

The Fall 704

Chapter 704: Cork Island

The skeleton's spatial ring was in a pretty bad state, and Zac guessed that it wouldn't last more than a few more decades. It had probably lost more than three-quarters of its original space by now, and what remained was far smaller than even the backup rings he bought in Twilight Harbor.

The contents were left in a chaotic jumble, but Zac started to organize the loot into piles, something that had become a lot easier since his control over mental energy got stronger. It quickly became apparent that the previous owner had fought a few life-and-death battles before dying himself, as it looked like the items came from at least five different people.

There were four sets of cultivation manuals, all of them of different elements. There was a Body Tempering Manual as well, but it was locked just like the manuals were. Hopefully, he would be able to decode them through some service, since these manuals were most likely all things that could be used all the way into the D-grade.

Even if they were average in other aspects, that alone made them better than 95% of the manuals currently available in Port Atwood. Apart from the manuals, there were over fifty bottles with pills, but almost forty of them had golden runes emblazoned on them. It was a seal by the System that locked items of too high a grade until he left the trial.

It was the same with a number of talismans and two Low-grade Cosmic Crystals.

Those crystals were probably left for emergencies, as there were also two small hills of Supreme Nexus Crystals and Supreme Miasma Crystals. The fallen Hegemon was probably among the weaker ones who had entered the Twilight Ascent during some previous opening.

All-in-all, the tally was extremely impressive for an outer trove, though most of the value seemed to be in the crystals themselves. Two low-grade Cosmic Crystals meant 200 D-grade Nexus Coins, a shocking haul for most peak E-grade cultivators. In comparison, the estimated value of the Trove Catheya found was just in the vicinity of 120,000 E-grade Nexus Coins.

Unfortunately, there was not a single Twilight Fruit in the ring, which was a pretty big disappointment. By value alone, they were almost a match to the Cosmic Crystals. But more importantly, they might be the perfect food for [Love's Bond]. Zac's best guess was that D-grade Twilight Fruits were considered too great a reward, and removed by the System.

Zac was about to retract his vision but he suddenly spotted a familiar sphere, and he curiously took it out. He infused some energy into the ball, and he soon found himself in an illusion. It actually worked. He wasn't worried about the thing being a weapon or a trap since he had an identical sphere in his own spatial ring.

It was looked like a metal ball, but it was called an [Ocean Chart], and it was a specialized version of his [Automatic Mapper]. It was designed to chart the Twilight Ocean and it automatically added in and updated the map as Zac moved along, even while it was in his Spatial Ring. It was one of the first things he prepared for the trial, but until now he hadn't had much reason to take it out since it was almost completely blank.

The [Ocean Chart] he found was completely different, and large swathes were filled in with great detail. It wasn't much help to Zac as the whole ocean had been rearranged since then though. But Zac suddenly spotted something interesting, something that pertained to him specifically.

In a certain part of the middle area of the trial, Zac spotted an all-too-familiar Volcano; the Volcano with the Shard of Creation. Zac's eyes lit up, having found the first real clue to the remnants. The volcano obviously wouldn't be at the same spot as before, but most features stayed in the same general depth.

So if the volcano was around the midpoint during a previous trial, there was a good chance it was in the same general area this time around as well. Even better, there were over five distinctive markers close to it, any one of which might still be connected to the nondescript volcano. The ocean would gradually get charted by the trial takers, and he would be able to trade for or steal their [Ocean Charts] to supplement his own.

Finding the unnamed volcano had just become a lot easier thanks to this map since he could use its surrounding features as clues.

There were unfortunately no clues to the Splinter on the map. In the vision he had back during the Mystic Realm it was deep inside a cave hidden among jagged pitch-black rocks at the ocean floor. But he was just one week into the trial, and he had already made surprising inroads.

Zac had already come to a decision since discovering the remnants were here; as long as he could find both the locations, he would try to absorb a second set. Collecting more of the remnants was a huge risk, but Zac felt the potential rewards justified it. Making his ultimate attacks stronger was a welcome addition, but he was more interested in the passive effects.

Without the purified energies of Oblivion, it would have taken much longer for his soul to reach the state required for the First Reincarnation. He wasn't like Vilari, born with a soul multiple times stronger than the norm. It was the same with his body. The Shard of Creation had kept nurturing his Bloodline over the past years.

It was the shard that had helped push his [Force of the Void] to 27% reserves even without a method to cultivate it. He had tried eating all kinds of things, but so far he had not found much that was of use. Most treasures were simply turned into Cosmic Energy by [Void Heart], while a few items with strong Spatial Energies seemed to nurture the Hidden Node to some degree.

Getting a second set of Remnants would mean both a faster soul cultivation and body tempering, without Zac actually having to spend any extra time on either. It was an important experiment as well, to see whether the cage could take on more remnants. Zac memorized all the features surrounding the volcano, after which he stowed away the old [Ocean Chart] to be used as a spare.

