

The Fall 721

Chapter 721: Runebinder

Zac spent the next few hours stabilizing his mind and getting back to perfect condition. The final snippet to evolve Bodhi still eluded him, and he eventually gave up. He knew all-too-well the Dao couldn't be forced, especially not for him. Sitting around pondering was all-but-useless with his affinities.

But he did eventually realize what was responsible for the sense of wrongness in his epiphany. It was related to the source of his vision.

The scene of the fighting species beneath the Bodhi tree was just like how he conceptualized how he should fight in his human form. But his Evolutionary Stance was not just Bodhi, it also contained his understanding of the axe. It wasn't pure, like the Dao of Life he needed to move toward. Meanwhile, the vision he had created for the Fragment of the Coffin was both a proper concept of its own and a link to his Inexorable Stance.

But he knew he had at least formed a proper framework. The part of his epiphany that worked was based on change. Conversely, his insight into his Death-attuned fragment represented finality. Life and death; Creation and Oblivion.

His Dao progress had come to a stop, but there were more things to work on. Zac had already spent close to a month in seclusion, but he wasn't done there. First, he spent three days filling up his still-empty nodes on his Human side, pushing his level to 109 with the help of a stack of Supreme Nexus Crystals and the energy that his [Void Heart] kept spitting out as it purified the Twilight Energy.

Only then did he swap back to his undead form and took out another set of [Aethergate Pills].

The odd sense of damage and weakness was all gone by now, which should allow him to go for a few levels. A surge of energy entered his body as he swallowed one of the pills, but he frowned and threw one more pill into his mouth as he felt the lacking energy that shot toward his node. The damage was gone and the accumulated Pill Toxicity was within what was acceptable, but he was starting to build up an immunity to the [Aethergate Pills].

Thankfully he had a backup plan, and he eventually swapped to his human form after having broken open two nodes with [Aethergate Pills]. One pill had almost opened three nodes the first time around, but these two nodes alone had forced him to take seven pills. The supreme leveling pills weren't usable in his human form, but that was fine by Zac as he took out another inlaid box.

Inside were the best leveling pills that the attendant could get her hands on, and Zac felt a powerful surge in his body after swallowing the shimmering amber-colored pill. The pills were not as potent as the [Aethergate Pills], but they had a greater effect when considering the immunity he had built up toward those specific pills.

He once more entered the slow but steady cycle of gaining levels and filling nodes with Supreme Crystals, but Zac sighed and stopped after he had forced open five nodes in total. The result wasn't as good as back in the Twilight Harbor, but the damage to his body was almost at the same level since each node was harder to break open than the one before. Besides, both his immunity and accumulated Pill Toxicity would become a problem if he went any further.

His [Purity of the Void] was fast at work, but much of its efforts went into expelling the invasive energies from his body, leaving most of the accumulated Pill Toxicity untouched. Zac couldn't be sure, but he probably wouldn't be able to gain any levels this way again inside the Twilight Ocean unless he found some opportunity that cleansed his body like the lava bath did.

Until then, he would have to do things the old-fashioned way.

The [Chainbreaking Pills] were still waiting to be tested, as was the [Stone of Hope]. Hopefully, he'd get the opportunity to try those things as soon as the imperceptible damage to his foundation had healed. For now, Zac spent another week filling up his levels with the help of Supreme Miasma Crystals on his undead side until both sides were maxed out.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

114

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

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

7599 [Increase: 105%. Efficiency: 238%]

Dexterity

3406 [Increase: 75%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance

6019 [Increase: 96%. Efficiency: 238%]

Vitality

4558 [Increase: 84%. Efficiency: 228%]

Intelligence

1345 [Increase: 69%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom

2545 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 187%]

Luck

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

Free Points

140

Nexus Coins

[D] 938 235

Zac looked at the numbers with satisfaction. Just over half a year had passed since the events with his mother, but his attributes had essentially increased by 60% since then. Add to that the increased combat prowess of forming his two combat stances, his improved Daos, and his Dao Braiding, and his combat power was pretty much doubled.

Even Heaven's Chosen would probably be shocked if they heard of such a cultivation speed, and they might even form a heart demon if they learned it was a Mortal who made such strides.

Dao and levels were dealt with, but there were even more things that Zac wanted to try now that he was alone. Zac allocated his free points into an even split between Strength, and Wisdom before he took out a number of array flags. The added Wisdom was to make up for the fact that his latest Dao improvements barely provided any points into Wisdom, and to hopefully help facilitate what he was about to do next.

It was time to upgrade the first of his skills.

His mind still held some lingering inspiration after swallowing the Life-Death Pearls, and his understanding of the Dao had taken a step forward. He wanted to use this wave of momentum to make his first manual skill upgrade. He knew there were some risks involved, but he would have to take that

step sooner or later. The experience would also allow him to get a practical understanding of the process, and show him where he needed to improve further.

