

The Fall 724

Chapter 724: Profiteering

Zac grunted as he looked down at the deep wound in his chest and swallowed one of the Dawn-series healing pills along with a soldier pill. A large ball of hard-to-expel Dao was lodged in the wound, but there was not much he could do about it at the moment because it was time to go. He turned his gaze inward and toward the brand, and with a push of Dao he completed his preparations and crushed it in one fell swoop.

Seven days had passed since he was branded, and he had been attacked 11 times. Two of those ambushes Zac had escaped from, four groups had been relieved of their Spatial Treasures before being knocked out and hidden a few meters beneath the soil, and five battles had ended with unilateral annihilation.

He had made a fortune over the past days from looting Cosmos Sacks, including everything from rare herbs to a small mountain of Twilight Fruits. There was, unfortunately, no treasure at the same grade as the Life-Death pearls, but he still had formed three mountains of assorted loot. Even if he didn't manage to unlock the manuals, the accumulated value still had to be around 20 to 30 D-grade Nexus Coins.

That wasn't really much to the current him, but he knew that he couldn't turn his nose away from making money like this. He was burning his 'inheritance' left and right, without any proper channels to recuperate what he spent. Every little thing counted.

But the real gain had been the great progress he had made on his combat stance. It was rapidly evolving into something real, where he could already incorporate most of his skills without missing a beat. In contrast, his Evolutionary Stance was still only a basic technique so far that didn't make use of any of his Skills.

His Contribution Points and Ladder Position had made a significant jump as well, though most of it came from gaining 25,000 points for evolving his Death-Attuned Dao Fragment. With his other sources of points, he already surpassed most cultivators who had entered with a Dao Branch and only got the 50,000 points to start off with.

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 81,167 Rank: 2,541. Value: 500-750.]

His points were a bit inflated because of the mothertree and the other two locations he helped destroy, but it honestly wasn't empty strength any longer. Zac knew he was still far from the top tier-powerhouses, but he was confident that he could soundly defeat anyone without a Dao Branch by this point.

He even felt like Yanub Mettleleaf wasn't an insurmountable enemy by this point, as long as they met in the deeper parts of the Mystic Realm. After all, he had evolved both Coffin and Axe since they fought, which should make it a lot easier to deal with his powerful regeneration.

But more than anything, the ladder showed just how hard it was to form Dao Branches in the E-grade. Catheya had already said that it required not only extraordinary affinity, but also valuable opportunities, but only now was the point starting to come across. Eleven million, most of them the best of the best in

the Twilight Harbor, yet there were probably less than ten thousand people inside the trial with a Dao Branch.

It was clear that taking that step was exponentially harder compared to forming a Dao Fragment in the E-grade. Seeing such a grim situation, he was once more pretty happy with his weird constitution. The bottlenecks were starting to grow more and more palpable for those around him.

Forming a Cultivator's Core without the stability provided by a Dao Branch was extremely difficult from what he'd gathered, so the ladder was a poignant reminder of just how few of the trial takers would ever reach Hegemony. Meanwhile, he only needed to make sure he had enough treasures to eat and enough enemies to fight to keep progressing.

After testing things out over the past days, he could confirm that the lethality of [Deathmark] especially had taken a huge step forward from the Dao upgrade. The passive shroud alone was dangerous to the average peak E-grade cultivators, and it was almost game over if they got branded by a mark.

The amount of putrefaction that flooded into their bodies was simply too overwhelming, which was only compounded by the Twilight Energy that was already messing with people's constitutions.

Better yet, Zac had not met a single cultivator who had managed to erase the brand within three seconds, which was a lot of time to be subject to the extremely potent toxins. He had also gotten a lot more adept at instructing his wraiths to better integrate them with his Inexorable Stance. They were still a bit simpleminded, but it would probably get better as soon as he managed to upgrade the skill.

So far any skill evolutions it had eluded him, but he felt he should be getting close based on his experience with [Blighted Cut].

However, even with his recent powerups, the last four battles had been pretty rough. Two of them he had immediately fled from upon seeing the strength of the party, though he had left them with a small parting gift; a hundred offensive talismans flung in their direction. Activating them all cost almost three-quarters of his Miasma, but the eruption had been a sight to behold.