Cracking open the first hoard solo was pretty exhilarating, but the excitement quickly died down over the next hours. Troves obviously didn't grow on trees, and Zac didn't really gain much of anything over the next day. He did loot a couple of Twilight Fruits, but Alea still showed no indication of being stuffed as she greedily ate any fruit she could get. The monotony eventually ended though as another Ice Crystal formed next to him.

"Everyone gather," the crystal said. "The Living Pulse is up ahead, which means we're closing in on Cork Island. The risk of ambush is a lot higher here."

The group all swam over to Catheya before advancing any further. The start of the living pulse was a small subaqueous mountain range, where the stream emerged out of the depths. From where, no one knew, as going against the current got you ripped apart. The stream was then rerouted through the canyons of the mountain until it turned into a powerful surge that shot through the ocean.

Their group obviously wouldn't get too close to the mountain, since it was a popular spot to gather up for adventuring parties. They instead chose a roundabout way as they masked their presence as much as they could. It was hard to miss the Living Pulse even when it was in the distance, as Zac could sense a pure surge of life within the Golden Haze.

That was a unique point of the Living Pulse; it passed a lot of life-attributed points of interest, and it was marked by those locations and held strong life-attuned energies. Or perhaps it was the Pulse itself that made those points of interest possible at all. In either case, it made their work easier as they moved along its path toward Cork Island.

They soon spotted the island in the distance, or rather the fact that the depth of the ocean kept shrinking. They eventually reached a sheer mountain wall that went from the ocean bed to above the surface. They had reached the island proper. The Living Pulse actually cut straight through the island itself, but they would have to get onto it.

Sharpo wordlessly sent out a small snake that quickly turned translucent.

"The cliff is forty meters tall," she said. "I can't see any cultivators, but my snake can't see through high-quality illusions. There are some odd fluctuations though, there might be someone lying in wait."

Catheya frowned for a few seconds before she took out a talisman, but before she had a chance to use it Zac felt a weak push against his mind. He wasn't even sure if his impression was real, but it looked like the ghost and Catheya had sensed the same thing.

"We've been spotted!" Sharpo said.

"We strike," Catheya immediately said. "It'll be trouble if they expose our group. We'll take them out before hiding inside the forest."

Time was of the essence, so everyone immediately got ready.

"Be careful," Catheya said as she nodded at Qirai who once more took the lead with a massive ice shield on her arm.

The Titan immediately rose through the waters like a wall-breaker while both Zac and Yod followed close behind. Varo and Sharpo disappeared from sight as Catheya brought up the rear, one icicle after another appearing behind her back.

For a second Zac thought they were making a mountain out of a molehill, but he was almost immediately proven wrong as a storm of golden spears that made Zac think of Nenothep Medhin descended upon them. The ice shield on Qirai's arm expanded to the size of a building in return, blocking hundreds of stabs as it was slowly whittled down.

Eventually, it broke, but the Titan unleashed a terrifying punch at that moment, containing enough force to lift the ocean itself, turning an Olympic pool's worth of water into a projectile that shot up toward

their attackers. The icicles behind Catheya were launched at the same time, and they actually stabbed into the water bomb, turning it into a glacier radiating an immense cold.

A tremendous shockwave erupted above just as they breached the surface, no doubt the ice mountain crashing into whatever defenses the attackers had prepared. The scene above was just utter chaos, but Zac could vaguely see a few sources of power with the help of [Cosmic Gaze].

‘Six people, no First Seeds’, Sharpo’s voice echoed out in Zac’s mind.

“Do it,” Catheya said with a sinister smile, and the whole area was suddenly drowned in darkness, like they had been thrown into the abyss.

Zac could sense that the whole world had been sealed off, but Zac could still see the attackers just fine. In fact, it was like they had been lit up like spotlights in the dark. It was a domain skill, and while he couldn’t confirm it, he believed it was activated by the now-invisible Varo. Zac had always suspected Catheya’s staid butler to have something like an assassin’s class, and this domain seemed to lean in that direction.

The others seemed to have things in hand, but Zac couldn’t just sit by and watch this time around, and he finally finished channeling energy into [Abyssal Phase], which made it look like the world had frozen in place. Fragments of the ice bomb fell back toward the churning waters in slow motion, and Zac effortlessly dodged them along with several descending attacks as he made his way toward the cliff where the attackers stood.

It was a mixed group of treants and humans, and they were already launching a series of powerful attacks that had almost completely submerged the Titan in a chaotic swirl of energies. Qirai emitted some odd pulses that kept pushing sharp roots and golden spears, and some sort of radiant blades away, like she was creating a void zone around herself. Another ice shield had already appeared on her hand, helping keep the pressure down.

