

The Fall 695

Chapter 695: Breaking Shackles

Getting stuck with such a deadly mission was a shock, but it wasn't like Zac hadn't thought of heading over to the Twilight Chasm before. After all, it was the endpoint of the Twilight Ocean, the spot where the greatest treasures could be found.

The Twilight Ocean was essentially an enormous planet where you started on a continent on one pole, while the Twilight Chasm was on the other end. The description wasn't exactly true though, as the realm itself was somehow layered in ways that Zac couldn't understand. It was possible to enter a stream that shot through the ocean, and suddenly find yourself on what should be the opposite side of the Mystic Realm, saving months of travel time.

Finding the Twilight Chasm was easy, but only the best of the best could survive in that place. The Twilight Energy alone was enough to instantly corrode the souls of 99% of all participants, but that was just the start. There would also be extremely powerful Peak E-grade beasts patrolling the waters, and you also had to contend with all the peak power trial takers. Zac had only planned on going if he felt confident about his survival.

But now he was essentially given what could be considered a suicide mission, and Zac struggled to understand why Catheya's master would give him a task like this. His mother's array was supposed to hide any details of his cultivation inside his body, making him appear completely bland through some unknown means. Yet Catheya's master seemed to believe him able to reach the very depths of the Mystic Realm, something that most likely was impossible even for his own disciple.

Zac doubted that a peak C-grade Monarch would be so roundabout if he simply wanted Zac dead. Perhaps he believed that Zac would be able to resist the ambient energy long enough to at least reach the Chasm, completing the task before he succumbed. Or perhaps he had found something indicating an ability to exceed expectations inside the Twilight Ocean when scanning Zac previously. Had his desperate escape from the Hegemon been so impressive he felt that Zac had what it took to reach the end? It was impossible to tell.

It was also suspicious that he didn't want his disciple to know what was going on. Was it just that he didn't want his disciple heading for the dangerous Twilight Chasm, or was there more at play beneath the surface? Zac felt it was all related to the secondary mission Catheya mentioned, but he still had absolutely no idea what that entailed.

Ultimately, he didn't have much choice but to follow through. The blue mark on his hand had already sunk into his body, and Zac couldn't even sense it any longer. He tried activating [Spiritual Anchor], but there were no signs of its whereabouts at all. An E-grade skill was simply too low-graded to expose a Peak C-grade mark.

The good news was that he didn't immediately need to set out to the Chasm, even though it felt pretty bad walking around with that ominous thing in his Spatial Ring. He could spend a year or two working on his cultivation inside the trial and only then set out toward the depths. He was already at the precipice of evolving his Fragment of the Axe, and when adding the Life-Death Pearls he was slated for a huge powerup.

The enforcement squad eventually reached the platform, and they actually led Zac all the way to his courtyard just to be safe.

"We have been given a new order," the Revenant said. "Two captains will be stationed outside your courtyard, and they will accompany young master up until the trial. Don't worry, we will not impede on your daily life."

"Thank you," Zac nodded, and the guard captain sat down a hundred meters away from the gate, closing his eyes in meditation.

The VIP-Treatment might be because of Catheya's master, or it might just be protocol. The Council probably didn't want Monarchs running rampant in the harbor, and keeping the young elites out of trouble was a good way to help keep the peace. In either case, it would be a relief to have two Hegemons following as a deterrent. Otherwise, he'd be hard-pressed to go out again.

Unfortunately, it looked like the leisurely days of traveling around on Nala's dingy vessel were over. He would have to let her go, as to not get her involved in his mess. He and Vilari were only temporary guests, but Nala would have to make do in this place even after he left.

"I don't want to be disturbed for the rest of the week," Zac said as he turned to an attendant that stood waiting by the gate to his courtyard.

"Certainly, young master," the early E-grade Revenant quickly nodded. "If you have the need for any of our services feel free to contact us through the communication array installed by the gate."

"One thing," Zac said after some thought. "Do you have any allies among the Dreamers, someone reliable who can complete a few errands on the Life-attuned islands?"

"That's..." the attendant said as he glanced at the guards who still hadn't left the area. "Security is quite strict around this time..."

"Oh, nothing like that," Zac snorted. "I just need someone to make some purchases for me, but I don't want to visit those life-attuned places myself. It has to be someone who has access to premier establishments."

"I will ask my manager," the assistant nodded, but his face indicated that this shouldn't be a hard request to field.

