

The Fall 661

Chapter 661: Peak Performance

Gaining levels was usually the easiest part for geniuses, with Daos and Achievements causing the biggest delays. However, Zac had long heard about how many people got stuck in the middle of the E-Grade, bottlenecked to never reach the peak. At first, he had trouble understanding why some people would rather dissipate their energy than keep pushing forward, but Zac had been given a rude awakening the moment he hit level 100.

It was the peak of Low E-grade and the first node that wasn't placed in one of his limbs. It was rather placed at his shoulder. It was still at the edge of his body, but still on his proper torso. Zac read about the increasing difficulties of breaking open nodes on his torso and later his head, but nothing could have prepared him for the fallout.

The fleshy explosion that almost made him lose his whole right arm was bad enough, but the true threat was the invisible wounds that impacted his pathways and his whole body. His very foundations had taken a massive hit by cracking the node open, and he had been forced to spend three months in recuperation where he barely circulated any Cosmic Energy at all.

Even his lethal cocktail of Berserking methods during the final battle against Adcarkas had only required two months of bed rest, but this single node was even worse.

Healing pills hadn't worked, and neither had [Surging Vitality]. Redrawing his pathways with [Spiritual Anchor] did help a bit, but he was still extremely weakened, like his body had sprung a leak or something. It looked like only his body's natural recuperation was able to heal the weird state of weakness. His Void Emperor Bloodline didn't really help either, except by providing an unusually sturdy body. After all, his situation wasn't caused by impurities, so [Purity of the Void] did nothing in this situation.

He had somewhat looked down at Galvarion, the maritime mortal that he read about in Thea's library, for taking over a century to reach Peak E-Grade. But he understood all-too-well by now. Zac had expected things to get gradually worse, but this was too much. His attribute gains doubled at Middle E-Grade while the difficulty rather increased tenfold. He had gathered as much information as he could though, and he made some discoveries.

First of all, this wasn't only a problem that affected Mortals. Even cultivators were impacted by this change. Low E-Grade was essentially risk-free to boost, but even cultivators would be hurt when grinding open nodes with the help of their Cultivation Manuals in the Middle and High E-Grade. Of course, the threat to them was only a tenth compared to mortals who forcibly blew their nodes wide open.

Secondly, one's foundation made things more dangerous. This wasn't a surprise to Zac considering what he had learned so far, but it was still important to remember. The higher your attribute pool was, the bigger your energy reserves were. That also meant that you needed to fill each node with more energy before it burst, which unsurprisingly made the fallout worse.

Someone like himself probably took a hit many times more dangerous than a Mortal like Galvarion, who only was an Uncommon E-Grade mortal.

Third, you could minimize the damage to your body by improving your control of Cosmic Energy. This was unfortunately easier said than done for Zac. His energy control wasn't completely wretched like his Dao Control, but it was still not something to write home about. Add that to the previous point, and him breaking open nodes was far more dangerous compared to the situation for normal mortals.

Luckily, there were some solutions to his predicament. First of all, breaking open nodes with the help of pills or treasures was equivalent to Cultivators' situation. The damage he would receive leveling with the help of pills would be negligible. His sister had already added a simple purification array to his cultivation cave that would help shed Pill Toxicity and slowly reduce his resistance to those types of pills. Furthermore, his Hidden Node sped up his natural detoxifying process ten times compared to normal warriors.

He was already at a state that he could do a level rush as he did back when evolving to E-Grade, but he was still holding off as he wanted to deal with his undead Race. There was also the issue of getting top-tier pills. Last time he wasted his potential a bit by just taking random pills he got in the Base Town, but now he wanted to make the most of it, only eating the best of the best as to not waste any time.

There were also arrays specifically designed to decrease the danger for mortals when bursting nodes. Unfortunately, those arrays weren't all that popular since very few Formation Clans felt it worthwhile to study those types of arrays and improve them. The array he had got his hands on was called [Shedding Mortal Coil-Array], but it didn't even slightly live up to its name.

It did at least lessen the damage by up to 10% by somewhat containing the outburst, and that was after Kenzie's improvements. But Zac couldn't complain, he needed every advantage he could get. Furthermore, it was engraved on an array disk, so he could always bring it with him in case he wanted to break open a node on the go.

Zac was convinced there were far better arrays out there, perhaps even some supreme arrays that could allay the dangers for mortals completely, but that wasn't something he could get his hands on Earth, probably not anywhere in the whole sector.

His best solution right now was to slowly improve his control and work on his soul. He hoped that evolving his soul would come with all kinds of benefits, including improved control over his Daos and Cosmic Energy. In the meantime, he might get his hands on better supportive tools for mortals. But for now, he had decided to slow down his leveling drastically and instead focus on other things.

And there was a lot to do.

Grinding his skills to peak mastery was his first goal, and the next step was to start fusing his abilities. Some of the F-grade skills were barely useful any longer, utterly incapable to bring out the power contained in his body. He was better off simply fighting head-on than using skills like [Chop]. Even his skills from his undead Epic class had fallen behind by this point, and skills like [Immutable Bulwark] had long stopped scaling with his Endurance.

That was why Zac nowadays spent around ten hours a day pouring over hundreds of missives on shoring up his theoretical foundations. Pathways, Fractals, Attuned Energies, Dao, the Soul, and the relationship between all these components. Zac had studied it all to better grasp his situation and what steps he needed to take toward the future.

His improved constitution was proving invaluable during his studies. He no longer had any issues maintaining complete focus for days on end, and his memory was near eidetic as well, allowing him to remember pretty much everything he had read. Just one month of studying now allowed him to learn far more than he did during his years in college.

