

The Fall 699

Chapter 699: The Twilight Ocean

"Good luck," the Goldenleaf Monarch said after the portal in front of the waiting trial-takers had stabilized. "Remember, the moment you pass through those gates you will have to spend a minimum of one year in the Twilight Ocean. This is your final chance to back away."

No one left after the warning, but Zac wouldn't be surprised if some would find themselves unable to take that final step through the Space Gate. He was personally mostly filled with anticipation for the opportunities within, but he had been through so many life- and death encounters by now that this venture felt relatively safe in comparison to some of his other experiences.

Meanwhile, some participants probably had limited experiences with death and were rather raised in the relative safety of their clans.

The first people to enter were the descendants of the Council Factions, soon followed by the premiere local clans. It was a small show of force to have the outsider wait, even if they were descendants of B-grade forces. Catheya still had seeded slots, so it was their turn after just three hours. By that point, only four hundred thousand cultivators had already passed through, meaning that most were still waiting their turn.

"Remember to be careful," Catheya said as they floated in front of the barrier. "The first culling has already started on the other side."

The rest nodded before they flew through one by one. Zac didn't turn into an incorporeal consciousness shot through the void as usual during teleportation, but it rather felt like he had been thrown into the middle of intense fireworks as his surroundings flashed in gold and black. The energies surrounding him were immense, and he looked around with wonder since it felt like the almost nauseating lights were rife with hidden truths.

Suddenly, an immense pressure locked Zac in place, causing him to frown with worry. He had read about the chaotic teleportation already, but this pressure wasn't mentioned in any missive he'd bought. The next moment he felt a sharp pain from his finger as his Spatial Ring reached blistering temperatures. He sent a strand of mental energy into the ring, and he was filled with a sense of foreboding as he saw the odd egg shaking within the space of his ring.

Was it some sort of banned item?

But before Zac even had a chance to worry about getting slapped with a tribulation punishment for bringing contraband to the Twilight Ocean, a ten-meter rune rushed toward him, completely undeterred by the chaos, and passed right through his body. A moment later the pressure was gone and the egg had calmed down.

There was no time to make sense of things before he found himself standing in a foreign world. It looked like he was pretty lucky as he had been dropped off at the edge of the starting continent, and he found himself standing up to his knees in a greenish-golden liquid. He had read so much about it over the past months, but it was still exhilarating to see it with his own eyes.

Zac looked down at the water with interest as he activated [Cosmic Gaze]. He could confirm that it was attuned with both life and death just like the missives had explained, but he couldn't make sense of how the two had fused even after looking at the water for over a minute.

One second it felt like the two attunements were two opposites fighting for the same spot, vaguely familiar to his own path where life and death clashed in an endless war. However, the next moment they coexisted in harmony, only to a moment later be either pure life or death. Finally, for short bursts of time, they were melded into something unique that Zac couldn't begin to comprehend.

It was even impossible to tell which state was the real one, or if the continuous transformations were even real. It might be a bit like those pictures that changed motif depending on what angle you looked at it from. Zac had initially hoped to make inroads into his path by visiting this place, but he honestly wasn't so confident that 3 years was even close to enough to unravel the mess he was looking at.

He was dragged out of his musings as a screen appeared in front of him.

[Twilight Ascent. Help perfect the Tapestry of Twilight. The reward at the end dependent on contribution rank.]

[There are two ways to contribute to the Tapestry of twilight.]

[1. Make Dao Breakthrough into a Dao pertaining to Life or Death. Higher-grade breakthroughs provide more points. Successive breakthroughs provide both rewards. If no breakthroughs are made, half the value of current Dao stages are added by the end of trial.]

Early Seed

1

Middle Seed

5

High Seed

25

Peak Seed

125

Early Fragment

250

Middle Fragment

1,250

High Fragment

6,250

Peak Fragment

31,250

Early Branch

100,000

Middle Branch

500,000

High Branch

2,500,000

[2. Release trapped Dao of Life and Death. This can be done by consuming or destroying treasures of life or death, or killing cultivators or beasts holding related Daos.]

[Rewards will be rewarded upon the end of the Trial. Participants leaving trial prematurely will have half of their contribution points deducted.]