Qirai was essentially taking on the role Zac himself usually took when fighting with allies; the meat shield. That was just fine with Zac since he was moving away from the defensive archetype in his undead form. He appeared behind the group a moment later and deactivated his movement skill. It was impossible to prepare skills while he was in his intangible form, but his axe still shot toward the closest throat as it started dripping extremely corrosive liquids.

However, a two-meter tall crystal hand appeared to block his strike, and a counter-stab of a golden spear shot toward him before he even had finished his attack. Zac wasn’t worried though. He might have moved away from a pure defensive class, but that didn’t mean he was without defensive means.

Three pygmy skeletons appeared behind Zac, each one of them radiating such an immense aura of death that the air around them kept distorting. One held a lantern wrought out of bone, and a blue flame radiated from within. The second held a coffin as large as itself, while the final one was mostly obscured by a black cloud that floated around it as though it was a living thing.

Zac infused a stream of energy into the coffin-bearing pygmy skeleton, and a deathly barrier very reminiscent of [Love’s Bond] sprung up to block the incoming spear. At the same time, the blue light inside the second pygmy’s lantern increased in intensity, and the Crystal hand quickly deteriorated and

fell apart. Zac was already mid-swing by that point, and his axe ruthlessly shot toward the Treant cultivator again.

The Treant looked shocked at its defenses crumbling so quickly, but he was still a peak E-grade cultivator. A wall of roots sprung up to block and retaliate, and Zac found himself cut off from the enemies once more. But that was fine with Zac, as that bramble wall had essentially trapped the ambushers with him putting pressure from behind and Qirai from the front.

He had already spotted six huge snakes climb up the cliff-side too, no doubt Sharpo's summoned beasts. They didn't emit too strong auras, but they all were still Late E-grade equivalent. They didn't immediately jump in to tussle with the group of cultivators, but they rather helped keep the battle contained and the living trapped in one spot.

Zac couldn't spot Varo or Yod, but he guessed they were somehow keeping the enemies occupied in other ways. As for Zac, the situation had essentially turned into a battle between life and death. Zac, his four chains, and his lantern-wielding pygmy kept whittling down the barriers while the Treant desperately grew new ones in an attempt to overwhelm him.

A huge eruption of force almost threw Zac off his feet, and he sensed that it was Qirai who had finally unleashed a massive punch at the defenses the group had erected after getting the ambush thrown back in their faces. Of course, Zac didn't plan on giving these people any chance to breathe.

He was utilizing his insights into the Dao of the Axe as much as he could to maximize the damage he was causing to the defenses. He had usually stayed a human back on Earth, but he had still somewhat integrated his Path into his Draugr side as well. Still, it was ultimately a bit lacking, and integrating his warlike movements into his combat style wasn't as smooth as in his human form.

The axe-work was fine, roving back and forth like a furious charge of a deathsworn army. But the patterns of his four chains were still slightly stilted. Zac wanted to use them to keep an ever-present pressure on his enemies, like four raiding parties constantly demanding attention while the main army pushed forward.

As for his fused path of Coffin and Axe, he still hadn't quite found a direction like the Evolutionary Stance he had started forming as a human. He did have some ideas on how to fuse death and conflict, but he hadn't landed on anything specific yet. His goal was to find inspiration during this trial, something that fit his personality and that could match the Evolutionary Stance.

For now, he kept using [Blighted Cut] rather than [Gorehew] in an attempt to shake something loose from the battle. He figured his odds of figuring something out would increase if he fought with a death-attuned skill imbued with the Fragment of the Coffin while following a combat style based on the Fragment of the Axe.

His axe ripped through endlessly growing plants as pools of miasmic corrosion spread beneath his feet. He could have activated his other skills as well, but he had pretty much confirmed that these people weren't powerful enough to be a threat to Catheya. As for the others, he wasn't as sure. In a sense, this was a chance for him to inspect their strength.

If they got themselves killed against this group of the living, it might be for the best. Otherwise, they'd just become a weakness when they were set against more powerful enemies.

But even with Zac only unleashing a small part of his kit, the Treeman soon found himself completely overwhelmed. The biggest problem was the aquamarine flames from the lantern-wielding skeleton. It was just too efficient at eating through defenses, even more so than Zac directly swinging into the barriers with his axe.

A pang of danger suddenly erupted in his mind, and Zac looked up in time to see a massive crystal spike descending toward him. It contained an immense aura of life, and golden lightning crackled through its core. Zac frowned and halted his assault for a second, long enough for him to point toward the spike.

The third pygmy finally made its move as the swirl of darkness around it expanded and rose like a hungry maw. It actually swallowed the crystal whole, and a moment later a tremendous shockwave erupted a few hundred meters out to sea as the very same crystal spike slammed into the ocean, causing a small tsunami.

The cultivator looked on with blank incomprehension, and Zac only grinned as he once more pushed forward.