

The Fall 729

Chapter 729: Raksha Shrimp

Zac glared at the sealed talisman in his hand, swearing at both the wily elf and the salesman who had guaranteed 'unparalleled ability to escape even inside a sealed domain' for the talismans.

"Don't be like that. Now hurry, my preparations can only delay the big guy for a minute," the voice of Ventus echoed through the chamber, surprising Zac.

It looked like the elf had known something like this would happen and made some preparations. The thing Ventus threw Zac at the end clearly wasn't an escape token, but it looked like it was meant to deal with the situation above. Zac sighed with some exasperation before he rushed out of the Dao Arena, and he was met with a scene of utter chaos outside.

The outer wall was already gone, and there was an enormous hole in the Greengrove canopies right outside the settlement. And from the depths of the tunnel, hundreds of Raksha Shrimps skittered forward, reeking of bloodlust with their six serrated claws ready to tear the settlers apart. Even the smallest of them was 4 meters long, brutish crustaceans clearly bred for war. The largest specimens were almost twice as big, and Zac guessed they had to be the ones who reached had Peak E-grade, with the rest of them being in the later stages.

They rolled forward like bulldozers, but the protective arrays still held while the wall did not. In fact, the whole sky had been replaced by a starry nebula, making Zac feel like he was looking up at space outside the Mystic Realm rather than the greenish haze of the Twilight Ocean. Motes of light were constantly falling, each one of them targeting a shrimp that stepped too far.

The motes looked harmless, but one massive beast after another fell helplessly on the ground after a simple touch, and piles of them were quickly forming at the edge of the settlement. The two dozen cultivators still inside weren't affected though, and the motes harmlessly passed them by. A few took the opportunity to strike at the shrimp, but most were trying to break out.

It was not only space that had been sealed, but the beasts had actually managed to erect a physical barrier creating a cage far stronger than [Profane Seal]. There was a huge water barrier that encapsulated the whole settlement and the surrounding five hundred meters. Even Ventus's prepared defenses were within the water cage.

As for the source of the barrier, it was pretty obvious; a 40-meter long Raksha Shrimp King that actually floated in the air above the tunnel that it had created. Not only did it have eight enormous claws that made Zac's heart shudder when he looked at it, but it had actually formed what looked like wings made out of blood-red water.

His best guess was that the Beast King was tricked into thinking there was some opportunity for a Dao breakthrough hidden in the town, and it had now locked it down to look for it. Thankfully, it looked like it was a bit hesitant about entering itself because of the odd cloud in the sky, instead letting its children test the water.

Zac only hesitated for a second before he shot toward the water wall on the opposite side of the town, away from the Raksha Shrimp King and its minions. Fighting a Beast King was something he was planning

on doing sooner or later, but there was a time and place for everything. This one had a seemingly endless number of followers to throw at him, and some of them had quite formidable auras.

Besides, the king himself gave off a much more condensed aura than the electric eel even if the shrimp king was less than half the size. Not only that, but the Raksha Shrimp species were generally considered one of the most dangerous species in the inner layer of the Twilight Ocean according to the missives he'd bought thanks to one special ability of theirs.

They could utilize a War Array.

The king had brought thousands of subjects, and it might be able to turn itself into the equivalent of a Middle Stage Hegemon with their combined contributions. It was no surprise that the settlers focused on stalling while trying to break the water wall rather than going all-out to take the king out. Few E-grade cultivators would willingly anger a Beast King, even less than a Hegemon.

F-grade beasts were almost always weaker compared to cultivators level for level, except for some unique races. E-grade beasts were a bit better off, but still slightly behind. They had gained some basic intelligence and an understanding of the Dao, but they were still a tier lower compared to cultivators with their weapons, and skills, and so on.

However, that all changed at the D-grade. The boost in power for humans was big, but it was even bigger for beasts. Beast Kings were essentially the lowest grade beasts that were considered bestial cultivators, beings who followed in the steps of the Beast Ancestor.

Only those who managed to purify their bloodline would manage to form a Beast Core, and when that happened they would gain a Bloodline Inheritance. This bloodline inheritance differed greatly in quality and scope between species, but even the worst ones were a full kit of both skills and a cultivation method that suited their kind.

Though apparently, beasts with extremely pure bloodlines could awaken such an inheritance much sooner, some even from birth.

