasures.

The Life-Death pearls were supposedly in a very hard-to-find spot, but no one wanted to take any detours after seeing how they were a bit late to the party already. Eventually, Catheya turned and started swimming up along a mountain peak.

"Follow close, we'll pass through the formation here," Catheya explained as she turned to Zac. "Can you connect us?"

"I thought we weren't supposed to climb the peaks?" Zac asked as he sent out two chains toward both Catheya and Qirai.

"We have to if we want to reach the valley," Catheya said as she looked at Zac and Qirai. "Just let me drag you two from here on out. Don't elongate the chains, and don't expel Miasma. The formation will test you, and if you expend any energy or unleash a skill you will put us in danger."

Zac nodded, and he soon felt the pull as Catheya pushed herself forward by doing a classic breaststroke rather than pushing herself forward with Miasma. Suddenly, she simply disappeared, making it look like the chain of [Love's Bond] was cut off two meters ahead. Zac first considered trying to catch up, but he eventually stilled his nerves and stayed his hand.

After a while the chain turned, and his brows rose when he found himself heading straight toward a sharp piece of rock jutting out from the mountain wall. He gritted his teeth and braced himself, but the spike disappeared as he passed right through it. Things continued like this with one scene replacing another, and Zac found himself ramming into everything from illusory thorny bushes to large predatory beasts.

But after half an hour it all stopped, and Zac spotted Catheya floating right ahead, standing at the entrance of a valley as she played with the chain of [Love's Bond]. Was this another illusion? Zac looked around for a good minute before he felt he could confirm that this was all real.

He sighed in relief as he swam over, his nerves pretty frayed after being assaulted by an endless series of illusions for so long. His Danger Sense and powerful soul had ultimately told him that the things he saw were fake, but that knowledge didn't help much when you stared into the maw of a twenty-meter piranha.

"We made it," Catheya said with a smile as she saw Zac's approach.

"Only cost us half the crew," Qirai muttered with a sardonic grin as she caught up as well.

"Well, the core members are still around at least," Catheya sighed before turned to Zac with a spurious smile. "I wasn't sure you'd be able to sit still for this one. A lone wolf putting his life in the hands of someone else? It's been hard on you."

"Well, I figured I was sturdy enough to take a hit or two in case the visions were real," Zac snorted. "So this is the place? No wonder you said it was safe. You'd need some dumb luck to find this valley without the directions."

The valley was surrounded by peaks, and the only thing here were dozens of things that looked a lot like oysters spread out with a few hundred meters between them. Each of them was well over a meter wide, making Zac wonder just how big these Life-Death Pearls actually were.

"It's secluded, but I doubt we're the only group looking for this place. There is no time to waste," Catheya said.

“So how do we harvest these things?” Zac asked. “I searched high and low for information back in the Twilight Harbor, but I couldn’t find anything specific.”

“It’s not too difficult,” Catheya said as she led the group toward the closest oyster. “These things continuously feed on the ambient truths of the Twilight Ocean. You need to cut off its head and then quickly infuse it with your Dao. This will trick it that it’s evolving rather than dying, and it will condense all its insights into a pearl that is somewhat similar in function to a Beast Core.”

“Can you infuse it with any Dao? Like my Axe Dao?” Zac asked curiously. “And are there any differences to the quality of the pearls depending on the Dao you use?”

“No. Your Dao is just there to trigger the process. The only benefit of a powerful Dao is that the pearl formation becomes a bit quicker,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “And the Daos you use have to be related to Life or Death for these plants to be tricked. No one has managed to find any other Dao-type that works. Mixed-meaning Daos from different branches are fine as long as Life and Death take a major role, but nothing else.”