

The Fall 696

Chapter 696: Aethergate

Zac had been worried until now that any pill he'd swallow would be insufficient to provide the energy needed to break open a middle-stage node since his foundation made things ten times harder compared to the average cultivator. Thankfully, those fears were instantly dispelled just a second after swallowing the [Aethergate Pill].

The leveling pill was Pseudo D-grade, and it showed considering the shocking amount of energy it contained. It was like eating something like twenty of the pills he used back when he had just evolved. The pill formed a cool swirling whirlpool had appeared in his body, but Zac felt a pang of pain even when the Pill Energy wasn't chaotic at all.

The pill was simply meant for Late E-grade elite cultivators, those who needed a shocking amount of energy for each level. It was a bit foolhardy to eat them at level 101, but Zac knew his constitution could take it. The Pill Vortex rapidly shrunk into a size no larger than a button, but it still retained the same amount of energy as before as it moved toward the next node.

It was located on his shoulder just like his last one, but this time on the left side. It was just a few centimeters away from the pathways of what formerly was [Cyclic Strike], and Zac looked on with rapt attention as the whirlpool burrowed into the Node. Zac felt a slight pain as the Pill Vortex gradually cleansed and empowered the node. It was like the whirlpool acted as a motor that kickstarted the slow swirl that already existed inside, while also feeding it a boatload of energy.

After a few moments, Zac felt a snap as the node fully opened, and a radiating wave of pain spread out through his body as a small gash appeared on his back. It was like he had been struck by lightning and his pathways had become a conduit. The feeling was all-too-familiar; the backlash of opening a node. It was just a shadow of the agony that had left him bedridden for months when reaching level 101, but it still caused some sweat to run down his forehead.

It was no wonder it took Catheya a full decade to enter the late stages of the E-grade even when having a Peak Monarch to assist in the process. Zac felt he would be able to keep going for a while, but any dreams of rushing straight through the middle E-grade with his Pseudo D-grade pills were instantly dashed the moment he saw the damage to his foundations.

The [Stone of Hope] didn't seem to help either. He had hoped that it would lessen the damage, but it really looked like it was more of a fateward-type item that protected against deadly harm when cultivating. Opening a node with a pill was just the standard path of leveling and not something where this odd treasure would assist with. [Chainbreaking Pills] might help, but the damage wasn't big enough to warrant the cost of using those things unless he was actually forcing open the nodes.

The good news was that the Pill Energy wasn't exhausted even after opening a full node. It looked like it wanted to keep infusing the recently opened node with energy, but Zac rather pushed the vortex toward the next node instead. Meanwhile, [Purity of the Void] was already working on overdrive, steadily preventing at least some of the Pill Toxicity from settling into the depths of his cells.

The second node was slightly below his shoulder-blade to the side, and opening it would definitely have punctured a lung if forced open. Another wave of pain erupted through his body an hour later, and Zac

spat out some black ichor as he inspected his state. The physical damage was still nothing worth mentioning, but the intangible damage had superimposed on the first set of wounds, together creating more harm than they would do on their own.

Zac pushed the pain away as the [Aethergate Pill] still wasn't done, and he urged it to set the foundations for breaking open the third node before its energy was exhausted. The pill had absolutely exceeded his expectations, though so had the pain. Not even cultivators had it easy, it seemed. Zac took a ragged breath before he took out a Supreme-Grade Miasma Crystal.

He also popped a top-quality healing pill as he started absorbing the huge amount of Miasma within the Miasma Crystal. The nodes were opened, but he had actually not gained the levels just yet. The healing pills wouldn't really work on the hidden damage to his foundations, but it would at least patch up the wounds.

There was also some damage to the pathways around his opened nodes, and Zac spent three hours redrawing them with the help of [Spiritual Anchor]. It took two full days to fill the two Nodes, even when using the Supreme Miasma Crystals which were so energy-dense that they caused Zac some pain as they flooded through his pathways.

But it was worth it. He wasn't in a rush this time, and this way he'd avoid accumulating any unnecessary Pill Toxins. When he ate a bunch of pills just when reaching E-grade he had used pills for the process, but that was because he was flying toward the Dead Zone. This time there was still almost two months before the Twilight Ascent started.

If anything, he didn't want to leave the courtyard at all since there might be more thieves and assassins roaming about. After seeing how things progressed he had Vilari send a command to delay the meeting with whichever living attendant the hotel could enlist before he continued the process.

