

## The Fall 491

### Chapter 491: Clashing Versions

Since he was done with checking what he needed to in his human form he finally swapped over to his Draugr side. The process activated as usual, but Zac frowned when he felt that it took almost 3 seconds to transform, which was a lot worse compared to before he evolved. Was it because the Pathways had become more complicated, and swapping them out took more time and energy?

However, there was still a solution. The transformation skill Yrial provided was geared toward the F-Grade, and it could hopefully be upgraded to once again shrink the time it took to change forms. The skill was unfortunately something that the C-Grade ghost put together without much thought, and it neither had proficiencies or an upgrade Path.

Zac would either have to figure out a way to recreate the skill or wait until he could enter the Inheritance Trial again. He could only put the issue aside before opening his Class Menu once again, as there were some things he wanted to confirm there as well.

Class: [E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation.

Strength +50, +5%. Endurance +50, +5%. Wisdom +50, +5%

Level: Strength +11/22/33, Endurance +8/16/24, Wisdom +5/10/15, +10 Free.

Skills: Blighted Cut (LOCKED)

Zac was a bit surprised that he had gained equal parts in the three attributes from the class, even though he would gain more than twice the amount of Strength compared to Wisdom at each level. But that was great news for Zac as he was already pretty lopsided toward Strength with his class choices, while his low Mental Defense was his biggest weakness.

A quick mental calculation confirmed what Zac had expected. The per-level gains from his old classes remained, but the flat class bonuses had been swapped out. For example, Undying Bulwark had provided 10% Endurance and 5% Vitality before, but 5% of the Endurance and all of the Vitality was swapped out for Strength and Wisdom.

There was still a net gain as the flat attributes increased drastically, but it was still a bit of a shame. One of his strong suits was his almost inhuman Endurance, but that advantage would slightly weaken in favor of the massive amounts of Strength he would rack up during the E-Grade. Perhaps it might even be worth putting some of his free points into Endurance to maintain the lead over normal Cultivators.

He opened his Quest Menu next, and interestingly enough, the Hegemony quest wasn't there in his Draugr form. Was the quest chain perhaps connected to the race he was when the integration started? He still hadn't gained his Draugr form when completing the first quest, after all.

There was a skill quest though, and Zac breathed out in relief when he read the task.

Blighted Cut (Class): Kill an evolved being of equal or higher level with a single non-lethal cut. Reward: Blighted Cut Skill (0/1).

The quest for Blighted Cut was thankfully a lot more straightforward compared to the one for [Rapturous Divide]. However, it was still not a free win by any means, as it seemed to put very high demands on the corrosive effects of his Dao. That was at least Zac's takeaway going by the name of the skill. He needed to make a non-lethal attack lethal with the help of his caustic power.

The Fragment of the Coffin contained a decent corrosive effect, but it always required him to stack up numerous wounds to create an effect strong enough to cause real harm. For example, Faceless 9 was completely covered in rotting wounds by the time he finally gave up, but it wasn't enough to actually take him out.

It meant that he would have to make some inroads into the death-aspect of his cultivation path as well to complete this quest. Perhaps the System felt that he had utilized too many Dao Treasures to prop up the Seed of Rot, leaving the foundation lacking.

Zac shook his head as he turned his sight inward, and unfortunately, it looked like the bad news would just keep coming. His pathways had been reformed just like in his human form, but there were some other changes. The once-perfect fit of the class skills was ruined for multiple skills, mainly those that dealt with pure defense.

However, he noted that the fit for [Profane Seal], [Deathwish], and [Immutable] was just fine while the fit of [Winds of Decay] had actually improved. This was just what Zac had expected though, where he moved away from a defensive class toward a more offensively geared one.

But more importantly, the nodes looked completely identical in his Draugr form as in his human side. The effect the nodes had on the flow of energy through the pathways wasn't exactly the same, as the two sets of pathways differed from each other. But the nodes themselves were in the exact same position.

It was clear to him that the Nodes weren't actually a part of the pathways themselves, but rather something tied to his body. However, they didn't feel corporeal at the same time, but rather intangible. Zac suddenly had an idea as a knife appeared in his hand and he stabbed his leg, aiming right for a node.

Black ichor started dripping down his leg, but the bleeding quickly stopped thanks to Zac's massive pool of Vitality. However, Zac was more interested in the fact that the node he just struck showed no reaction at all from being stabbed. It ruined one idea he had where he would forcibly rip the nodes open and rely on his inhuman durability to recuperate. It simply didn't work.

The situation clearly hinted at a situation where he would only need to break open each node once. This was great news for his leveling speed, but it was horrible news for his Attribute Gain. Of course, he would have to confirm his hypothesis by actually cracking open a node and gaining a level, but it looked pretty clear-cut from where he sat.

There was one more thing he wanted to consume before he ended his seclusion, but he first wanted to tell his sister he was fine.

However the scenes from the tribulation repeated in his mind upon thinking of Kenzie, and he was unsure what to think. Was their mother really on the way back to take his sister somewhere? And judging by the malice and madness in her eyes she might just kill Zac along with the whole planet if she was in a bad mood.

Her ability to simply conjure a spatial portal out of nothing proved she was a big-shot, though he had already suspected as much. Not only was she involved with a peak force like Firmament's Edge, but her necklace seemed to be some sort of ghost key that gave blanket access to Technocrat facilities.