But the more he learned the more he also understood just how shallow his foundation was. Unfortunately, it was either extremely expensive or even impossible to buy detailed information about most subjects, making advanced knowledge scarce. It was no wonder so many wandering cultivators eventually chose to join a sect.

This lack of proper available guidance was obviously not a coincidence, but rather an intentional situation created by powerful factions. If an information house started disseminating everything from skills, to manuals, to secret knowledge far and wide, they would immediately find themselves under tremendous pressure from hundreds of powerful forces.

Hiring talented wandering cultivators was extremely important to maintain operations even for family clans, as they were needed for everything from filling the ranks of armies to providing skills that the force was lacking. If these wandering cultivators suddenly could get their hands on all they needed by just buying a bunch of missives, then they would be far less likely to join a force. Or at least demand a lot higher compensation for giving up their freedom.

This conflict of interests had resulted in a tightly controlled information market, with unofficial rules on what information could and couldn't be sold, and prices being mostly standardized. Perhaps things were better in more flourishing Sectors, but Zac wouldn't bet on it. Because one willing participant in this scheme was the System itself.

The System had long since concluded that freely accessible information generally resulted in mediocre cultivators. It rather wanted factions to go to war for each other's heritages, with knowledge and riches being the reward for risking your life. Zac was in neither any position nor mood to go to war to steal some other faction's heritage, so he and Port Atwood had to make do with just the basics.

Of course, Zac wasn't the only one that was working on improving himself around the clock, and a sigh escaped his lips as he glanced toward his sister's compound. Thea said she believed Kenzie was up to something big, but she didn't know the half of it. Thea was still completely unaware of the factories and workshops that were hundreds of meters underground, massive complexes built with the help of data and components found in the Spatial Rings of Cervantes and the Cartava elders.

Furthermore, two islands had been turned into strictly guarded factories that produced components for Kenzie's needs.

Zac hated that Kenzie was so insistent in playing with Technocrat technologies, but the events in the Mystic Realm had instilled her with the same sort of need for power that had allowed him to reach his current heights. She refused to listen to him, to the point that Zac was afraid she'd leave Earth and set up an even worse compound somewhere else if he pressured her.

Then again, it had also turned out that they didn't have a lot of options other than to take the plunge if they wanted Kenzie to evolve.

Jeeves had long become part of her soul, and it turned out that her reaching E-grade without Jeeves doing the same was impossible. She had long reached level 75 and gained four Dao Fragments, and there were less than five people in Port Atwood that could deal with her in a direct confrontation. But she still couldn't even get an Uncommon E-Grade class.

It was like Jeeves had turned into a fourth requirement on top of Dao, Race, and Achievements.

The desire to find Ogras, and to a lesser degree Billy who they assumed had been sucked up by the vortex as well, had pushed her on in a manic scramble to find everything Jeeves required to become a Class-2 AI, while simultaneously building a whole mechanized headquarter to facilitate the upgrade. Zac mostly looked on with worry while limiting her operations to the bare minimum, praying that Jeeves was really right in its insistence that it wouldn't draw the ire of the System.

He had also erected Ten [E-Grade Heaven's Path Beacons] across the planet without telling his sister. The beacons were provided on the cheap by pro-System factions and they only had one purpose; to block access to the Digitized World and weaken any sort of signals of technological origin from reaching the planet's surface.

They were essentially WIFI-jammers to make sure that Kenzie didn't sneak onto the Soul World Jaol mentioned in her desire to become stronger, inadvertently putting the whole planet in danger. Zac would rather have bought far more powerful beacons as he wasn't confident that these low-grade arrays could properly block factions like Firmament's Edge, but this was the best he could get his hands on at the moment.

Prolong and agonize as he might, the day of Kenzie's evolution had finally arrived. Evolving Jeeves had required a shocking amount of money, and not even he would have been able to shoulder that cost. They had managed to satiate a few of its requirements by looting the Merit Exchange and the accumulated wealth of the Lunar Tribe and Cartava Clan.

However, most of it was acquired by Kenzie herself as she had made a fortune with the help of Jeeves.

Her method was quite ingenious; she found popular defensive arrays sold by Formation Clans or Sects and created extremely efficient Array Breakers for them with the help of the calculations of Jeeves and the Technocrat Supercomputers she snatched. With that in hand, she essentially blackmailed the factions, selling her silence and instructions on how to remedy the loopholes.

If the sects refused, she simply released the Array Breakers through Calrin or the Array Clan's competitors and made a bundle of cash that way.

She had only been doing that for two years and with low-grade arrays, but she alone made way more money than Zac's combined ventures, which was a testament to the value skilled non-combat cultivators could bring to a faction. It was for this very reason the Tsarun clan had spent so much effort on the Gemlings. Unfortunately for them, it had turned into yet another venture of theirs that benefited Zac in the end, with the first being the Thayer Consortium.

Kenzie had already gained some infamy in certain circles from her actions as well. More than one Array Master and Formation Clan had put out a bounty on her head, though no one knew of her real identity. The bounties were the reason for more than one sleepless night for Zac, but he knew that trying to do something about it with his limited strength would only worsen the situation.

Calrin and the Thayer Consortia was also a great beneficiary of Kenzie's, or 'Peak Performance Breakers', as she called her venture when going about her extortionist business. It was a bit on the nose, but Calrin couldn't care less as he raked in huge commissions by acting as a go-between with the help of his Mercantile License.

Zac couldn't help but snicker and wonder if her actions had caused any problems for the real Peaks, the Peak Family that Average and Pretty belonged to.