

The Fall 725

Chapter 725: Information Exchange

The group of cultivators was too far away for their bounties to show up, but Zac saw the leader's bounty as he got closer; 250-500. That was essentially the average of those who managed to reach the Hollowtongue Mountains from what Zac had seen, making the members of the group footsoldiers.

The man hesitated a bit when he saw Zac's own value, but he still approached a bit further before he stopped.

"You're looking for that crazy Draugr?" Zac asked skeptically. "Sounds like a good way to get yourselves killed."

"We dare not target him ourselves. Many have already fallen, we know that. We are simply looking for him on the orders of Auride Serveris of the Radiant Temple," the leader explained.

"Oh?" Zac exclaimed curiously, and he suddenly remembered one of the fights in the past week.

It was one of the two groups he had fled from. He had suddenly stumbled upon a group of over twenty cultivators, four of whom wore robes that seemed to be related to the Radiant Temple. One of the warriors had emitted a very intense aura, and a massive two-handed sword circled his head.

The small army hadn't actually made a move on him, but Zac didn't dare take any chances because of the number of people and the strength of their leaders. He had chucked one of his pre-made talisman balls to set a whole valley on fire while he fled with [Abyssal Phase]. Now it looked like that man was looking for revenge.

"He is currently at the 1,533rd spot on the trial, a future powerhouse of the Temple. He is paying handsomely for both clues and tracking marks," the leader continued when Zac didn't immediately speak up.

That rank might not sound too impressive compared to the rankers, but Zac knew it represented real strength. It was noticeably higher than his own, and Zac had definitely sensed a powerful weapon-related Dao emanating from that leader's body, which made sense considering the massive sword.

"I got two of those crystals and some second-hand information," Zac slowly nodded. "What is the young Lord willing to pay for that? I am only interested in treasures and Twilight Fruits."

"10 Twilight Fruits per crystal," the man said.

"Even if the signal has gone out?" Zac asked with a raised brow.

"We don't know what the young master is planning," the cultivator shrugged. "We can pay five for second-hand information if it's useful."

"I got close to the signal three days ago, to see if an opportunity would present itself," Zac sighed. "But a massive explosion suddenly erupted. Judging by the energy signatures he should be an Array Master who had set up a trap. The force was much too strong for it to be an attack. Just half a minute after the explosion, the man was over ten thousand meters away. I guess he has high-quality escape talismans to

move that quick in the mountains. If you want to trap him, you need to do something to block those kinds of arrays.”

The man’s face got a bit weird when Zac described the event where his leader got blasted to kingdom come, but he slowly nodded and took out a normal jute sack and filled it with twenty-five Twilight Fruits. Zac in turn threw over two of the crystals he had snatched the past days, somewhat regretting he couldn’t divulge he actually had 16 of them.

The two groups left in their own direction soon after, with Zac heading toward the outer reaches of the mountains. The 25 Twilight Fruits was a nice enough bonus, though just a fraction of the almost 600 he had robbed over the past days. What was more important was the information he got from the trade; the Radiant Temple-leader had some method to track him.

Zac scanned his body over and over with [Spiritual Anchor] over the next ten minutes, but there was really nothing left behind. His second-best guess was that the sword cultivator had some method to reverse-engineer the Revenge Array so that one of these tracking crystals could instead track the other crystals. If that was the case, his location would be lit up considering how many he carried.

It didn’t hurt to be careful, so Zac took a circuitous route the next few hours and dumped one crystal after another into various powerful currents, allowing them to be dragged back into the depths of the mountain range. With that dealt with, he had washed his hands off the whole situation. Something was brewing in the Hollowtongue Mountains, and he wanted no part of it.

He kept going through the winding paths for another two days, at which point he finally reached the exit. The towering peaks were eventually replaced with jagged boulders, who in turn were replaced by a mostly flat seabed covered with corals and seagrass.

Zac didn’t encounter anything of interest over the next week except the occasional plant he found with the help of [Forester's Constitution]. It was obvious he was moving through the same paths as others had traveled before him on the way to the inner layer of the Trial. Any of the real treasures in this area, if there ever were any, had long been harvested by those who had rushed here.

Eventually, the topography started to change a bit as Zac found the ocean depths slowly decrease until it was just a few hundred meters. At the same time, the ambient energy was steadily increasing as Zac spotted a vast forest in the distance. The trees weren’t of as grotesque proportions as the cork trees over at Cork Island, but they more than made up for it in number.

The forest line stretched across the horizon, blocking his whole field of vision as they reached from the ocean floor all the way to above the surface. Zac didn’t immediately enter, but he rather took out his missives, trying to figure out which forest he was dealing with. There were over a dozen sprawling forests in the Twilight Ocean, and a few would be dangerous to enter even for him.

