

The Fall 497

Chapter 497: Attunement

"Are there any merit exchanges that have cropped up?" Zac asked as the quest reminded him of the beast waves back on his island. "And have you figured out what the World Core upgrade entails?"

"Merit exchanges? Not that we know of," Gregor slowly said with some confusion. "We don't know anything about the core either. Perhaps it will upgrade our planet to C-Grade? The System did mention it was D-Grade when we got integrated, after all."

"You wish," Ogras snorted from the side, drawing everyone's glances. "This World is as wretched as D-Grade worlds come. The feels abundant now, but wait until the Origin Dao is gone and you've reached peak E-Grade. There is no way that a single quest will bump you all the way to a C-Grade Planet. Our whole Demon Horde with tens of thousands of forces only have one of them."

"So what do you think?" Zac asked.

"It might push the world a bit further, to something like middle D-Grade. It might increase the size of the world as well, as it is quite small. A larger planet would allow larger forces and higher overall strength. Or it might even give the world an attunement, which would probably be the most valuable reward."

"An attunement?" Zac repeated thoughtfully.

"It might not be useful for us, but for the following generations," Ogras added. "A fire-attuned world would generate a lot of fire-aspected treasures and herbs, attuned crystals, and even the fire affinities of cultivators would slowly increase. Specialization begets power."

Zac nodded in agreement. Such a scenario would probably be the best for Earth, though it was useless for him unless the attunement was Life. The planet becoming Death-aspected for his Draugr-side was obviously not going to happen, as that was the very thing the quest goal was designed to stop.

The Councilors also tried to discreetly inquire why he had been missing the past days and how he managed to gain so many levels in short order. Zac explained it by slightly mixing truths and lies. He said he left for the Tower of Eternity in order to evolve his Daos and gain achievements to the point that he could evolve. That was the only way he would gain enough power to assault the Dead Zone.

Lying about going to the Tower of Eternity was a waste of effort. It was just a matter of time before his activities were made known across Earth. It shouldn't be too hard for people to figure out he was the one who caused such a ruckus the moment they went to the Tower themselves.

As for the levels, he didn't bother hiding it and told them about the Node Breaking Pills. He had a massive surplus of them now that he couldn't use any more for the time being. Most would probably be put into his Merit Exchange so they stayed within his force, but he could also consider selling some of them to outsiders.

In fact, Zac was already thinking of holding an auction of his own sooner or later, provided their whole planet didn't fall to the Undead Empire. He had a lot of items right now that were pretty common in the Multiverse, but still unheard of on Earth. It was a perfect opportunity to make some money before people managed to find their own business connections.

No one on Earth was nearly as wealthy as he was, but the accumulated wealth of tens of thousands of elites should be pretty impressive by now. It was a bit unethical to overcharge his fellow countrymen, but it could be considered a fee for closing pretty much all the Incursions for them.

Zac didn't want to stay in the base any longer than that, and he left after he had transferred all the latest intelligence reports to a tablet. The bad news was that the Dead Zone was enormous by this point, having grown more than twice in size since he visited the last time.

The realignment array had not only increased the density of the Death-Attunement, but the forces of Pangea left multiple kilometers every day. Death spread forth like an intractable wave, and you could even see the process with your naked eyes. Every single one of the border towns was long gone, having turned into unlivable ghost towns by now.

Teleporting closer wouldn't work either due to the jamming. That meant that there was no time to waste, as the distance they needed to traverse was simply massive. He guessed that it would take over half a day to reach the core of the Dead Zone even with the flying treasure.

They still had some time according to Kenzie's estimate, but he didn't want to be late once more. The desolate landscape flashed past them as they soared through the air, this time hidden from sight with the help of a mobile illusion array that made them perfectly blend in with the surroundings.

He had gotten the idea from the seer during the climb. He had mentioned that his descendants had placed a treasure on a flying treasure and hid in the sky, making them impossible to find. The Dead Zone was no doubt crawling with those ghost scouts, but this would give them a small chance at arriving to the core unnoticed.

At the beginning of their flight they could see not only the undead horde far in the distance but also trucks and armies moving about on the ground. However, after one hour had passed there was no activity from the living. They saw a smaller horde move toward the larger one at the edge of the Dead Zone, but that was about it.

The hours passed but no one could relax. Everyone was afraid a storm of ghosts would blast through the clouds and attack them at any moment. But it really looked like their approach went by unnoticed. The Dead Zone was perhaps too big to monitor by now, allowing them to pass by unnoticed.

Zac was about to return to his meditation but something in the distance caught his attention.

"Wait, stop for a second," Zac said as he pointed at a specific spot. "Set down the vessel over there."

He had kept [Cosmic Gaze] running to keep watch of any hidden threats. But rather than ghosts, it had allowed him to see something unexpected, a beacon of life in a sea of dour death. Joanna immediately changed course and they landed where he indicated, and Zac's eyes widened with recognition as he looked around. He had been here before.

He once sat beneath the tree in front of him.

"What is it?" Ogras asked with confusion as Zac walked over to the mutated tree. "We don't really have time for a botanical study."

"I just want to confirm something," Zac said as he closed his eyes with one hand against the magnificent tree.

It was really the same one. He had found this mysterious tree once more, hidden in a sea of death. It felt like there was some sort of fate behind the second encounter.

"Hopefully you can help me in the future," Zac muttered as he ran his fingers across the bark. "I'll come back again after I've dealt with the undead."

