

## The Fall 746

### Chapter 746: Ascent

[E] Pillar of Desolation - Proficiency: Early. Stuck and struggling. Inexorable desolation. Upgradeable.

Zac looked at the skill screen, endlessly relieved he didn't listen to the whispers of doubt in the back of his mind that told him to give up on his drug-induced ambition and instead try to salvage the skill. Its description didn't seem any different compared to any other of his skills, but he knew that it most likely was the most powerful one in his repertoire at the moment.

His best guess was that it was the kind of skill you'd get from an Arcane Class, which should add another layer of raw power output. As for the skill being 'pathbound', it probably meant the skill was tailor-made for his path, having completely broken free from the ill-fitting archetype of his previous Undying Bulwark-class.

Zac gave it a thought as he took out the second dumpling, but he sighed with regret when he opened the lid of the jade box where he stored it. A gust of dense herbal aroma wafted into his face, but his body was mostly indifferent to the presence of the treasure. Just as he expected, this dumpling was the sort of item you could only enjoy once. He wouldn't be able to use the second one for evolving [Vanguard of Undeath] or [Hatchetman's Spirit], it looked like.

Still, [Profane Seal] was the lynchpin of his Draugr class, and now that it was upgraded and improved, he felt a lot more confident even if he encountered the true elites of the trial. Even if he still was some distance away from defeating them, he was a lot more confident in escaping with his life intact. After all, while the details had become blurry in the wake of his epiphany, Zac was still certain that [Pillar of Desolation] remained a restraining skill even after the evolution.

He briefly considered upgrading [Vanguard of Undeath] even without the liquid clarity of the natural treasure, but he felt drained after eating the dumpling, like he had used a year's worth of inspiration in creating [Pillar of Desolation]. Any skill he created in his current state was bound to be unimpressive, if he managed to complete the upgrade at all.

Besides, while the dumpling might not be serviceable for another round, there were all kinds of opportunities out there. Both his classes were doing just fine without upgrading their final skills, and he would get another set of skills upon reaching level 125. Now that Zac knew that attaining these kinds of unique skills was possible, he might as well keep [Vanguard of Undeath] and [Hatchetman's Spirit] unevolved until he found some way to enter another bout of inspiration.

With that, Zac knew it was time to get going. Of course, that didn't mean he would leave a small fortune behind, and Zac turned into a whirlwind of unfettered greed as he ripped out one crystal after another from the walls. The shimmering light in the chamber grew dimmer and dimmer until even the broken crystals had been stowed away.

That left only two crystals inside the cave; the massive [Mind's Eye Agate], and the sanguine stone where [Verun's Bite] was still sealed.

Verun had actually finished its evolution months ago, but it had indicated to Zac that it wanted to stay inside the crystal. The aura of the [Mind's Eye Agate] apparently helped Verun strengthen its spirituality, though the effect was obviously not as pronounced as Zac's when using a Soul Strengthening method.

Still, the stronger the Tool Spirit, the easier the evolution to D-grade would become for Verun, so Zac had let it cultivate in peace while he focused on his own cultivation. But all good things had to come to an end.

"It's time to go buddy," Zac smiled as he put his palm against the smooth surface of the crystal.

There was no immediate response, but a roar echoed through the cave as cracks started to spread across the surface of the crystal. Suddenly, it cracked, and Zac snatched up the axe before it fell on the ground. However, doing so almost made him topple over, and he looked at the weapon with a mix of surprise and satisfaction.

Since having finished its evolution, its weight had increased almost ten times over, and it felt far more sturdy compared to before. That wasn't a problem for Zac, even if he hadn't expected it when grabbing it. If anything, it made the weapon easier to wield now that its weight better matched his massive increase in Strength.

That wasn't the only thing that had changed, and Zac's thumb traced the fourth rune that had been lit up. The fourth rune represented the fact that the Spirit Tool had reached late E-grade, just one step from the peak. The first rune was the one that let him release Verun and have it join him in battle, and it was what truly set it apart from most beastcrafted Spirit Tools.

This activation both cost a huge amount of blood and had a pretty long cooldown, so it could only be used sparingly. The second rune was far cheaper, and it had a pretty common effect; sharpness. It used some sort of sanguine power to empower the edge, providing it with a stronger penetrative force. It cost a decent chunk of blood, but Zac still often used it when he needed a bit extra lethality in his swings.

The third rune was both useful and useless, since he hadn't had cause to activate apart from trying it out. The third rune activated an odd ability that could best be described as molting, probably a result of feeding [Verun's Bite] dragon's blood. The outer layer of the axehead would become brittle and fall off as a new layer grew out to replace it. Zac initially had some difficulty figuring out what good that ability was, but he soon realized it was a type of empowered restoration.

