

The Fall 745

Chapter 745: The Last Laugh

The cultivation cave where he had spent the better part of a year no longer felt like a secure sanctuary, like a home that had been burglarized.

Zac knew that he was mostly to blame for getting wrapped up in this mess. Staying in one place for this long was to tempt fate, but the location was simply too good to give up on. He had been making rapid progress, both in levels and in regards to his soul. Over the past three months, he repeatedly considered finally setting out, only to feel the need to keep cultivating a little bit longer.

Now he had been exposed, and the quest screen in front of him loomed over his head like an executioner's axe.

Thankfully, it didn't look like the Eveningtide Asura had managed to get the whole picture. Zac couldn't be certain, but Alvod's control of the Mystic Realm probably wasn't as great as he tried to let on. Why wait eight months if 'the Twilight Chasm was his 'domain'? It was either prohibitively difficult to manifest inside this place as he did, or his senses were blocked out by the System, making discovering Zac difficult.

It was also clear that the System didn't allow the Twilight Lord to directly alter the events as it descended after just a minute, even though the Eveningtide Asura only appeared as a weak presence. Unfortunately, it was impossible to tell exactly what Alvod had managed to glean in their short encounter. For example, had he activated the array in time? Would Alvod even be able to discover anything as a weak consciousness?

One thing was for sure though, Zac didn't dare swap between his races in this place any longer. The intruding presence had been booted by the System from the looks of it, but who knew what methods a Monarch possessed. Also, the final threat of the Eveningtide Asura made him afraid to delay much longer.

It was a shame too as he had managed to reach level 120 two weeks ago. If he pushed himself, he might have been able to gain another five before the trial ended. Truthfully, he had hoped to reach level 125 after a year, but progress was rapidly slowing down. He still had more than enough Beast Cores and [Chainbreaking Pills] to keep going, but the problem was his hidden node.

[Void Heart] could ultimately only purify so much energy, whereas the amount of energy required for each node increased exponentially. For the first two levels, his wounds had been the bottleneck, with the next node being ready to be opened the moment he had recovered. But from level 118, that changed to an issue of energy supply.

Reaching level 120 had taken three weeks longer than the previous level, and Zac guessed he'd require another two months for the next. It was just like when he got his hands on Nexus Crystals in the beginning. He gained a few levels smoothly in the earlier stages of the F-grade, but soon enough the energy the crystals provided were all but negligible.

He had tried feeding the hidden node all kinds of things, from natural treasure to straight-up going back to absorbing Twilight Energy. Having [Void Heart] feast on natural treasures was no doubt the quickest,

as it processed and returned that energy far quicker than anything else. Conversely, using Twilight Energy didn't only take three times as long to refine, but it also left a bunch of unwanted energies behind.

Seeing as he only had so many natural treasures, he had soon enough reverted to only using Beast Cores while keeping the Twilight Energy away by crushing supreme-quality crystals. It was a disappointment, but pushing five levels in eight months as a mortal was a tremendous achievement. Doing the same had taken Galvarion well over a decade, and not even Catheya's leveling speed was at this level either.

To reach level 125, Zac might need two to three full years cultivating this way. Of course, he could drastically shorten that time through slaughter, but Zac knew the ship had sailed. He didn't dare burst up any more nodes now that he was leaving the chasm - he needed his full combat strength going forward.

Getting a new set of skills was impossible, but there was one more thing he could do. Eight months of refining his soul wasn't enough to reach the second reincarnation, but it had still strengthened his soul tremendously. With some help, it should be just enough.

Zac spent the next five hours refilling his mental energy and stabilizing his mind, at which point he took out one of his [Fractal Framework Arrays] meant for his undead side. Having spent this long in one place had given Zac ample time to train his proficiency in upgrading skills, with all his ancillary skills being evolved by now, except for [Beauty Yrial's Great Transformation Skill].

Even [Cosmic Gaze] had been upgraded to E-grade on his Draugr form, though he still hadn't managed to improve [Piercing Gaze] in his human form to match.

There were, however, two final holdouts on his Draugr side, and leaving before improving the situation might prove lethal. [Vanguard of Undeath] still worked decently enough, but [Profane Seal] simply wasn't durable enough to deal with the elites of the trial. He had seen how effortlessly Uona had broken through his cage, and there were more examples like Yanub Mettleleaf and the ice mage in the Greengrove Archipelago.

He was about to set out with a massive bounty on his head, and he needed the ability to trap others, making sure his location wasn't exposed. He needed to upgrade [Profane Seal], even if there was a risk of it being downgraded to a lower-quality skill. However, Zac wasn't without some confidence.