"Good, have the person visit me in one week," Zac said and the Revenant quickly bowed as he closed the gates to his courtyard.

Zac activated a series of isolation arrays the moment he closed the doors. The arrays were clearly of high quality as he had never sensed a ripple of energy from his surroundings. He couldn't sense the Hegemon or his soldiers waiting outside either. They were definitely enough to shield his activities as well, but he also erected a private array for his own peace of mind.

Of course, if someone like Catheya's master wanted to spy on him, there was probably not much he could do about it. Thankfully, he wasn't planning on doing anything he desperately needed to hide over the following days.

"What happened?" Vilari asked with worry when she saw Zac's harried form.

He had some shallow wounds as his robes were tattered in various places, though the tears were fast mending. He had long since upgraded the Tool Spirit robes he bought from Yrial, and with the help of the Gemlings back home he had managed to infuse a burgeoning intelligence in the Tool Spirit. It was still a far cry from Verun, but it was a step in the right direction.

He had also unlocked the third skill of the robes, which was a transformation ability. It had allowed him to turn the previously white robe into a black-and-silver cut that suited his Draugr persona far better. Its defensive properties were worse than his own body and his skills though, but Zac knew that Yrial used these robes more for the aesthetic than its properties. You'd need a peak-quality defensive Spirit Tool for its skills to be of use to someone like Zac.

That changed at D-grade though. Reaching D-grade meant gaining the ability to power your equipment with the vast energy stored in your Cultivator's Core. Only then could even normal Defensive Equipment produce effects strong enough to match that of proper skills. That was also another reason why it was so hard to kill Hegemons; even the poorest of the bunch had scrounged up for at least one or two D-grade defensive items that could block powerful strikes.

"A few items appeared that I really needed at the auction," Zac sighed as he waved away Vilari's ministrations. "I drew too much attention and was attacked on the way home."

"Should we return home?" Vilari asked.

"I can't," Zac slowly sighed. "Catheya's master personally intervened, but he forced me into completing a mission inside the Twilight Ocean. I'll die if I go back to Earth now."

"That bolt of ice... Was that him?" Vilari asked, a bit of killing intent leaking out from her body.

"You sensed it?" Zac asked with surprise, considering how far away the battle took place.

"It was like the universe was cut in two... Monarchy..." she mumbled with a frown.

"We'll get there sooner or later," Zac smiled. "I'll give him a good thrashing when I reach that point. But for now, I need to enter seclusion for a bit."

The auction had ended just four hours ago, but Zac couldn't wait to start using the things he had bought. The recent events only reinforced the fact that he needed to get stronger, and quickly.

"I will wait outside," the Vilari said as Zac entered the basement where a sealed cultivation chamber was built. "Let me know if I can do anything to help."

Zac didn't waste any time after the vault-like door closed behind him. He replaced the complimentary prayer mat with a peak-quality mat he bought the other day and lit three sticks of incense around it. The room was immediately filled with an earthy herbal aroma, and Zac felt his mind enter a state of tranquility as the waves in his Soul Sea noticeably stilled.

The sticks were called [Serenity Incense] and were among the cheaper items he had prepared for today. Their effect wasn't anything special except helping one keep a calm and steady mind, which could lessen the risk of mishaps during breakthroughs. He originally wasn't planning on using them just for eating a bunch of pills and treasures, but he was still a bit shaken after coming face to face to not only a Hegemon but also a Peak Monarch.

His frazzled mind was quickly soothed by the aroma and the mat, and he soon took out the [Stone of Hope] and hung it around his neck next to [Love's Bond]. He didn't really feel anything different from equipping the item, except a slight cooling sensation. There was a brief information crystal provided with the purchase, and it said that he didn't need to do anything except to keep the thing on his body for it to work. Zac wasn't too sure whether it would help when eating treasures though, since it was designed to help when forcibly breaking open nodes.

The next thing Zac took out was one of the first things he bought at the auction; the three [Fruit of Awakening]. Zac immediately pushed the first one into his mouth and swallowed after chewing a few times. Nothing happened for a second, but Zac suddenly felt a sharp pang of pain in his gut. He hunched over with a grunt, but the prickling pain just increased in severity over the following minutes.