[Verun's Bite] had the ability to sharpen and recover from damage like most Spirit Tools, but the process was pretty slow. Still, with the weapon being of such high quality, the small blemishes Zac accrued from battles were easily fixed, making the third ability a bit superfluous. However, Zac felt the ability would become handy sooner or later as he fought stronger and stronger enemies.

After all, the passive regeneration could take days, whereas the active ability took just a few seconds. As long as he could stall for a bit, he could even use the ability in the middle of a fight. It might even be able to allow Verun to survive where most Spirit Tools would break, which was an extremely precious insurance policy.

Now the axe had a fourth ability, and realizing what it did made Zac all the more cognizant of the importance of finding the right food for Verun. The fourth ability built further on the most fundamental aspect of the treasure bone – weight.

Activating the rune could almost instantly increase the weight to a level so great that even Zac barely could withstand it. The ability suited Zac's combat style very well, and it meshed perfectly with his Fragment of the Axe. The Fragment was fused from the Seeds of Heaviness and Sharpness, matching two of the axe's abilities perfectly.

Zac knew he had lucked out a bit though, and he knew that he would have to be a bit more discerning going forward. It wasn't just a matter of getting a bad ability by feeding it the wrong thing, but he also risked turning the weapon less compatible with his path. That was doubly important when he would evolve the weapon to D-grade. He would have to make sure it aligned with his path perfectly by that point, though Zac still didn't know how he'd accomplish that.

Only the agate was left behind after having extracted [Verun's Bite], and the gemstone had already dimmed somewhat now that there weren't any Supreme Twilight Crystals to siphon energy from. Zac quickly went to work, digging into the ground around the gem, forming a two-meter pedestal to hold the gemstone in place.

The [Mind's Eye Agate] entered his Spatial Ring to join the Twilight Crystals, and Zac turned to an intangible wraith after taking a look around. A few seconds later he appeared in the main tunnels of the crystal mine, and he swept forward, occasionally ripping a crystal from the walls. Normally, he would have taken every single crystal, leaving just a mottled wall behind.

Unfortunately, he wasn't in any position to do so at the moment. Now that he was on the move, crushing crystals to alleviate the ambient energy wasn't nearly as effective. Even he couldn't stomach the cost of crushing one every second as he rushed through the tunnels, and there was no point in leaving gusts of pure energy in his wake.

He needed to cover as much distance as possible while he had the energy to run [Void Zone], which meant he only extracted the most valuable crystals and herbs, leaving the rest behind.

Zac made steady progress through the tunnels, and the occasional beast that was unlucky enough to find itself in his way was quickly disposed of as Zac used them as target practice to get used to the new weight of his weapon. He didn't really ascend toward the surface though, but he rather worked his way in the direction of what should be the waters of the Twilight Chasm.

Until now he had wanted to move as far into the bedrock as possible to avoid discovery from either snake or trial-takers. Now that it was time to get out of here, it would be far quicker to simply climb up the wall with the help of his chains. He certainly couldn't move as quickly while defying the constant tug of the currents, but he also wouldn't waste hours backtracking back and forth in the hard-to-traverse cave system.

It took him the better part of a day to reach his destination, mostly because he finally had to stop and run his Soul Strengthening Manual to expel Twilight Energy, but he eventually reached a section that was completely submerged in water. From there it just took another two hours until he found his way out of the massive network of cracks and tunnels that had been his sanctuary the past eight months.

First, he spent another ten hours restoring his Void Energy, after which he made his move. The calm and somewhat brackish waters of the cave system were soon replaced by the torrential currents of the chasm. He looked back and forth, but neither the monstrous snake nor any other obvious threat was anywhere in sight.

Two chains dug into the wall as the other two crawled upward along the sheer mountain wall. They extended for over two hundred meters before they slammed into the stone while oozing black tar. It was [Blighted Cut] that empowered them with a much greater penetrative force, and the stone bubbled as it melted to let the chains dig deeper.

Zac dragged himself further and further up, but he froze in fear after just twenty minutes as he spotted something enormous looming above. He felt his hands shake in fear of being discovered, but he eventually calmed down when he realized he wasn't really dealing with the gargantuan pet of the Eveningtide Asura.

He still couldn't make out what it was though, but after climbing for another ten minutes did he finally figure it out. It was a mountain, if you could call it that. It might be more accurate to call it a mountain-sized rock hovering in the chasm, seemingly unaffected by the constant pull from the depths of the chasm. Zac could only see its bottom, but it was just as large as the mountains he had climbed before.

Was this the true nature of the peaks of the Twilight Chasm?

Rather than actual mountains connected to the ground, perhaps the peaks that people searched at the top of the chasm were nothing more than oversized rocks. The same possibly went for the peaks he had traversed further down in the depths. In fact, who knew how many layers of mountains were stacked like this in the endless depths of this place.

A couple of minutes later a few more peaks came into view, silently hovering in place like the first one. Zac looked at them thoughtfully, remembering the purpose of the peaks below. Were these mountains part of some array as well, perhaps? An obstinate part in the back of Zac's mind wanted him to swim over and cause some damage if that was the case, to show the Eveningtide Asura that he was not so easily pushed around.