Some were the homes to massive schools of fish or other beasts, and the hordes were so numerous that even he would find himself harried to death if he wasn’t careful. There was not much to go by though, and Zac found himself at an impasse where he wasn’t sure whether he was better off passing straight through to save time, or to spend a week or two going around.

Suddenly, a lone figure emerged from the forest line in the distance, swimming straight toward him. It was clearly a cultivator rather than a local beast, and Zac looked over with a small frown that only

relaxed when she stopped over a thousand meters away from him. The woman sent out a crystal, and it sped through the waters toward him. Zac looked at it suspiciously, considering whether he should destroy it or not, but he soon realized what it was and accepted it.

"Are you interested in a trade?" the unknown cultivator asked through the communication crystal.

"A trade for what?" Zac asked curiously.

"Judging from your trajectory, I think you took the Life Pulse on the way here, and we could both benefit from updating our mappers as well," she said. "I have also traded and killed until my [Ocean Chart] has reached 2.33% completion. I have traveled in the outskirts of this forest for a while as well, and I have valuable information."

Zac gave it some thought, and he agreed. There was a small risk of giving up good information and getting false information in turn, but the mappers were smart enough to differentiate with first-hand accounts and bought information.

"I can do that. My map is 2.46%," Zac answered as he engraved a copy on one of his spare mappers.

Of course, this copy was slightly altered to not make his path in the Hollowtongue Mountains completely clear. It also didn't display the location of the valley with the Life-Death Pearls, or the disjointed external data containing the Volcano and its surrounding features.

The stranger did the same, and Zac smiled with satisfaction when he saw how his mapper almost doubled. This cultivator had followed another current here and traveled roughly two weeks through the edge of the forest before she reached this place. Part of it covered the Life Pulse though, and Zac guessed she had traded with someone taking a similar route as himself.

He quickly scanned the contents, and he slightly sighed after seeing none of the spots that held the Remnants were marked down. He had handed over the task of finding the spots to Catheya, but it would obviously be even better if he managed to find them himself.

"Is there anything of note happening where you came from?" the voice asked.

"The mothertree on Cork Island fell just after I got there, even with Yanub Mettleleaf trying to stop it. It was a real mess," Zac said. "The undead were involved I think. There was also a manhunt for some Draugr called Arcaz Black back in the Hollowtongue Mountains where I just came from, led by the Radiant Temple. The guy is apparently filthy rich, but he survived for a week before disappearing."

Zac had already started using his own exploits to make some money, and he saw no reason to stop now. Besides, he had been pretty isolated so far and didn't have much else to contribute.

"There were unusual clashes along the Silverwind Stream as well," the woman sighed. "A squad of elites from the Havarok Empire annihilated a mysterious unit of wandering cultivators. Those cultivators were unknown, but they displayed shocking power. The grandson of a Havarok Marquis actually fell."

"Do you know what they were fighting about?" Zac asked.

"It was on the second major stop of the Silverwind Stream; the Gem Grotto. It sounded like the wandering cultivators tried to blow the whole thing up for some reason," the woman said. "The empires are up to something, best to stay out of their way."

The Gem Grotto was a somewhat popular destination for the lower-tier cultivators, and it was a bit like Divine Grotto he had contaminated. It was essentially a Nexus Crystal Mine like his own mine back home, except it was full of Twilight Crystals. Those crystals were pretty useless for cultivators, but they turned into either Miasma Crystals or Divine Crystals when taken back out, making the cave a steady but limited source of wealth.

Destroying the whole cave truly made no good sense; it was like setting a mountain of money on fire. The purpose had to be related to his own mission, proving once more that he was just one of many squads involved in this mess. At least he wouldn't be involved any longer as soon as he rid himself of that weird egg.

"Which forest is this?" Zac asked next.

"It should be the Greengrove Archipelago," the woman said as she took out a four-meter eel from her spatial ring. "This should at least be a Greengrove Eel, and I caught it inside this forest. The appearance of the canopies above surface matches as well."

The two kept sharing some information for a few minutes, but there was ultimately only so much to cover. Both were going at it alone, which meant they could only keep to the edge of the big events and more dangerous spots.

"Your map was superior, so I'll give you an additional piece of information. There is a temporary settlement on top of one of the canopies roughly two days from here. I never dared enter myself, but I looked at it from the distance for half a day. People did both come and go, apparently without issue," the woman said, and she disappeared a moment later.

