

## The Fall 753

### Chapter 753: Reef Forest

Zac panted deeply for a few seconds before he eventually ripped out the edge of [Verun's Bite] from the brain stem of the beast. Afterward, he quickly swam up, escaping the gory soup inside the Beast King's skull. All around him, the massive den was in shambles, the walls completely unable to withstand the fury of their clash.

The original plan had been to ambush and take the wounded beast down in one quick go, but plans could only take you so far. The first surprise had come when the beast finally reached its den, an enormous chasm that continued thousands of meters into the ground. Zac had been shocked to find that its aura had simply disappeared just a minute after entering.

It was like it had teleported away, without giving the slightest hint of what it was about to do. Zac first thought that it was unusually good at restraining its aura, but that didn't completely explain the situation. There had to be something inside, be it a powerful Nexus Vein, a unique herb, or even some mysterious metal whose aura would allow the Beast King to gradually refine their bloodline.

But there was nothing like that. Conversely, the energy hadn't decreased either like it did around the small chamber that had become his Cultivation Cave down in the depths. The energy the hole emitted was exactly the same as the ambient energy, making Zac guess something else was at play.

Either there was an array hiding what was going on inside, or perhaps a unique material with obscuring capabilities. In either case, it piqued Zac's interest, and he had slowly made his way inside after waiting for another 20 minutes to let the Beast King lower its guard. Unfortunately, it had been futile, and Zac had almost gotten himself killed by a terrifying energy beam that engulfed the whole entrance when he entered.

If not for his Danger Sense and activating [Abyssal Phase] with the help of his bloodline, he would have been severely burned. However, he managed to dodge completely unscathed, which left the wounded Beast King in an awkward situation, considering using an attack of such magnitude had worsened its wounds considerably.

The battle had turned into a ruthless melee afterward, where Zac eventually managed to create an opportunity with the help of the finishing strike of [Blighted Cut], which had opened up a large enough wound in its skull for Zac to sneak inside. From there, a rampage inside its brain had given the king of the reef a gruesome but quick death.

He had ultimately been forced to use [Pillar of Desolation] again even though he had planned on doing without, but the chains of [Love's Bond] simply wasn't strong enough to trap such a strong Beast King, even in its wounded state. Just trying would damage the chains, which in turn would harm Alea.

It was a useful experiment though since it was a confirmation that he could only attach one chain to even such a massive creature. The chain had at least wound itself over ten times around the beast, and it had managed to endure just long enough for him to unleash [Blighted Cut]. However, he knew that even his ultimate skill wouldn't have lasted against a Beast King for too long.

In either case, the hunt was a success which meant it was time to loot. The beast was quickly chopped up into manageable chunks, though Zac could quickly confirm that its meat most likely wasn't serviceable. It had a rank odor not fit for eating, but it would still be useful as feed or as a lure for other beasts.

As for the den itself, it was covered in Twilight Crystals, though most of them had been broken during the clash. Unsurprisingly, the energy intensity inside the den was far greater compared to the outside, in this case, thanks to sitting on on a Nexus Vein. Unfortunately, it looked like the 'treasure' that this beast had found for itself was a natural formation rather than an item, meaning it impossible for Zac to bring away.

He had sensed a mysterious energy being generated in the center of the cave, but that energy was gone by the time the fight was over. That didn't mean his hunt was fruitless, and his eyes first turned to the small hill of corpses in the corner of the cave, and then the mound of Twilight Crystals in another.

It looked extremely grim, but Zac still shot toward the pile first to rummage for wealth among the fallen cultivators. There were almost a hundred corpses gathered, and judging by the state of decomposition of the remains, this beast had preyed on trial-takers for at least 10 E-grade trials. For all Zac knew, this bloodthirsty bastard might have been a known terror of the area.

Zac only briefly scanned some of the rings and pouches, but he realized that most of the Pouches had been broken down by the Twilight Energy, their contents lost to the void forever. Thankfully, the Spatial Rings were more resilient, and while many had lost a lot of their space, what remained contained an impressive amount of treasures.

Those who had fallen were mostly native elites from the looks of it, while Zac guessed seven of the identifiable corpses came from the three B-grade factions. Even then, the items inside were almost exclusively treasures found in the ocean or the preparations they had brought for the trial itself. The imperials didn't have a single skill crystal or cultivation manual inside their rings, for example.

Finally, there was the odd crystal mountain hidden in a secured corner of the cave. Throughout the whole battle, the beast had kept away from that side, and Zac curiously looked at the skeleton sitting on the mound of Twilight Crystals. After having encountered something similar once before, Zac could quickly confirm that this set of bones had once belonged to a Hegemon, this one probably much stronger than the other skeleton he still carried in his Spatial Ring.