However, the vast majority of Zac held onto his sanity, knowing there was a time and place for everything. He did want to throw a wrench in the works of the Eveningtide Asura, but that was ultimately more about self-perseverance than spite. Something massive was going down on the outside, and the events inside the trial could clearly affect the outcome judging by how the various factions were going all out sending their elites into the Twilight Ocean.

The more of Alvod's preparations Zac undid, the less time the Eveningtide Asura would have to spare on a junior who slighted him. He would be knee-deep in whatever the B-grade factions had prepared. However, Zac couldn't overdo it. If he caused too much trouble and his actions were exposed, then Alvod might very well hunt him down just out of spite.

He rather needed to figure out which side everyone was on, and subtly assist the Eveningtide Asura's enemies.

So he slowly looked away from the mountains, instead focusing on covering as much ground as possible. But as he climbed, he became more and more shocked just how deep this place was. Four days passed,

and he actually found himself passing two layers of mountain ranges. But finally, Zac saw an end to his climb as the oppressive darkness started to give way to weak golden light.

Four hours later Zac found his surroundings properly illuminated, and he finally found himself able to cope with the environment without relying on his Soul Strengthening Array. As expected, he had been climbing the actual wall of the chasm all this while, and if he kept going for another hour, he would reach the crest.

However, Zac didn't climb the final stretch to the edge. Instead, he pushed out from the wall, shooting toward the closest mountain in the distance. He was eager to leave this ominous place, but there was one thing he wanted to do first. With things having reached this point, Zac had decided to see if he could harvest the odd egg.

Zac had actually been able to sense his brand for a while now, and the mark had grown a lot stronger since he planted it nine months ago. His original plan had been to go fetch the two remnants and then return for the egg, but the events in the depths of the chasm had probably ruined those plans.

He truthfully doubted he would be able to continue exploring the Twilight Ocean after forming the Glimpse of Chaos, so this might be the last chance to recover it. He could still somehow sense that the mark hadn't really "matured", but he was out of options.

It thankfully looked like the currents had dragged him almost straight down after Uona knocked him unconscious. It wasn't too far a distance he needed to travel to get back to the mountain peak that housed the hidden valley. There was a small chance Uona was waiting for him over there, but he doubted it considering her points had been steadily climbing since five months ago. She was most likely off hunting cultivators elsewhere.

Zac reached the very same spot where the hidden tunnel was located a few days later, and there were thankfully no signs of anyone lying in wait. Unfortunately, there was also no clear way for him to get inside without the egg acting as a key to open the path. He spent the next few days swimming back and forth, trying everything from brute force to dumb luck to break into the valley.

But no matter what he tried, the area was completely sealed off, the rock shockingly resistant to his efforts to dig into it. Eventually, he returned to the location of the tunnel to see if there was anything he had missed.

The mark felt like a taunting beacon, reminding him of the fact that the thing he desperately wanted was just out of reach. The feelings of impotence once more returned, and Zac growled in annoyance as two streams of Dao entered his shoulders. Soon enough, a small mark appeared, and he pushed it into the stone as he kept picturing the tunnel opening up.

Using his ace at this juncture was a risk, but Zac refused to give up now that he had come back to this place. The mountain wall shuddered in reluctance, but Zac felt a transformation starting to take place. It was much slower compared to before, but it felt like the stone was starting to become intangible somehow.

However, just as Zac thought he had succeeded, the wall started to revert back into stone as a pulse emerged the heart of the mountain. Zac stared at the wall with aggravation upon realizing he had failed, but he didn't even have time to consider backup plans before the wall shuddered once more.

At the same time, he felt the brand on the other side of the wall go from a beacon into a raging fire, and the connection between himself and the mark grew exponentially stronger. Zac gaped in shock as the tunnel once more appeared, this time covered in the intricate runes that had started to cover the valley just as he left the last time.

However, there was an indiscernible difference this time. While the runes had only held the prime truths of Twilight before, they were now speckled with a hint of something more, something that belonged to Zac. The energy of Creation. His gaze soon turned toward the direction of the egg, but the hallway was completely covered in a thick haze seemingly wrought out of the Dao itself.

It moved like it was alive, and small glimmering specks within the dust made the churning shroud look like a star-speckled nebula. Looking at the swirling clouds made his drained soul once more fill with inspiration, and he almost entered a state of epiphany then and there.

However, a wave of panic broke his trance as the walls started to shudder ominously. The runes flickered, seemingly in a struggle against themselves. The tunnel that shouldn't have opened had been forced open, but it clearly wouldn't last long. Zac threw caution in the wind as he shot forward, not caring about what kind of dangers might lurk within.

Just the clouds that had escaped the valley were this marvelous, how could he let go of the opportunity that waited within?