The party that attacked him twelve hours ago had been pretty impressive as well. It had been four cultivators from the Yon'Dai Family, one of the thirteen factions on the Twilight Council. They had all been at a power level that surpassed his own, and they both had E-grade Skills and a War array to empower each other.

If not for the advantage he was given by the Twilight Energy, he would have been in big trouble against that quartet. He had still been forced to use up all three of his healing brands mid-battle, along with most of his Void Energy from [Force of the Void]. Thankfully, the Void Beast organ allowed him to recover the hidden energy storage within a few hours.

Things had obviously gotten even more pressed in the last battle. The trio of Revenants were decent opponents, and Zac had only planned on robbing them after continuing the duel for a while longer. But things changed because of two reasons; first, that brew that had pushed their strength to a level that surpassed his own while also shaking off most of the effect of the Twilight Energy.

There was no room to hold back in a situation like that.

Secondly, his hidden advance array had warned him that a large group was approaching the Valley, perhaps even one of the two armies he had already escaped from once. He had been forced to go all out, using the energy from both his remnants in short succession. One of the methods had even been something he had thought up on the spot.

Warning bells had gone off the moment the sword entered his body, and he knew that a storm of chaotic energies would rip his innards to pieces unless he did something. So he had instinctively forced the Creation Energy into the sword, not even bothering with having some specific goal in mind. Zac had sensed the insipient Tool Spirit being drowned in Creation, falling apart along with the weapon itself.

However, the cost for that attack had been steep; he had once more lost some of his longevity.

It looked like the only safe way for him to use the Creation Energy was to use the Mark of Creation. Anything else would drain him of his life force, no matter if it was to heal himself or unleash bursts of wild Creation. It was maybe lucky that he hadn't really found any way to use the hidden Oblivion Energy in his soul. Perhaps it had a similarly sinister price to be activated freely.

There was at least some good news as well. It was the first time he used Annihilation Sphere for real since he evolved his Soul, and he could pretty much confirm what he sensed when he was cornered by that Corpse-lord Hegemon after the Auction. His control over the process had improved considerably thanks to his empowered Mental Energy. Forming the sphere wasn't really a matter of chance any longer, and he didn't feel he was at risk of accidentally annihilating a body part or two unless something unexpected happened.

He was also able to control the amount of stored Oblivion Energy he expelled, though there seemed to be a minimum amount of energy required to reach a critical mass and form an Annihilation Sphere. He had lost roughly a third of his stores, but he didn't feel too bad about it. He would have needed to expel some of the energy soon enough anyway, to alleviate the mental corruption that came with keeping it all inside.

The gains were plenty, but it was time to go. The next group would arrive in less than ten minutes, and Zac had no plans to stay around when they arrived. Miasma surged through his body as he started channeling [Abyssal Phase], and he flew into the thin crack he had already discovered. A series of loud explosions erupted behind him, as the Talismans he had triggered blew half the valley to kingdom come.

That chaotic eruption should both mask any lingering energies from his fight, while also making it impossible to figure out where he had gone. Half a minute later he had passed through half a mountain peak, at which point he stopped and returned to his corporeal form. Zac looked around for any threats before he activated his Specialty Core as the robes on his body changed their design to suit his human side.

Color returned to his eyes and face a few seconds later, and he took off his shoes before he set off again, following the current toward what he hoped was the outer parts of the mountain range.

There was no way to know whether he had missed something, but he felt he had covered all his bases. His signal should have disappeared in that valley, and he was now tens of thousands of meters away, looking like a human instead. Even if anyone encountered him, they shouldn't be able to tell he and Arcas Black were one and the same.

Clattering sounds echoed out in the distance, and Zac cracked his neck as he took out [Verun's Bite] again. He had mostly fought in his Undead Form for almost half a year by now, and it was time to go at it as a human for a while. After all, he couldn't simply let the insights he gained back in the Big Axe Coliseum fade away as he focused on other aspects of his cultivation.

His vision was suddenly blocked as a two-meter large critter appeared seemingly out of nowhere. It was a Hollowtongue, the beast after which the mountains were named. A stinger shot straight toward Zac's heart, but he was already on the move as [Verun's Bite] ripped through the waters.

Zac himself pivoted his body before he pounced with his axe, almost like a beast biting down at his target. Green blood spread through the waters as the axe embedded itself in the odd critter's head, but he felt a burning pain on his left shoulder. He had underestimated just how agile that tongue was, and he had failed to completely avoid it as he went in for the kill.