Its bones shone like polished metal, and they exuded a palpable pressure as Zac swam closer. Zac wondered why the Beast King would accord this long-dead cultivator such respect, but after some time he believed he had found the reason. It was not the skeleton itself, but rather the item on its wrist and the benefit it provided.

It was the bracer the fallen Hegemon carried that hid the aura of the cave, rather than the natural formation or the Beast King itself. To accomplish that, it was constantly drawing energy from the thousands of crystals beneath, and Zac guessed that it was the beast that had figured out how it worked and supplied the crystals.

The thing seemed able to block out the aura of anything that entered this cave. It had a mesmerizing blue luster, and Zac could vaguely spot what looked like a rune deep inside. The craftsmanship of the

metal bracer that held the sapphire-like gemstone was absolutely exquisite, and the treasure reminded Zac of his [Stone of Hope].

He hesitated only for a moment before he put it on his left wrist just like the skeleton had, and the change was immediate. Whatever field the gemstone emitted was drawn in, suddenly only covering his body. Zac tried infusing it with some Miasma to see if he could make it spread its protection to a wider area, but his energy was rebuffed.

Zac furrowed his brows a bit as he glanced at the mound of crystals beneath the skeleton, and he guessed that the item wasn't made for the undead. That was fine with him though. This effect alone was a great get. Anyone could restrain their aura, but there were always some of it leaking out.

Besides, anyone using scout abilities would see the energy inside his body just like he did with [Cosmic Gaze] no matter how skilled at energy control you were.

This treasure would hopefully allow him to traverse unseen, just like the array pillar of the Havarok had almost perfectly blended in with the surroundings. He doubted it would be able to hide the bounty that would appear above his head, but he also knew that thing only showed up when he was focused on.

He spent a few more minutes storing the skeleton and crystal mountain before scavenging the cave for any more treasures, but the Beast King was pretty organized, as far as turtle monsters went. Most of the corpses and treasures had been dragged to the same alcove, except the D-grade skeleton which had been placed in its own section. Seeing as there were nothing else of interest Zac simply left, once more setting course for the settlement indicated on his [Ocean Chart].

It took him another five days to pass the vast coral reef, even if his new bracer saved him a lot of headaches. As long as he kept it running he was ignored by most of the animals that made the reef their home, even if he was spotted. They probably figured that eating something that didn't emit a speck of energy was a waste of time. Why fill their bellies with trash when they could gobble up something much more palatable?

Some beasts still tried to rip him apart just out of spite, but most of them let down their guards since killing such a weak being didn't warrant any effort. They were quickly proven wrong as Zac bisected them with a lazy swing of his own, adding their carcasses to his rapidly growing stockpile of high-grade meat.

These fights quickly showed the limits of the bracer. It only worked while Zac didn't emit too much energy himself. The moment he unleashed a skill the effect was broken, and the beasts around him could suddenly sense his aura. Secondly, it was a bit troublesome to keep going, seeing as it required non-miasmic energy to function.

Without anything to feed it, the sapphire lost its luster after around an hour. Zac quickly fashioned a makeshift solution by fastening a Supreme Twilight Crystal to it, though he suspected he wouldn't need something like that in his human form.

Having the crystal against his skin led to more Twilight Energy entering his body, but it was a small price to pay for Zac as he crept closer toward the gathering point the information missive had shared. He was still half a day away from the settlement marked on the mapper, but a sudden outburst of energy followed by massive explosions made him stop in his tracks and quickly take cover.

It didn't seem like beasts fighting from the energy signatures, and Zac cautiously crept closer until he spotted the source. It was cultivators, over a dozen of them. Seeing them filled Zac with an odd sense of relief. He hadn't seen a single soul for almost a year, to the point that he started to doubt his sanity a little bit. But he really hadn't been left behind, forgotten in this cursed ocean.

The group of cultivators was fighting against a school of fish that had made a large beehive-like coral their home, and Zac had quickly receded into the shadows before he was spotted. The group was made up of six elementals and nine undead, Revenant natives by the looks of it. Two of them had bounties at [2,500 - 5,000] as well, indicating they most likely possessed Dao Branches.

Zac wanted information, but taking on a group of fifteen elites was overdoing it. More to the point, Zac wasn't certain some locals knew the answers to his questions, and their allegiances were a lot harder to guess. That party might just be a band of strong cultivators looking for opportunities together, or they might be agents of some of the foreign factions.