"Heaven's help us," the demon muttered from the side. "He's lost it."

"Shush," Kenzie said as she kicked Ogras' shin before turning to Zac. "What is it?"

"Life and Death," Zac said as he stepped back onto the leaf. "It's pretty amazing. If I could bring it with me without killing it I would. I feel I can use it as a base to study my Daos."

Seeing the small beacon of life in the sea of death not only resonated with his Daos, but it also made him remember his Skill Quest. Splitting Life and Death was such an obscure concept, but perhaps this natural oddity might guide him down the right path.

"Take note of this place," Zac said to the Valkyries and his sister. "We need to return after we've dealt with the Incursion."

The group kept flying through the Dead Zone, but the dense Death-attunement was, unfortunately, having an impact on his vessel, drastically slowing its speed. It was still a lot quicker compared to the old disk he had, but it felt like a crawl after the shocking speed it exhibited when infused with the Dao of the Bodhi.

Zac didn't dare waste his mental energy on speeding up the vessel though in case something happened. He knew he was the muscle of the expedition, with the others acting as backup. The delay gave him enough time to finish filling his fifth node on his Draugr though, allowing him to balance out his two classes at level 80.

He put the 10 points into Dexterity once more before he turned back into his human form. He still didn't want to expose his Draugr side to the undead invaders unless necessary, especially after learning about Catheya and her master. What if that Peak C-Grade monster became interested and tracked him down?

He was already traveling in search of something to break through, and wouldn't Zac's body make an interesting study? Even Yrial said so. Zac sighed for the umpteenth time over the fact there was no one to turn to for help regarding these issues. No old ancestor who could make their problems go away with a wave of his hand. Everything was up to him to solve, but he was out of treasures that could help him become stronger.

He instead turned his attention to the next thing; his skills.

With him having reached Peak mastery of multiple skills along with having evolved, then upgrading his skills was the next logical step. He had already learned some of the paths from Galau and his visit to the Undead Kingdom, and he had shored up his knowledge from the following encounters.

There were a few ways to upgrade his skills, demanding various degrees of interaction by himself. The simplest method was to adjust the skill fractal so that it would be useable in the e-grade as well. That

wasn't to say that his old skills suddenly had turned useless, but there was a limit of how much energy they could contain.

His miasmic bulwark would only be able to block so much damage, and the wooden hand he conjured with [Nature's Punishment] would only be able to unleash so much destruction. But this could be changed.

The skill fractals were right now like crude drawings placed in the masterpiece that were the intricate E-Grade Pathways. You could slowly adjust these drawings to blend better, to take advantage of the higher amount of energies that could flow through them. The process of doing this was the same as when he manually drew the pathways for his two classes back in the F-Grade.

However, there was no blueprint provided this time. This meant that you were required to not only understand the skill to a great degree, but also how the skill fractals worked. You could actually ruin the skill altogether, forcing you to redraw the fractal from scratch. It wasn't really a big deal for someone as durable as him, but it would no doubt hurt like hell and likely force him to delay his progression for a while.

This method was generally considered the easiest way of progress, but it wasn't really that case for Zac. Most people had grown up in a world of cultivation, spending their entire childhood studying fractals and pathways and the Dao in preparation of when they could finally start cultivating. He could still somewhat intuitively understand what parts of the fractals did, but his understanding was still far worse compared to any average cultivator in this regard.

The second method was to upgrade through epiphany, and Zac guessed that this was his best shot at rapid progress. Just like one could have a Dao epiphany mid-battle, so could he have a breakthrough for his skills. He had seen it a few times already with his skills, though that was just upgrading the proficiency.

Galau had also mentioned Skill Arrays, which was something that most forces and academies used. You could even say they were an integral part of a proper Heritage. They were like assisted guidance systems that helped you upgrade certain skills. They resulted in slightly worse compatibility compared to doing it yourself, but they would undeniably save time that you could spend on gaining levels instead.

You also needed an array that would work on your specific skills, and Zac was pretty skeptical he would be able to find something like that anytime soon.

Finally, there were the Skill Upgrade Quests that the System would reward, but the first one wasn't until level 90 as far as he knew. It was usually a branched quest that would either allow him to upgrade a skill or transform it, and he guessed that this was the best chance to fuse two of his skills into one.

Certainly, one could fuse skills without the assistance of the System, but you needed an extremely strong understanding to do something like that. Some treasures could put you in a state of faux-enlightenment to assist you in the process, but it was probably something better left alone until you had reached a much higher understanding.

Perhaps Yrial could assist him a bit the next time he entered the Inheritance, but that was still a decade away.

Zac didn't really have a lot of options right now, but he kept looking inward at his skill fractals, and their connection to the pathways. He figured that if he got a better grasp of the fractals and how they were lacking compared to the pathways, then he might be more likely to be able to gain an epiphany mid-battle.

Sort of like the heat of the battle was how he managed to form the bronze flashes inside the Tower.

However, no matter how hard he tried over the following hours, he simply couldn't make heads or tails about it. He would no doubt be able to redraw all the fractals in his sleep by now, but that didn't really help him in his predicament.

"I think we're just two hours away by foot now," Kenzie suddenly said, waking Zac up from his reverie. "What do you want to do?"

"Let's go by foot from here," Zac said after some hesitation. "We'll see if we can reach the core unnoticed."