The necklace by itself was a cause for concern, and he took it out of his Spatial Ring and looked it over. Reaching the E-Grade, unfortunately, hadn't increased his skills of discernment, and he still couldn't find any clues of how it worked. However, the moment he touched the token with his mind in an attempt to look inside, a drastic change occurred.

The token hummed to life and floated up into the air by itself. [Verun's Bite] was already in Zac's hand as he jumped up in alarm, though confusion plagued his mind. He had tried scanning the medallion the same way dozens of times, but there hadn't been any response until now. What had changed? Was there something different about his mental energy after evolving? Or was it the Remnants?

However, Zac had no time to figure it out as a figure appeared in front of him. The figure of his mother.

"Zac, my son," Leandra said with a smile marred with longing.

"Mom?" Zac said, his mind thrown into chaos once more. "Is that you?"

He had just seen a crazed incarnation of his mother during the Heart Tribulation, but now a completely different Leandra stood in front of him. Her demeanor was in stark contrast to the one the System depicted. There was happiness, but also sadness as she looked upon Zac.

"It looks the Integration took place, after all," Leandra sighed, not answering his question. "I am glad you are fine, and evolved at that. Where is your sister? Is she okay?"

"Kenzie's fine. Is this really you, or an AI?" Zac asked, some doubts worming into his heart when he heard his mother immediately ask about Kenzie.

"It seems you have learned a few truths," Leandra nodded. "You are not speaking with the real me, but a Synthetic AI based on me. I left it in the necklace, and it activated now that someone of my blood has reached the E-Grade."

"Why wait until now?" Zac asked with a frown.

"My identity is a bit complicated, I am an enemy of the System," Leandra freely admitted. "I couldn't allow any clues of my existence to appear on the planet right after it got integrated. The Cursed Heavens would have spotted me, which would have put your lives in danger. It should have taken you a while to reach E-Grade, and the System has long turned its gaze elsewhere."

"What's going on?" Zac asked, trying to calm his chaotic mind to not miss any details. "Why did you leave back then? Kenzie was just a newborn."

"My family, your family, has been working on a miraculous device with the help of some of the greatest minds of the multiverse for dozens of generations. But things turned awry and most of our clan died. Some people we thought were friends betrayed us at our moment of weakness out of greed, causing even greater losses," Leandra said, pain and anger flashing in her eyes.

"I was badly hurt, but I managed to barely escape. I set course for your homeworld as it was a desolate rock far from either integrated or controlled space, where our family once hid a small laboratory. The

base was abandoned after the experiments were concluded, to not draw the attention of the System, but I discovered it in our family's archives. I scrubbed any knowledge of it to make it a safe harbor in case I needed it," Leandra said with a wry smile. "Who knew that the desolate world would have turned populated in just a few dozen millennia?"

"My wounds were too harsh, and a safety protocol kicked in where I lost my memories and any aura that could lead my captors to me. Robert found me as I wandered around in your world in a daze, and we had you two years later," Leandra smiled. "But when I had Kenzie ten years later there were complications, and the pain woke the real me up from its recuperative slumber."

"My aura was immediately noticed by both the Heavens and my enemies, and I was forced to flee Earth shortly after Kenzie was born. I couldn't risk leading my enemies to you, especially not while I wasn't strong enough to protect you. I don't know where my real me is, but I am sure I am still working hard on finding a solution so that I can return to your side," Leandra said.

"Is Kenzie here as well? The time I can stay here is limited, I want to see her before I go," Leandra said.

"She is out in the wilderness training," Zac lied. "She will be back in a week or so. Can you wait until then?"

Zac felt he could see a spark of turbulent emotions flash in her eyes, though it was quickly masked with a forlorn disappointment.

"Well, there will be time for us to meet in the future," Leandra sighed. "Be careful, you two. Don't mention your connection to me, it will cause you trouble. And stay away from the Mystic Realm that seems like a science fiction movie. Some unknown force found it and set up their own experiments after we abandoned the place. It might be extremely dangerous depending on what they did there. I didn't have a chance to scout it out myself."

"Are you really coming to get us?" Zac asked, his heart beating in fear-mixed anticipation.

"Earth is a low-tiered world with no strong points. The Multiverse is a magical place that you cannot even imagine. Staying there will only harm your future," Leandra said with a shake of her head. "You need land, resources, and opportunities to reach your full potential. Earth is lacking on all three fronts. Staying there is a waste of your future."

"Remember to protect your sister. I left a protective AI with her that will be able to help her out, but it is just an assistant in the end. It's not infallible," his mother added. "I must go now, or your location will be discovered. Stay safe, Zac."

With that, she was gone, and the medallion once again turned into an inert ornament as far as Zac could tell. He stood frozen for a few seconds, unsure of what to believe. Seeing another version of Leandra just after seeing the vision hadn't really made him clearer on whether his mother was a friend or a foe, or which version was the real one.

But there were a few snippets of information that probably were true as they were mentioned in both encounters. First of all, it really didn't look like she had left willingly. Both versions seemed forced to leave Earth because her presence was made known.

Secondly, she was coming back. One version felt like a farmer who wanted to reap her harvest, and the other was a loving mother who wanted to provide a better future for her children. His heart wanted to believe that the second version was the true one, but something held him back. There was a voice whispering in his mind that all the projection said, was just a cover story to make sure he didn't mess up her plans.

Then again, he had become pretty paranoid over the past year, and his opinions were already somewhat swayed after having been shown the original vision. Perhaps that was exactly what the System was aiming for by creating a Heart Tribulation like that, just as he had initially suspected.

But the real question was; did he dare to risk it? Could he really allow his mother to return?