As for the skill he had decided to evolve, it was [Indomitable]. Mentalists were a lot more common in this place compared to back in Zecia. Now that he was heading toward the depths of the sector, he wanted to strengthen his Mental Defenses even if his soul was stronger than most people's. An F-grade Skill ultimately wasn't enough to block out a Peak E-grade Mentalist's attack, and he couldn't trust a series of fortuitous encounters to save him every time he ran into someone like Vilari's predecessor.

At the same time, it wouldn't be the end of the world if [Indomitable] lost a bit of its efficacy when reaching E-grade due to Zac's lack of experience in upgrading skills. It shouldn't be one of the most straightforward evolutions as well since Zac didn't want to change a single thing with the skill except its grade. It would be much more complicated to upgrade [Vanguard of Undeath] for example, where he wanted to remove the requirement of a shield to activate the skill.

Zac lit a set of incense as he sat down in the middle of the [E-grade Fractal Framework Array]. Evolving or modifying a skill could be done in two ways. The first way was to do everything by hand, following one's own intuition and understanding of a skill. The second way was to use some sort of prepared tools to help facilitate the process.

The former method was mainly used if you were an extreme talent, or if you had gotten your hands on some sort of treasure that provided you with an epiphany. The latter was the method used by more than 99% of all cultivators though, and any sect or clan would have specific array chambers for that very purpose.

Zac knew his limitations all-too-well. Freestyling it with his zero affinities and clumsy energy control was essentially to ask for trouble. That's why he had paid a premium to get the best portable arrays that money could buy. Success still depended on Zac and his understanding though, so this was essentially a final exam of his studies with Catheya.

The array hummed to life as Zac sat down in the middle of it and closed his eyes. He focused on the skill fractal in his mind, and he took a steadying breath before he made his move. His soul shuddered as the connectors between the skill fractal and his pathways were all severed in an instant, after which he surrounded the skill with dense layers of Mental Energy.

This was the first step of a skill evolution, the severing needed to make the patterns malleable. He carefully moved the fractal out of his body and infused it onto an empty disk right in front of him. The disk lit up, and a perfect copy of the skill fractal appeared with aquamarine luster as a hologram above it. Meanwhile, Zac felt a steady drain on his mind as a continuous infusion of Mental Energy was required to keep the fractal stable.

The circular fractal that made up [Indomitable] contained tens of thousands of miniature patterns that formed a cohesive whole, and Zac marveled as he looked at the design. It was like he was gazing at the patterns on a seashell, but thousands of times more complex. Some truths were hidden in those fractals, like how mathematical formulas hid within the spiral patterns of the shells.

His mind started to wander, perhaps still a bit affected by the Life-Death Pearls, and Zac hurriedly focused his mind. He had already made a plan in his mind based on his years of study along with

Catheya's teachings, and he started to send out tendrils of Mental Energy to manipulate the hologram. Meanwhile, he sensed many streams of energy entering the disk that held his actual Skill Fractal.

This was a bit like those surgery robots on Earth, where Zac would modify the enlarged hologram as the array made the actual changes to the skill fractal. It did increase the energy expenditure in return for lowering the difficulty, and Zac was more than willing to pay that price.

What Zac needed to accomplish in this process was both easy and difficult. He didn't need to change any functions, so he simply needed to increase the density of patterns in the skill to allow it to exhibit greater strength. It was just like how engineers fit more and more transistors on microchips back on Earth to increase their computing power.

That would turn the skill into an Early E-grade skill, after which the System once more would take charge of the modifications on the pattern when the skill upgraded to middle proficiency and so on. Then again, the better the foundation Zac created, the more functions the System would be able to add. It wouldn't fix any mistakes of his though. Imperfections by his own making would have to be resolved by himself.

Zac started the process by redrawing one section of the circular pattern, an area that housed the patterns designed to store energy. These were usually the safest ones to upgrade in the start, and they often helped stabilize the rest of the progress. There were thousands of such interlocked patterns on his skill fractal, and Zac quickly got to work.

One F-grade storage pattern was turned into nine interlocking ones, where one E-grade core was surrounded by eight supporters. The first transformation took a bit of time, but each change went quicker and quicker until he managed to replace a pattern in just over a second. Rushing the work wasn't optimal, but there was a time limit on this process.

He needed to form the evolved skill fractal and reattach it to his pathways before he ran out of steam. Otherwise, he'd cripple the fractal or even lose it altogether.

The skill fractal kept changing over the next hours, though most of the modifications Zac performed were so fine that they wouldn't even be recognizable from the distance. He quickly realized that having a plan was all well and good, but some issues could only be discovered when in the heat of it. Certain sections upgraded just fine, but small problems kept cropping up when his schematics didn't hold up in the real world.