A fiery tsunami of supercondensed Twilight Energy flooded his veins, and the sensation almost made him see double for a moment. Zac had already activated [Innate Ward], but it was no use now that the stinger had already pierced his skin. It did however block out the blood that spread around him, which by itself seemed highly toxic.

He felt his veins constrict, but his Fragment of the Bodhi quickly came to the rescue as it brought waves of warmth through his body. The toxin was weakened, at which point [Void Heart] pounced. [Purity of the Void] helped against poisons to some degree, but it was already dealing with pill toxins and the Twilight Energy itself.

A moment later the situation was back under control, except for a red bump where the stinger had pierced his skin.

The pain was thankfully far from lethal, but he knew that the blood spreading through the tunnel might attract trouble. He pushed his body down to the surface of the tunnel and flashed away with [Loamwalker], only appearing a few hundred meters away. It was a weakness of his movement skill in the waters; he actually had to touch the ground to activate the skill.

He could still do his "double jump" in the middle of water though, but it would have to be preceded by a normal step on the ocean bed.

The clattering sounds grew ever louder as he continued, and Zac knew he had chanced upon a hive. Sure enough, he encountered one Hollowtongue after another until he reached the mouth of a large submerged cavern. It was as large as a lake, and there were hundreds of Hollowtongues swimming about or resting on the cave wall or stalagmites.

Zac looked at the scene for a few seconds, considering what to do next. Most of the beasts didn't provide any Contribution Points, but there was one that did; a five-meter mutated version that was given a wide berth of the others. It radiated a powerful aura, far beyond the normal late-stage Hollowtongue. It had to hold a late Dao Fragment at least as well since it was actually worth 183 Contribution Points.

The points were a welcome addition, but Zac was more interested in the challenge. A den full of peak E-grade beasts and a powerful alpha seemed like a good place to continue forging his path. He had made

good strides on his Inexorable Stance style so far, and now it was time to start consolidating his Evolutionary Stance.

Zac estimated it would take between 40 to 60 days to reach the edge of the Twilight Chasm after he exited this mountain range, and he hoped to have shored up his skills before reaching that point. This place made a great starting point, so Zac swallowed an antidote pill preemptively before he shot into the den.

Only an hour later did he leave the subterranean lake, covered in scars and pumped full of dangerous amounts of Twilight Energy. Above his head was a small cloud of energy he had been forced to release after killing all those critters. The battles over the past days were more than enough to push his next node to the precipice of breaking open, at which point he had started to release all the energy instead of aiming for another level.

Forcing open a node just a few days after opening five of them felt a bit too foolhardy even for him.

Zac made his way through the underground tunnels, following the general direction of one of his compasses, this one an upgraded version he had looted two days ago. It was time to leave the Hollowtongue Mountains.

Leaving such a wake of death and destruction behind filled him with mixed emotions, but this was ultimately how the road to supremacy looked. If he ever wanted a shot at catching up to Leandra, he needed to be ruthless both against himself and against others. At least he had only targeted the kind of groups who were the same, people who were ready to hunt down people for their loot.

Perhaps he had even left the Hollowtongue Mountains safer by eradicating these squads for those who just wanted to search for treasures in peace. He knew that he was ultimately just making excuses for himself, but he believed it was fine as long as his Dao Heart was clear as he walked down his path.

You've got to do what you've got to do to stay sane in the Multiverse.

Zac soon emerged from the cave, and he quickly set out toward what should be the outlet of the mountain range, on the opposite side of where he entered. He had slowly made his way across the Hollowtongue Mountains between his fights during the past week, and he estimated that he should be able to leave within half a day. However, he suddenly felt a presence far ahead, prompting him to stop in his tracks.

It was a squad of eight people, which would be a chore to take out even for him. However, they made no move toward him, and they had clearly exposed themselves intentionally.

"Excuse us!" one of the men shouted, and Zac frowned as he took out an escape talisman just in case.

"Please wait! We mean you no harm! We are looking for a Draugr Imperial named Arcaz Black," the first man said with a small bow, which made Zac take a second look at the group with confusion. "We are paying well for information and assistance!"

Zac blankly looked at the group for a few seconds before he waved the leader over with a crooked smile. Why let an opportunity to make both connections and some money slip through his fingers.

And who knew more about Arcaz Black's activities than he did?