Zac was pleasantly surprised at the news. Temporary settlements often appeared in trials like this since it was a convenient way for the powerhouses to make some money. Some top tier expert set up shop, using their name and prowess as a guarantee of safety. People could go there to socialize, trade, and exchange intelligence.

However, Zac could also understand why the woman ultimately never entered. There was always a risk of getting robbed or killed when entering a place like that, and that risk only increased when you were a lone warrior without any background to rely on. Furthermore, this supposed Dao Trial had a clear slaughter-component, which made things even sketchier.

Still, Zac ultimately chose to head for the encampment.

One of the main benefits of the place was the communal maps. Everyone entering would usually have to contribute their own map in addition to an entry fee, or at least be able to sell a copy of their mapper. That led to the communal map being the combined effort of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of warriors.

The current goal was to get to the Twilight Chasm as quickly as possible, to get rid of the egg and search for treasures before his soul oceans got saturated by the Twilight Energy. The best way to do that was to find one of the streams entering the chasm. It could save a month of travel time, and he had already looted seven submersibles from his battles in the Hollowtongue Mountains.

Updating the map to a communal one might even add some information on the places related to the Remnants.

So Zac entered the Greengrove Archipelago, but he didn't even get further than a hundred meters before he was assaulted by an eel just like the one the woman showcased. It shot out from a hole in one of the towering trees reaching above the surface.

Zac knew that this was a domain of the beasts, so he already had [Verun's Bite] ready at hand, and a swirl of leaves passed among the trees, completely overwhelming the late E-grade eel. It released sea of lightning across the area, but Zac's Endurance and [Innate Ward] was enough to mollify the effect until the beast died.

However, Zac swore in annoyance when he saw a dozen more eels shoot out from the surrounding trees, probably called over by the lightning domain. A huge leaf appeared in front of his blade, and it immediately gained a golden luster before a radiant wave flew out, quickly followed by one of pure death.

Life and death formed the signature demarcation of [Rapturous Divide], but Zac's eyes widened in alarm as the scar just kept growing as it continued forward. One Tree after another toppled as the Twilight Energy in the surroundings were reduced to their base components, pushing the lethality of the skill to unprecedented levels.

The madness only lasted for less than a second though before the radiant domain of Arcadia was ripped apart by the Twilight Energy, cutting the skill short. Still, that was more than enough as all the eels had been split before they even had a chance to unleash their domain or move out of the way.

The same was true for the trees, where many had lost a twenty-meter section of their trunks. However, they still hovered in the air, as though they didn't need their roots to survive. Zac knew it was just because of their canopies above the surface though. They were pushed together so densely that they essentially formed proper islands made out of leaves. The trees that weren't cut apart propped up those that were.

Zac quickly looted the battlefield before he moved on. It was lucky he decided to test out the skill before using it in a real battle. It's effect was definitely strong, but it worked a bit differently compared to normally thanks to the Twilight Energy. It was more chaotic, with hundreds of demarcations forming a thick band of destruction, instead of one clean line.

Its lethality was pretty impressive, but it was also ripped apart by the surroundings itself. So if someone managed to defend for just half a second, the attack would be rendered useless by the Twilight Ocean.

It was worthy trade in Zac's opinion, and he continued to temper himself beneath the Greengrove Archipelago for half a day, fighting the various beasts that made the waters their home. The eels were the largest population, and Zac had soon killed hundreds of them, and it felt like his whole body was electrified by this point.

However, Zac suddenly felt a pang of dangers as a sea of lightning started to approach, and he quickly hid inside a hollow trunk as he activated an illusion array. It first looked like a natural calamity coming closer, but Zac could eventually discern a monstrosity if an eel in the center. It stretched over one hundred meters, and the movement of the beast caused crackling sounds that echoed through the forest.

It was covered in an armor of lightning as well, and it emitted a dense killing intent. Even worse, it looked like it was looking for something. Or someone. Was it angry that its children had been killed over the past day and come to find the culprit?

Zac wasn't in any mood to fight this thing at all. This big bastard was completely different to the mutated Hollowtongue he had fought with relative ease the other day. This was definitely a proper Beast King going by the aura, the equivalent of a Hegemon. These things were rare, but they definitely existed inside the Twilight Ascent.

They were supposedly mainly living inside the Twilight Chasm, but some kings could appear this deep in the trial. Part of Zac wanted to test his mettle, but this didn't feel like the time or place. This big guy didn't seem like a pushover, and even if he defeated him, who knew what kind of attention it would draw and what aces he would be forced to burn.

Thankfully, the beast didn't discover Zac's hiding spot, and it soon left in the direction of where Zac had killed the smaller eels. Zac decided to not stay beneath the surface in case it came back though. It was time to finally head above water after months of traveling on the ocean floor.