One moment it felt like he would soil his pants, but the next it felt like he would vomit as waves of warmth spread through his limbs. Meanwhile, it was like his pathways were on fire. Zac didn't panic though, as he knew this would happen. His whole body was coming 'alive', where largely ornamental organs regained their function.

The process lasted for three hours, at which point the process started to ebb down. Zac was elated to see that his Pathways were a lot wider by this point, but he still hadn't reached D-grade race. So Zac simply walked into an adjoining bathroom and doused himself to get rid of some extremely pungent impurities before he returned into the room and swallowed his second fruit.

Another wave of awakening spread through his body, but the worst of the pain had already passed. Some more gunk was squeezed out of his pores over the next two hours, but that was about it. His pathways had grown a few percent wider again, yet he still hadn't evolved. Zac wasn't deterred, and he swallowed his third and last fruit.

If this wasn't enough he'd start cramming pills down his throat, even if those things added impurities rather than removed him. The hours passed, and waves of warmth altered with pangs of cold. Zac wasn't able to tell if the last fruit would be enough, but he suddenly felt a deep thump in his chest as the unmoving sludge in his veins started to move.

It was his heartbeat, a real one. It wasn't his Hidden Node waking up or anything, but rather the final organ in his body activating. And as the black ichor started to move through his veins, so did his organs truly wake up. It felt amazing and uncomfortable at once, and he couldn't help but look down at his body.

As expected, there still wasn't any life force at all even though he had a pulse and 'blood' that coursed through his veins. Life could really take any form in the Multiverse. It was no wonder most people considered the Soul the true core of a life, where the body was just a vessel to contain it. Zac took another shower to remove the last of the gunk, after which he had mostly acclimatized with his new state of being.

Zac inspected his form, and he had to admit that he felt marvelous, honestly even more so than he did in his human form. Draugr really lived up to their reputation. Until now his Undead side had felt pretty much the same as his human, but that wasn't exactly true any longer.

His pathways were both thicker and sturdier in his Draugr form. A few revolutions indicated that the speed at which he could move his Miasma was almost 30% greater than in his human form, which meant that he would be 30% faster at activating skills.

Not only that, but his skin was extremely durable. It was soft to the touch, but he actually couldn't pierce it with most of his weapons. It was like he had gained a new layer of protection from his body alone, without the aid of skills like [Innate Ward]. Finally, his energy reserves were massive. It was like if his human side provided 1 unit of Cosmic Energy per attribute point, then his Draugr side provided 1.3 units of Miasma per point.

In other words, his energy pool was thirty percent larger than a normal human's, and a normal Revenant's from what Zac guessed. It might not really increase his direct combat potential, but it was still a shocking advantage over normal cultivators. It would allow him to activate far larger skills and to last in combat a lot longer, and it drastically reduced the drawback of his new movement skill.

He knew that Humans were considered a pretty lowly race in the multiverse, where their only advantage was their huge numbers. Until now he hadn't really felt his human heritage to be a detriment, but it was clear that more powerful races had all kinds of benefits that might not be immediately discernable from a status screen.

If this was the advantage after just reaching D-grade race, what about the higher stages? Would the difference just keep increasing over time?

Zac was a bit surprised though. He had already somewhat come to terms with the fact that Robert Atwood wasn't his biological father, and that Leandra had done some sort of extensive modification of his body. She said herself that she was the one who implanted the Specialty Core in him, which accidentally got triggered by the Draugr-samples that the Corpselord general Mhal used as a weapon.

So why wasn't his human side any stronger?

Leandra even looked down on his undead half from the sounds of it, yet it was far better suited for cultivation than his human side. As far as he could tell, the only special point about his original state was that his survivability, recovery, and energy resistance were better than normal. But his attribute cap and his ability to gain attributes from Attribute Fruits were just at the level of a peak human.

There was no easy answer to that question with his mother being long gone, but it begged the question if there was some way for him to improve his human constitution. After all, this issue should be something all human factions had to deal with, and perhaps there were methods to improve one's base quality. Perhaps he could form a life constitution to match his Draugr form.

Zac shook his head. That was all a question for later. For now, he had finally become a D-grade Draugr, which meant it was time for him to make another push forward. He took out another box with anticipation, and a small pill inside rested on a velvet bed. It was deep purple, with golden flakes swirling inside, and it emitted a dense fragrance that made his newly awakened body scream with hunger.

It was the [Aethergate Pill], the third item he bought from the auction, and Zac immediately swallowed the first of the batch.