Sometimes it was his instincts that indicated something was wrong. That wasn't just a blind gut feeling, but rather a dissonance between his Dao understanding and the patterns in front of him. Other times it was his array that was helping him out by pointing out imbalances, feedback loops, or energy leakages through the fractals.

By themselves, most of these small imperfections wouldn't be a problem, but they could quickly snowball into something serious that would be nigh-impossible to fix without reworking the whole fractal. This was thankfully where the huge number of practical examples Catheya had shared came in handy, as many of the issues he encountered were well documented. He just needed to slightly modify the skill fractal to accommodate these changes, and the array stopped beeping ominously.

Sometimes he kept going on some section for a while even after the array stopped any warnings. A workable and a perfect pattern were two completely different things, after all. Zac kept adjusting the

patterns and adjusting the balance between things like defensive runes and Dao-infusion runes until he reached a perfect state.

As to what perfection was, it was hard to say. It was once more came back to his gut, like how you could get a completely different impression from two different paintings which looked pretty similar on the surface.

Zac's vision was starting to become blurry as he slogged on. Even with his unusual amount of mental energy, he was starting to feel hard-pressed to keep up his focus. He tried to lessen the strain with the help of Soul Crystals, but it was only prolonging the inevitable. He was forced to work faster and faster until he almost completely relied on the Array to make suggestions that were decent rather than perfect.

A new skill fractal without any obvious fault was eventually born. It looked 90% like the original pattern, but Zac had been forced to add two small sections to the skill fractal that glommed onto its sides. A series of imperfections along with the need to adjust the pattern to his E-grade pathways had forced him to add new sections to retain all the functionality. It looked a bit ugly and it wasn't perfect, it would get the job done.

The only downside he could spot was that it would take slightly longer to activate the stronger state of the mental defense skill, and that it would cost slightly more to run.

He had spent too much time getting each part just right in the beginning, leaving too much work to be done by the end. Zac pressed his hand against the disk holding the actual fractal, and he felt the new-and-improved skill fractal enter his body and move to its previous position. He arduously reattached the fractal through hundreds of small pathways, and he eventually felt his Miasma smoothly running through it without issue.

A breath of relief escaped from Zac's lips just as the array powered down. It was a success, and he quickly opened his Skill Screen to take a look at the result.

[E] Indomitable - Proficiency: Early. The will of the underworld is intractable, undeterred by the screams of the bound. Upgradeable.

As expected, the result was the same skill as before, except that it was now E-grade. However, Zac noted with some interest that the flavor text had changed from the upgrade. The old text said 'A vanguard of undeath moves forth, undeterred by the whispers of those who wish to impede the crusade.'

Zac guessed that the flavor text was changed to represent how it now was fitted with his Fetters of Desolation-class. The adjustments weren't enough to turn it into a new skill though, which was fine by him. Fusing the skill had also come with another advantage; he had gained a new title.

[Runebinder: Manually evolve a skill while in E-grade. Reward: Base Attributes +50.]

Zac had already looked into the matter, and he was pretty relieved when he saw the result. There were various levels of the title, with the worst one being Runebreaker. You'd get that skill if you messed up so badly the skill was degraded to the point to be relegated to a lower tier. There was also Runemaster, the version where you evolved a skill and it actually became stronger than before, like turning a High-quality skill into a peak-quality one.

Runebinder was right in between, meaning that he had lost some efficacy when adding his modifications, but not to the point that the skill went from a Peak-Quality skill to a High-quality skill. That was actually above expectation for his first try. He just needed to incorporate what he had learned and figure out solutions to the things that confused him during the process, after which he could keep evolving some of the simpler skills.

In addition to the rune-series of titles, there was an even better version where you created a skill from scratch. If you managed to create a peak-quality skill on your own before reaching D-grade, you'd reportedly get a top-tier title. Zac had to set aside any thoughts of getting that title for now though. He wasn't confident in even creating a low-quality skill at the moment, let alone a peak-quality one.

In a perfect world, he would keep upgrading every single one of his skills before setting out, but he felt like the moment had passed. He might have dared to upgrade a few more of the simple ones if his mind had still been in a state of elevated clarity. Unfortunately, the energies were completely processed by now, and he was back to his normal non-enlightened self.

Besides, he still didn't feel confident in evolving skills like [Profane Seal] even if he had the liquid courage of the Dao Smoothies. Not only was it a finisher with many interlocking parts which made the pattern far more complex compared to [Indomitable], but it also contained more than ten times the number of patterns to modify.

Zac would have to make some major sacrifices in efficacy if he wanted to upgrade the skill with his current accomplishments. But his goal was accomplished, and it was time to set out. His Soul Sea had been even further augmented during his month-long seclusion, and he needed to set out before it was too late.

It was time to set course for the Twilight Chasm.