The bloodline evolution alone would give them a tremendous surge in power, and forming a Beast Core would award them with a shocking amount of energy, and energy reserves were already one of the things they surpassed cultivators at. With the inheritance itself, they suddenly gained ways to make use of those almost endless stores of Cosmic Energy with skills and to empower those skills with cultivation manuals.

That was why the difference in power between cultivators and beasts was pretty much removed at the D-grade. In fact, the average cultivator was slightly disadvantaged in raw power. Zac was no average cultivator, but he still was far from the peak of the E-grade. The amount of strength he would have to exhibit to deal with this big guy was a lot more than he was willing to show in front of over a dozen elite cultivators.

Instead, he decided to follow Ventus's suggestion and help the people escape.

"Keep attacking it," a burly humanoid roared as he unleashed a tremendous slash with a two-handed sword at the barrier. "We need to exhaust it!"

The others didn't need to be told what to do, and they were piling on in an effort of breaking through the thick wall of water to escape. A few even tried to swim right through it, but they were rebuffed and bloodied from the attempt.

"It's you!" a familiar face exclaimed when he saw Zac approach. It was the storekeeper who had helped him update his [Ocean Chart]. "Where's the boss?! We need his help getting out of here!"

"He teleported away somehow," Zac said with a crooked smile. "I think he's gone already."

"What?!" multiple people exclaimed, glaring at Zac like this was all his fault.

"What are you looking at me for? Do you think I want to be stuck in here with you people?" Zac grunted as he took out his axe.

The next moment a storm of Axe-infused leaves slammed into the barrier, but it just rippled without properly breaking. The barrier was something else, and a showcase of the difference between the D-grade and E-grade. Hegemons simply had a disgusting amount of energy to spare, and the Shrimp King could probably just keep infusing the barrier with energy until their whole group was exhausted.

After confirming the situation, Zac took out the item he got from Ventus. The elf had said that this was the key, and Zac's best guess was that it was meant for this very situation. He readied himself as he infused the token with Cosmic Energy, and he instantly felt it emit a shocking cold. He had a good guess what was going on.

"The boss prepared a key! Get ready!" Zac roared to those few who were attacking the shrimp at bay in the distance, and he threw the talisman at the barrier a second later.

A huge seal appeared from the token, the rippling waters of the barrier immediately started to freeze, and the water wall soon turned into an ice wall. That wasn't the only change though; much of the energy that filled the waters were somehow nullified, making the ice not much stronger than just a normal wall. However, Zac knew the window of opportunity was limited as an enraged roar erupted from the beast king.

The Beast King could clearly sense what was going on, but an almost blinding starlight illuminated the area as a storm of silver leaves shot toward the rapidly freezing wall, cutting out a large chunk of ice in one go. A few more mighty attacks enlarged the escape path even further, forming a proper pathway.

Zac instantly flashed forward with [Loamwalker], appearing far outside the barrier in an instant. Three cultivators were even quicker than he was, and most of the others were hot on Zac's heels. The whole island shook the next moment, and Zac knew the Beast King had been forced into action.

This was no place to stay, and he rushed forward, his steps empowered by his movement skill as he flashed toward a neighboring island. A crash and an eruption of Cosmic Energy behind him indicated that the Beast King had caught up to someone, but Zac didn't stop to look. He had already paved the path, the others would have to deal with the fallout themselves. As for Zac, he set course for the depths of the Mystic Realm.

He was occasionally forced to jump down to the bottom of the shallow lakes to activate the moment skill again, but he was still making great progress across the archipelago. He only stopped ten minutes later to get his bearings, and it thankfully didn't look like any of the shrimp had followed him.

There was however a few cultivators on neighboring islands. They bowed in his direction before disappearing, and he followed suit as he jumped into one of the rivers of the Greengrove Archipelago and dug a hole that took him to the proper ocean beneath the canopies.

The Raksha shrimp were probably still gathered around the encampment, looking for the Dao Treasure that the Shrimp King thought he had sensed. However, they would probably spread out the moment they couldn't find it, aiming at the cultivators instead. So Zac didn't want to spend any more time in the area than he had to.

Huge swathes of land, or rather water, had been added to his [Ocean Chart], and Zac started planning his route as he pushed forward. Most of the added spots were unsurprisingly in the earlier parts of the Twilight Ocean. It was like Ventus had said, the temporary settlement seemed to be at the nexus of four paths, of which the route he took was one.

However, some parts had been scouted that went even deeper than the settlement itself. Zac had 'wasted' almost two months between Catheya's mission and his cultivation session, and some had reached this area over a month ago. A promising route to the Twilight Chasm had already been found, and Zac only hesitated for a few seconds before he changed course toward the already charted path.