For all he knew, there might be spies for all the major forces in that group considering their average strength.

He rather hoped that he could stumble upon members of either the Radiant Temple or the Havarok Empire. Some Imperial Clan of the Undead Empire would be fine too, but there wasn't a high chance of that happening. From the looks of it, there didn't seem to be many of them around, with the notable exceptions of Uona and the Eidolon scion whose activities were still a mystery to him.

In fact, he and Catheya were the only true pureblood Draugr inside the trial as far as he knew. Not a single scion from the nearby Draugr-led Kingdom was participating, and Catheya's clan had apparently sold most of their slots to others rather than use them themselves. In contrast, the Havarok Empire had thousands of cultivators entering from the looks of it, and the Radiant Temple had multiple squads as well.

That by itself was some sort of clue to his questions. But exactly what it meant, Zac still didn't know.

Zac left the group of cultivators to their devices, aiming for a group of easier targets to digest. Preferably, he'd like to find and catch a lone explorer, but he didn't know if there were too many of those this deep into the ocean. The hours passed as Zac dodged one group after another as he crept through the forest. He didn't actually go any closer to the reef any longer, rather opting to find some cultivators at the edge of the reef.

He had been extremely close to pulling the trigger on a group of four human cultivators, but he had been rudely interrupted just as he was about to close in on them. Another set of cultivators shot closer as well, clearly intent on robbing the quartet. Zac was forced to creep back into the shadows again, swearing at the group of ten opportunists ruining his good fortune.

But finally, eight hours after encountering the first squad, Zac found his perfect opportunity. A sudden light of life flickered between two corals in the distance, and Zac first thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. However, he soon realized what he was seeing was real. His Draugr eyes were seeing the outline of a humanoid from the life force it exuded, but his other senses couldn't spot a thing.

Someone was traveling alone, using some sort of skill or treasure to hide both their aura and appearance. Luckily, they couldn't fool his special sight that was almost like a heat-seeking vision, and a

smile spread across Zac's face as he activated [Abyssal Phase]. The world was reduced to a crawl as he shot forward, rapidly closing in on the target.

The runner only noticed something was wrong just as Zac had appeared right behind them, and by that point, it was much too late. Zac turned back into his corporeal form right next to the invisible target, and his hand flashed forward along with four unbreakable chains. As expected, the target didn't have an actual shield running, and he felt his fingers close in on a throat as they slammed into a coral with enough force to topple it.

A pained scream echoed out in the area, but no beast dared come close as Zac unleashed his Dao Field and empowered it with a storm of extra Dao from his [Spiritual Void] and his immense killing intent. It was like the area had become a war zone, and Zac could almost hear the screams of desperate warriors clamoring as his eyes bore into those of his captive.

He couldn't believe his luck when he saw that it was a Havarok Cultivator sporting pretty serious wounds. The injuries didn't come from him bum-rushing the poor man, but they rather appeared to be from a previous battle. The cultivator had been fleeing toward the settlement from the depths of the reef, so Zac guessed that something had gone awry in there.

It wasn't a surprise. Zac himself could fight freely in these waters, but most cultivators would be pressed to exhibit even 20-30% of their strength in this area. Entering a place with multiple Beast Kings roaming was to dance with death, and Zac guessed that the rest of this man's party had become food for the wildlife.

The cultivator looked completely discombobulated for a second before his gaze met Zac's, and his eyes slowly widened with comprehension.

"It's you!" he croaked with a strained voice.

Zac only smiled in return as he took out a sharp needle, which he unceremoniously stabbed into the man's throat. It was a paralyzing agent locking him in place. Zac would have preferred to seal his cultivation altogether, but he figured that the environment would kill the poor man if that happened. And that couldn't do with the plans Zac had.

"I guess I'm easy to recognize," Zac smiled as he removed his grip. Of course, he kept the Havarok agent locked in his chains, and he moved the edge of [Verun's Bite] to the man's throat to discourage any hasty actions. "In a sense, we're fated. I was just looking for someone from your empire, and here you are, delivering yourself to me. Answer my questions, and I'll let you go."

The cultivator shuddered for a moment, but a sense of calm soon appeared in his eyes as he stopped struggling.

"Like I'd trust an abyssal fiend like you," the man grunted. "Just kill me. I will never betray the Empire."

"Now don't be like that," Zac snorted. "Believe it or not, our interests are more aligned than you would think. In fact, I need you to send a message to your prince after this. I failed to kill off that bloodsucker the last time we fought, but if prince Ykrodas is interested, we might be able to finish the job together."