One node after another was opened and then filled with Miasma over the next ten days. Unfortunately, it was like a wedge had been inserted into Zac's body, and every node being cracked open added a hit of a sledgehammer to that wedge. Eventually, Zac was forced to stop, lest the wedge cracked him in two. The hidden damage he had accumulated by that point was pretty serious, though far from the debilitating effect of doing things like a mortal.

Zac knew that he was just at the precipice of causing some real damage, but he should be fine as long as he took things easy until the Twilight Ascent started. After that, he would only have to wait for a few months before he could start another round of pill-popping. Because thankfully, while the accumulated damage had reached his limits, neither had the Pill Toxicity or his immunity.

It felt a bit bad to stop prematurely, but the gains were still quite substantial. In fact, they were even better than what Zac had expected considering he had already reached Middle E-grade. Zac opened up his status screen, and a smile spread across his face when he saw the result.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

109

Class

[E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation

Race

[D] Draugr - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Planetary Lord

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider

Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, Weight of Sin, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao

Fragment of the Axe - High, Fragment of the Coffin - High, Fragment of the Bodhi - High

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

5008 [Increase: 105%. Efficiency: 228%]

Dexterity

2373 [Increase: 75%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance

4373 [Increase: 96%. Efficiency: 228%]

Vitality

3255 [Increase: 84%. Efficiency: 228%]

Intelligence

1176 [Increase: 69%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom

2211 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 187%]

Luck

397 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points

80

Nexus Coins

[D] 938 716

Eight levels just from cramming pills down his throat over two weeks was a pretty damn good result, considering he just managed to gain five levels during his first round of pill-stuffing in the early E-grade. The boost in attributes was significant as well, pushing his attribute total by 10%, with most of them focused on his main attributes. And he still had eight levels worth of attributes to pick up from his human side.

Unfortunately, there was no way for him to quickly elevate his human levels at the moment. He definitely wouldn't break the seal on his Duplicity Core in this place, especially after the attention Catheya's master had given him. However, there would hopefully be a chance for him to sneak off and gain the levels after entering the Twilight Ocean.

Zac hesitated a bit about what to do with his free points, but he eventually put 40 of them into Strength to push it to 5,090. Unfortunately, he wasn't rewarded any title for passing 5,000 points in any attribute. He had hoped for something like his Promising Specialist-title, but perhaps such a title would need 10,000 points in a single attribute, if there even was a title that could stack with his old one.

He put the rest of his free points into Dexterity before he closed the status screen and walked out to where Vilari still sat, this time surrounded by the soothing haze from an incense stick.

"Are you okay?" Vilari asked as she turned her head toward him. "Your aura is a bit unstable."

"Gaining levels isn't risk-free even when taking pills it seems," Zac said as he sat down next to her with a grunt. "The gains were good though."

"I'm glad to see young master finally getting rid of the bottleneck," Vilari smiled. "A living Hegemon Courier will arrive in 20 hours."

"Great," Zac nodded.

"There's also this," Vilari added and handed him a couple of Cosmos Sacks and a Communication Crystal.

The Cosmos Sacks held the custom orders he had placed during his shopping spree, and they contained everything from arrays and array breakers to customized gear for his followers back home.

The most important arrays were obviously the arrays required for the [Nine Reincarnations Manual]. Kenzie had already managed to create them before she was taken, but the array disks she made were as large as a tennis court and they still contained some errors. But this time he had prepared everything for both his second and third reincarnation.

The arrays meant for the fourth reincarnation were impossible to have made though since they required specific materials that weren't available in the Twilight Harbor.

The disks he had commissioned were made by a Peak Hegemon Array Master. The Elemental had managed to squeeze the arrays onto disks no larger than the size of his palm. Furthermore, they were engraved on extremely valuable materials, making them perfect conductors of energy and almost impossible to break.

Unfortunately, it was impossible for him to work toward the second Reincarnation at the moment. Each level added more stringent requirements on the cultivation environment. He would probably be able to use the arrays back in his cultivation cave, but not here in some random courtyard. Perhaps he would be able to make use of the weird Twilight Energy inside the Mystic Realm, but he wasn't too sure he would be relaxed enough to sit around and cultivate his soul.

The second most important arrays he'd ordered were the set of [E-grade Fractal Framework Arrays]. It was the best mobile array for skill evolution he could get his hands on, and half of them were even modified to especially tailor to his Axe- and Coffin Daos and class archetype. One could even tailor the arrays to his pathways and skill fractals, but he wasn't willing to display those to the Array Masters, no matter what kind of confidentiality agreement they had.