[Choose Identity; Zac Piker - Arcaz Black]

Zac read the quest carefully, and his eyes widened further and further as he read along. How was this a Dao Trial if slaughtering people provided contribution points? This was the Twilight Harbor, and at least a quarter of all warriors held a Dao related to either Life or Death. If things were bad with the exorbitant rewards from the Fate-Plucking ladder, things had just become a true slaughter-fest.

He also intensely regretted holding back the evolution of his Fragment of the Axe in hopes a breakthrough inside the Mystic Realm would help him with the trial. Now it was just a liability until he could find a safe spot to stop and cultivate for a while. Still, he was in a very good position for the first method to accumulate contribution points, considering he had Daos of both Life and Death.

There might be some geniuses who had multiple Daos of Death attunement, but Zac doubted there could be too many. Having two Daos that were very similar in function made little sense. It was better to either focus on one Dao and push it further, or have multiple Daos who brought different things to the table, making you more well-rounded.

Of course, there might be some cultivators playing the long game, nurturing two Death-attuned Dao Fragments to fuse them into one Dao Branch. In either case, Zac felt he had good chances at snatching a good Limited Title unless slaughter was a far more efficient method of accruing Contribution Points.

Furthermore, his Draugr heritage was definitely a detriment with these rules. Anyone he met would assume he held at least one Dao related to Death, which was true. After all, the Draugr held amazing affinity to the Daos of death, making them walking treasure troves. As for the final line, it even ruined his chance to enter a pseudonym for the ladder, and he reluctantly chose Arcaz Black.

He doubted too many people would know of the name Zac Piker, but Catheya definitely did. Zac being able to choose that name would definitely expose him, so he could only go with his 'real name'. At least the System didn't force him to use his true name, but rather the cultivation identities he used.

A mental command made a new screen appear, proving there was a ladder this time.

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 6,250 Rank: 22,538. Value: 100-250.]

His current contribution was at 6,250 as expected, the combined value of his two High Fragments. He guessed those points were just placeholders though until he evolved the Fragments of Bodhi and Coffin. As for his rank, he guessed it mostly was people with higher Dao accomplishments than him. It looked like around 5% of those who had entered so far had at least a Peak Fragment related to life and Death, which didn't feel too surprising.

But there was a pretty worrying twist to the ladder. There was actually a value attached to his name, saying his life wasn't worth more than gaining a Peak Dao Seed. It meant he would have to kill a thousand people like himself to gain the equivalent points of getting a single Dao Branch. It might not sound too bad, but everyone here would have stocked up on escape talismans and hidden aces.

Landing a killing blow wasn't easy unless there was a large power discrepancy, and some battles would result in wounds that might be extra hard to heal in the odd environment of the Twilight Ocean.

Zac eventually closed the screen and looked away from the water, his eyes turning toward the endless horizon instead. To his sides was an endless coast which was lined by a dense forest, and far in the distance could barely discern an island. The clouds were sparse, and they were either wrought in black, gold, or a mix in-between.

The sky itself held the same color as the spatial anomaly did from the outside; a mix of gold and green that cast everything in a slightly metallic hue. Zac took in the view for a few more seconds, but he suddenly froze. He had been so occupied with the shocking entry and the subsequent quest that he had missed a crucial detail.

He had seen this place before.

It was years ago and Zac's mind was a mess at the time, but he was sure of it. It was back when the Mystic Realm collapsed, turning into the Memorysteel mountain and thousands of islands. Back then the laws of space had been turned on their head, and Zac had found himself witnessing a series of odd scenes.

Back then he had seen an alien world, with a Shard of Creation nestled in the depths of a volcano. He had only caught a glimpse of the sky in that vision, but it definitely matched what he was looking at now. And if the Shard of Creation was here, it wouldn't be a surprise if the Splinter of Oblivion he saw in the depths of an ocean was here as well.

Were the remnants perhaps the source of the odd phenomena of this world? With Oblivion on one side and Creation on the other, this space had been affected by both. Add some Cosmic Energy and Miasma and you had something called Twilight Energy by the natives.

Zac slowly shook his head, eventually discarding the idea. It probably wasn't a coincidence that there were remnants in a place like this, but it was unlikely they were the core of this world. First of all, their energies differed from what he felt around him. But more importantly, they weren't powerful enough.

This realm was enormous, and it provided resources that even attracted Monarchs. Meanwhile, the remnants were called Class-3 treasures by the Administrator back then. Zac's own estimates were along

the same line, that they were peak D-Grade treasures. However, they also contained hints of extremely high-tiered concepts, which increased their danger compared to normal treasures of that grade.