He placed the [Fractal Framework Array] right next to the oversized [Mind's Eye Agate] to make sure he could get the most out of the treasure, but Zac wasn't done there. A small jade box appeared on the ground in front of him, followed by a crystalline vial with a shimmering pill inside.

It was the [Dawn Awakening] pill, whereas the box contained one of the two dumpling fruits. He still didn't know what the item was called or its exact usage, but he had managed to form an educated opinion three months ago. He had been a bit bored and restless, and overcome with curiosity he cut off a small bite from the smaller of the two natural treasures.

It was just a corner of the plant, but the energy had still provided some clues of the treasure's true nature. It was not a Dao Treasure, at least not as far as he could tell, but it was still something extremely useful.

Zac immediately swallowed the [Dawn Awakening] pill, it was like a wave of power swept through his body, transforming it into something else. Suddenly, it felt like he had become a part of the Twilight Ocean, perhaps even an integral part to its infinitely intricate tapestry. He was one with the ocean, and the ocean was one with him.

The feeling was so palpable that he actually stopped himself from crushing another Miasma Crystal when his surroundings were impacted, and the Twilight Energy that swirled around him was no longer hostile to his presence. It didn't try to force its way into his body until he exploded, instead simply sticking to him like a pet sticking to its owner.

The change was intoxicating, but Zac knew he had bigger fish to fry than to enjoy the absence of the pervasive and crushing pressure of the Twilight Energy. He opened the lid of the jade box, and he stuffed the unblemished dumpling into his mouth, swallowing bit by bit until he had consumed the whole thing, stem and all.

The natural treasure looked like a white ball of rice dough, but it actually contained a juicy pulp that was dark green, tasting a bit like a mix of kiwi and divinity. He had never eaten something as delicious before, though he wasn't sure if it was another side effect of [Dawn Awakening]. The pulp juices were full of the mysterious energy that had tricked him into thinking it was a Dao Treasure, and it perfectly blended with every single inch of his body.

Most of all, Zac was filled with an unprecedented sense of clarity, where the scripts and patterns that were the source for many a headache were suddenly as clear as day. It felt like his IQ was rising exponentially by the second, and he was awash with ideas to not only improve his current skills, but even create new ones.

This was the true nature of the mysterious fruit he had found; Inspiration.

It was a treasure that provided an unprecedented state of clarity into matters related to Life and Death. No matter if it was creating skills or upgrading existing ones, it could take your concepts to a whole new level. No doubt it would be an amazing treasure for craftsmen as well. Anyone who created an item under the influence of this fruit would no doubt produce a Spiritual Tool or Pill of unprecedented quality.

Zac wasted no time, and the extremely complex Skill Fractal of [Profane Seal] soon emerged from his body and entered the array. He had thought about this step for months on end, running hundreds and hundreds of simulations, analyzing every single step of the process over and over to make sure to avoid as many of the pitfalls as possible.

There were so many patterns working together in perfect harmony to create the extremely impressive cage that had become the staple of his undead side, and the slightest mistake could cause the whole structure to unravel. However, as Zac looked at the projection of the skill fractal in front of him, he wasn't content. He saw it as a piece of art, as a burgeoning life holding vast amounts of untapped potential for greatness. If he followed his original plan he would succeed, he would create a top-tier E-grade skill.

But he could do better.

There was a small voice in the back of his head that urged caution, but Zac pushed those thoughts befitting smaller-minded men aside as he was consumed the glory of creation, and like a master artisan he set about his work with both conviction and precision. Whole sections of the skill fractal were transformed, taking in and adding various concepts.

Runes that had never appeared on any of his skills before were added, based only on pictures and descriptions he'd seen in information crystals. He dug deep for all kinds of sources of inspiration. Some came from obvious sources, like his other skills and his Dao Visions. Others were things he normally wouldn't even consider, such as the river of death that swirled around Be'Zi and the ominous tower that probably held one of the Splinters of Oblivion.

The array was beeping ominously after just a few minutes, but Zac was undeterred. He felt like he was one with the skill fractal, and he could feel the limits it could tolerate, like it was part of his own body. And he would need to push that limit over and over to reach the goal he was still conceptualizing as he was moving along.

Zac strayed further and further away from his envisioned path, grasping higher and higher. He felt how his soul was being rapidly drained, which was no surprise considering the number of adjustments and calculations he was doing on the fly. But he didn't care. Perfection couldn't be constrained by budget concerns, and he just crushed a couple of Soul Crystals as he kept going.