He still wasn't quite ready to perform a manual upgrade of his F-grade skills, but the Twilight Ascent would last three years unless he left early. He needed to be prepared just in case.

As for the Communication Crystal, it came from Catheya. Zac scanned its contents and snorted with a mix of annoyance and helplessness. She thanked him for providing such great company and entertainment, and she also gave out some praises for his adroit usage of his newly acquired skills. More importantly, Catheya also called him for a meeting to meet the rest of the squad members, but that wasn't for another month.

Zac spent the rest of the day getting used to his evolved body, and he couldn't help but marvel at how good it was. And this was without the Hidden Nodes and bloodline talents of the Draugr-bloodline. He could absolutely understand why Revenant clans were so desperate to add some noble genes into their family line.

He also surreptitiously experimented a bit with his [Force of the Void], and he was a bit surprised to realize that it didn't quite match the energy reserve boosts he got from his Race Upgrade. In fact, he only got half of it. Zac's best guess was that it was because of his human side. His bloodline was split between both his Human and Draugr halves, and it looked like his Bloodline Talent provided a reserve equivalent to 27% of his average energy storage capabilities.

That was both good news and bad news. Bad in the sense that he wouldn't get the most out of the Bloodline Talent in his undead form. Good in the sense that it probably meant his human side benefitted from this situation, which was especially nice considering he used more energy-hungry skills there.

It was also interesting in the sense that this was the first time one of his sides could benefit the other, apart from the attribute gain that is. Of course, there was no way for him to test out whether his theory was correct until he could freely swap between his classes.

The hours passed, and Zac eventually heard a chime at his gate, indicating that the courier had arrived. Vilari opened the gate, and Zac saw a woman accompanied by the two enforcement captains.

"Young master," the pale woman said with a nod, and Zac couldn't help but do a double-take as he let her the trio into the courtyard.

Zac would definitely have guessed that the middle-aged woman in front of him was a Revenant if not for the weak hints of life-force hidden within a storm of murky energies. Zac didn't know why, but force made him think of Levala's eyes. Was this woman perhaps a hexmaster gravitating toward the Daos of Death? That would explain why she leaned toward the unliving factions.

"I heard Young Master was looking for someone to make a few purchases among the living establishments?" she said as she nervously glanced at the two captains whose eyes never left her body.

"No offense, but are you even able to get into the pill houses of the Dreamers?" Zac asked hesitantly.

"Truth be told, I cannot do business with the treemen. They are the race with the most... inflexible convictions. But the others won't mind me cultivating in death. There's too many of us like this," she said. "Bad business to turn all that money away."

"You come recommended by this establishment," Zac said as he took out a crystal. "I need everything on this list."

The woman nodded and scanned the contents, and her eyes widened a bit at the numbers.

The purchase order Zac had prepared was nowhere close to what he had bought until now, but it was still a pretty huge amount of resources. Most of it was peak-quality items such as Supreme Divine Crystals or hard-to-find pills. There was none of the more common stuff though, as Zac could buy all those things at a huge discount back in the Zecia sector.

Still, the total value of the items was almost 2,000 D-grade Nexus coins.

"This requires a few days and a massive amount of capital," the hexmaster hesitated.

"I'll pay you 2,000 Nexus Coins for the items in the list, half upfront. Your remuneration depends on how good deals you can find. I'll pay you the rest upon delivery of the items," Zac said. "Are you amenable to these terms?"

"This... Alright," she eventually nodded.

Zac guessed that go-between parties like the hexmaster had their connections, and she would likely get a kick-back on the purchases. Even if she just got a one percent commission from the pill house, she'd still make 10 D-grade nexus coins, a great salary for a few days of errands. The only issue was whether she had the ability to fork out 1,000 D-grade Nexus Coins until she got paid, and it was a bit of a test from Zac.

If she didn't have those kinds of reserves, she might not even be able to gain access to some of the items he needed.

The two signed a contract, and the hexmaster disappeared a moment later, leaving only a rune hovering in the air for a few seconds before it dissipated. Zac could somewhat tell that it was a trap. Not for him,

particularly, but rather as part of her movement skill. Anyone who touched that rune would probably be exposed to the hexmaster, who could throw out a curse remotely.

The two guard captains nodded in Zac's direction before they returned to their position outside.

"What now?" Vilari asked after she closed the gate.

"Well, we're pretty free for a while," Zac said after some thought. "How about we take advantage of our bodyguards and go sightsee a bit?"