The question was what to do with this knowledge. Should he go for it and try adding another set into his collection?

“Heurk,” a gagging sound dragged Zac out of his thoughts, and he looked over to see a humanoid curled up into a ball up on the beach.

Only then did Zac remember a piece of information in the crystal Nala had provided for him. According to the missive, the transfer put a great strain on one’s body, and it was a good idea to activate a defensive talisman the moment you arrived in the Twilight Ocean. That way you would be protected while you acclimatized to the weird energies in the air.

But why hadn’t he noticed anything like that?

Even now, standing in the odd life-death water he was completely unaffected. He already knew that his resistance to life-attuned energies was far greater compared to normal undead. But for him to be completely unaffected by the transfer? Was it the rune that passed through him? Even now, he wasn't really bothered by the small amounts of energy that seeped into his body.

The human soon gained a sense of his surroundings, and he was horrified when he saw a pureblood Draugr staring at him from just 50 meters away, seemingly unbothered by the Twilight Energy in the area. Zac didn’t even have a chance to say anything before the man activated an escape talisman and disappeared.

Zac could only snort as he turned back toward the ocean, and he started walking deeper into the waters. There was no point in hunting that humanoid since a '0' actually appeared above his head after Zac had focused on him for two seconds. Zac guessed that it was his value, meaning the cultivator didn't cultivate either life or death. Or perhaps that releasing his energies wasn't worth anything to the 'Tapestry of Twilight'.

He soon found himself completely submerged as he took the first steps into the ocean, and he was relieved to find that visibility was a lot better than he initially feared. He could see for thousands of meters before it all turned into a greenish haze, and he could even spot a few other cultivators in the distance. His eyes turned to a small reef not far away, and he started moving toward it.

The viscosity of the liquid was a bit odd, far lower than water. He didn’t actually float in the Twilight Ocean, and he could still swing his arms freely as long as he expelled small amounts of Miasma. It was a bit like when he found himself in space. Zac took out [Rakan's Roar] and swung it a few times before he nodded and stowed it away.

Until now, Zac hadn't really felt anything wrong with the Twilight Energy entering his body, but he eventually started to feel some discomfort after moving through the water for ten minutes. He expelled some miasma through his hands, after which he tried to restore his reserves with the accumulated energy. It worked, but it almost felt like drinking brackish water because of the taint of life energy.

Thankfully, his [Void Heart] finally woke up after the accumulated energy reached a certain point, and one beat was enough to cleanse most of his body. Interestingly enough, his Hidden Node didn't actually

consume Twilight Energy as a whole, but it rather ripped the life-attuned part and left clean death-attuned energy in his body.

But it wasn't exactly Miasma that was left behind. It was rather some other type of death-attuned energy with a slightly different flavor. Still, it began replenishing his missing Miasma without any problems as his [Purity of the Void] started to work on the life-attuned energies that were left behind. As for the death-attuned energies, Zac tried to push them toward the next node, but he found himself utterly incapable of actually using the energy for cultivation.

Zac sighed in disappointment since he had somewhat hoped he would be able to live the life as a cultivator for a second there. Of course, [Void Heart] would start spitting out some usable energy sooner or later, though it was only half of the Twilight Energy that entered his body. He wasn't too worried about the remaining energy either, since it wasn't harmful to him. He could always expel some Miasma to absorb it into his cells if needed.

However, he looked on with wonder as the deathly energies actually started to move by themselves, but neither toward [Void Heart] or his normal nodes. They rather congealed and formed a stream that moved toward his head, where a small whirlwind had appeared on his Soul Aperture.

The deathly energies swam right inside like they were coming home, and they immediately entered the deathly ocean in his mind. A moment later the energies were gone, completely integrated with the waters. Zac looked on with mute incomprehension, as nothing he had read in his [Nine Reincarnations Manual] had mentioned anything like this.

Still, it didn't really seem like a bad thing that the deathly energy entered his mind, especially when it was in such small quantities. But he did find himself in a pretty odd situation as the last of the death-attuned energy was swallowed. Others were trying all kinds of ways to minimize the harmful effects of the Twilight Energy, using everything from arrays to continuously rotating their Daos within their bodies.

Meanwhile, the various parts of his body seemed to fight for the energy, like it couldn't get enough. It was like he had come home.