Eventually, the Skill Fractal was an unrecognizable clump of discordant concepts, a mess made up by thousands of barely interlocking parts. If nothing drastic changed before he ran out of Mental Energy, the skill would be completely ruined. The seeds of doubt grew increasingly loud, but Zac knew there was no turning back now.

He could only trust his instincts, doubling down on the madness as he pushed on with his mad plan. Soon enough, his vision started to blur. What once was clear was gradually becoming convoluted again. The skill fractal no longer looked the seed of perfection, but more of a testament to man's folly.

However, Zac knew that was just a mirage, and desperately squeezed out the last of the medicinal effect of the natural treasure as his mind provided the final motes of mental energy he had left. He was almost there.

The final rune was the only component missing, and as it was added, tens of thousands of runes suddenly snapped into place. There truly was greatness hidden in chaos, but Zac had no time to celebrate. He hurriedly extracted the Skill Fractal as he felt his consciousness slip, and he barely had time to reattach it to his pathways before he passed out, his mind utterly overdrawn.

Zac woke up with a splitting headache, but it was nothing compared to the pain of his body almost exploding from energy overload. He hurriedly activated [Void Zone] to stop any more energy from entering his body, after which he quickly started to refine the energy that filled every inch of his body.

Soon enough a massive cloud of expelled energy had formed above his head. This time he had only been out of it for twenty hours, which was a relief considering he didn't have the Void Beast Organ to perpetually power [Void Zone] this time around. Ten minutes later the situation wasn't quite as deadly, allowing him to breathe out and check his status screen.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

120

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, Sovereign-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider, Runebinder, Runic Erudition

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 - Peak

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

8889 [Increase: 110%. Efficiency: 250%]

Dexterity

3910 [Increase: 80%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance

7383 [Increase: 101%. Efficiency: 250%]

Vitality

6311 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 238%]

Intelligence

1656 [Increase: 74%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom

3443 [Increase: 81%. Efficiency: 197%]

Luck

466 [Increase: 96%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

[D] 938 715

His attributes had taken a surprising leap since he allocated his free points into Dexterity and Wisdom a few weeks back, and it wasn't hard to find the source.

[Runic Erudition: Form a path-bound supreme-quality skill while still in E-grade. Reward: All stats +5%. Effect of Strength, Endurance, Wisdom +5%]

Zac looked at the title with marvel, both exalted by the boost it provided and what it represented. A supreme-quality skill? Zac didn't even know such a thing existed, but it was all he needed to see to know that his gambit had succeeded.

This was exactly what he needed. He was tired of being taken advantage of, tired of being used as a disposable chess piece in the machinations of the old monsters lurking outside the trial. He needed more strength, and this was a step in the right direction. Zac knew it wouldn't make a difference against terrifying beings like the Eveningtide Asura, but even an ant could create some waves that would have unexpected consequences.

He was tired of being a tool, a mere chess piece to be used and discarded by these old Monarchs who barely would spare him a glance. He felt his very soul buckle and rage at the restraints that kept being placed on him. It was time to strike back. Directly confronting someone like the Eveningtide Asura was obviously out of the question, but a plan was already starting to form in Zac's mind, a way to get what he wanted while also throwing a wrench in his and Uona's plans.

They would see who would have the last laugh.

Alvod took a deep breath as the memories of his soul sliver returned to his mind, and a sneer soon covered his face. Arcaz Black, that little brat was nowhere near as cowed as he wanted to let on. These youngsters all thought themselves so clever, that they were unique and infallible. He would soon learn the harshness of the multiverse, as so many had before him.

But there was still a lingering sense of unease in Alvod's heart as he went over the words of the young Draugr. Was he really related to two unknown Autarchs walking the boundless path? It sounded ludicrous, but Alvod knew that not even he would be able to instill a Draugr with affinity to life.

Someone had devised a heaven-defying method, and it was possible that it truly was someone the brat knew, rather than a fortuitous encounter. Not only that, but the brat had clearly recognized his true identity. Arcaz Black was more involved in the events Alvod had set in motion than he tried to let on.

However, Alvod eventually calmed down. The convergence of fate on the Twilight Harbor was too great, it was expected that some unexpected parties would make an appearance. If the Draugr was speaking the truth, he most likely was a vessel the two masters were nurturing, an experiment to travel that broken peak. That wouldn't interfere with Alvod's plans, and it might in fact help him.

Conversely, if the little bastard lied, then Alvod had contingencies for that as well. Thousands of people had thought they could pull one over on him over the eons, yet they had all turned into fertilizer for his Dao. He had planned this for so long, and no matter if it was the Havarok, the Imperials, or this Draugr, he would handle them all.

They would see who would have the last laugh.