The map bought from a Temporary Settlement didn't hold all the private markers that cultivators could add, such as warnings of powerful beasts or natural disasters, but it was still much safer than to go about things blind. The route would take him through Greengrove Archipelago and some more, where one of the settlers had spotted the beginning of another stream.

That stream was most likely one of the dozen-odd currents that led to the Twilight Chasm and entered its depths, and the quickest way for Zac to get where he needed to go.

But before setting off, there was one thing to take care of. He was currently swimming between the towering mangroves, but he suddenly swam a bit closer to one of the trees. Without warning, he pivoted in the waters, and stomped off against the trunk, utilizing the tree to activate [Loamwalker].

He flashed a few hundred meters forward, at which point he double-jumped in the waters to instantly change his direction and move around another trunk. There was nothing in sight, but a storm of leaves still shot out as Zac swung [Verun's Bite] with a ruthless gleam in his eyes.

The waters suddenly shuddered as two bloodied men appeared out of nowhere, both of them looking at Zac with surprise and trepidation.

"Is there some sort of misunderstanding?" one of the men asked. "We just escaped with our lives, why attack us like this?"

"Preemptive self-defense," Zac shrugged.

Zac had actually realized that someone was following him for a while now. Part of it was thanks to his peak mastery [Cosmic Gaze]. Each improvement to the skill brought the same benefit; greater detail to his energy vision. By the time it had reached peak mastery, it captured even the weakest hint of attunement.

Not only that, he had just evolved his Tree-based Dao and he was inside a forest, which made his senses extremely keen. Zac had noticed that there was a spot with weaker attunement a few hundred to a

thousand meters behind him. That was often the tell-tale sign of an illusion array or cloaking skill that didn't quite match up to Zac's own sentry abilities.

But the most sure-fire way was obviously his Luck. With his recent Dao Evolutions, his mostly stagnant Luck had finally taken some steps forward, and he was approaching 1000 effective Luck. That was a shocking amount for E-grade cultivators, and it unsurprisingly provided great benefits. His warning senses had never been sharper, and he could feel something amiss just from the fact that he was being targeted. Previously the danger would have had to be palpable for him to get this way.

The two had tried to make it look like Zac had made a mistake, but he could sense killing intent hidden in their eyes. As expected, the two suddenly shot toward Zac as they brandished their weapons. They could probably tell that their ploy had failed and decided to instantly attack to retain some of the element of surprise.

Zac wasn't worried, and a vast fractal forest sprung up among the mangroves, making sure he'd sense if there were even more people lurking in the area. His aura exploded to a level that far exceeded what he had displayed inside the town, and the waters churned from his roiling killing intent. This deep into the Twilight Ocean, this kind of outburst essentially represented a Heaven's Chosen.

The two were clearly shocked by the display, and one of them took out an escape talisman without hesitation.

"Wai-" the other man screamed in alarm, Zac had already pounced on him.

The robber's head was lobbed off as the other man activated the talisman. But he was dragged back by the chains of [Love's Bond] before he was finished in one go as well. Zac deactivated [Hatchetman's Spirit] and scurried away after looting their rings and Corpses.

The gambit was a huge success. Zac was definitely powerful enough to deal with these two warriors without too much effort, but it shouldn't have been that easy. The two were still elites that dared travel in the depths of the Twilight Ocean, and Zac didn't want to attract any attention so he had unleashed an unnaturally powerful aura to catch them off-guard, courtesy of his bloodline and [Spiritual Void].

The two must have thought he was a monster with a Middle Stage Dao Branch between not being restrained at all and having his aura so condensed. They would definitely have figured out it was just fake power within a second or two, but they both died long before that.

Zac traveled for another ten days, continuing his progress between going over Catheya's fractals and battling various beasts that had made the expansive mangrove forest their home. His Dao evolution was rapidly being consolidated into his path, and he was shoring up the insights into his path he had gained as well.

Soon enough he reached the edges of the Greengrove Archipelago, but he didn't leave just yet. He first found an inconspicuous tree an hour from the edge and dug a small cultivation cave in its crown. He plugged the hole with the branches he cut out and followed up by setting down a couple of arrays to seal the area.

He had already incorporated his lessons from upgrading [Indomitable], and he had pushed his Life-attuned Dao Fragment to peak as well. Now that things had calmed down, it was time to make a real go at upgrading his skills.