

The Fall 747

Chapter 747: Dissenting Views

Zac felt like he was tearing through the veil of the heavens as he pushed through the haze, embraced by life and death as they had joined each other into a nebulous soup. Of course, Zac believed something even greater was brewing in the depths of the valley, and [Love's Bond] was already stirring in anticipation. The chains gingerly stroked the runes in the tunnel, and the Dao clouds shuddered in turn as the two resonated.

Each physical step also felt like a metaphorical step down his path, and Zac's original purpose of entering this place was starting to become muddled as he approached the mouth of the tunnel. A small part of his reason for coming here was to foil whatever designs Va Tapek had for this realm, but it seemed so insignificant now. The same was true for the Eveningtide Asura. What were they in front of the Grand Dao?

The murmurs of the most profound truths of the Twilight Ocean whispered into Zac's ear as he approached the light, but even he hadn't expected what waited for him at the other side. What was this?

It felt like he had somehow been transported to the depths of the cosmos, to the origin of the universe where all matter and truth was reduced to a primordial farrago. Base concepts that tethered him to the mundane realities of existence held no sway in the storm he found himself in, and he felt himself becoming a stain that blemished a perfect tapestry.

The tunnel was gone, the Twilight Ocean and the surface were gone. All that remained was the Dao and the runes that spun all around him in a dance that codified reality. Life wasn't life. Death wasn't death. Truth was malleable, and it changed as the runes swirled around him, forming a river that was everchanging, yet always the same.

Of course, there was also the throne. Standing in the middle of the chaos was a point of order, and on its pedestal, the seed was still beating, each thump deepening the waters of the river around him. The egg was barely recognizable any longer, as it had somehow transformed from something physical into a concept.

Millions upon millions of runes formed a tapestry that while no larger than an ostrich egg, contained a whole universe. It had drawn upon the essence of the Twilight Ocean and distilled it into something greater, something higher. Was this true Dao? Looking at his own avatars, Zac felt like a caveman producing a fledgling fire while looking up at the stars, not able to grasp the vast chasm between the two.

It terrified Zac, and it enthralled him.

Thump.

Zac was now closer, standing at the foot of majesty, his soul weeping with inadequacy. Had he walked the distance, or was he simply moved here because this was his destined terminus? He felt his sanity fraying, but there was a small core that tethered him to the mortal world, and that frayed lifeline was screaming at him to take that thing and get out.

Thump.

He stood on the altar, his skin slowly transforming to conform to the higher truth of this valley. It was slowly gaining a greenish tint, and indistinct runes flickered before once more disappearing. They were of no script Zac could recognize, but they roared like crashing waves of Twilight. This was not a matter of being overrun by a deluge of sludge, it was losing one's fundamental essence in front of a deeper gospel.

The fundamental core of Zac's being was being supplanted, but he barely registered it as his gaze was locked on something marvelous. The egg was not the only thing on the altar. There was something else, something perhaps even more precious than the insight locked in the avatar of Twilight itself.

It was a bead of distilled light hovering right above the egg, but its true appearance was blocked out by four layers of shockingly complex runes. Each beat of the egg released a crashing tsunami of Twilight, but only the most perfected pieces of the tapestry were allowed to enter the arrays enclosing the light.

Zac didn't know why, but it felt like that thing was unsullied by nature, and arrays were the only thing protecting it from being indelibly stained. However, the sanctuary the arrays were providing was slowly being corroded by design, and he knew that this pure light would eventually be swallowed by the river that coursed through this valley. The river of Twilight.

His mind was a chaotic struggle, ripped between the desire to protect and the desire to devour. His companion didn't have the same compunctions, and four chains shot forward, targeting the gestating truth of the ocean. A small mark of endless possibility cried in his mind in desire to fulfill its natal edict, to be consumed and in that way find new life.

But no matter what the Spirit Tool tried, it was unable to dislodge the egg. If anything, it had become a cemented part of the area. It had become the core of this universe, an eternal fixture that couldn't simply be moved or taken away. Every moment Zac felt himself eroding, and he knew something had to change.

Suddenly, a mad idea took form as Zac looked down at the glowing avatar of Twilight. In its current state, it was unapproachable, an extension of the ocean itself. Taking it was as impossible as stealing the whole Mystic Realm.

But what if it was no longer an avatar of Twilight, but an avatar of his own? The more he thought about it, the more it started to make sense. And as his idea sprouted, nurtured by greed and his path, so did the swirling clouds around him lose their luster, the runes no longer mesmerizing in their profundity.

"It's wrong," Zac muttered, his abyssal eyes wide with mania as his silver hair danced in the wind. "It's all wrong. Life is Life. Death is Death. Forever separate, always in conflict."

Two storms of Dao and ancient madness surged out from his mind and into his shoulders. It was Life and Death, unsullied and eternal. Twilight was just a half-measure, a mockery of Chaos. It was a poison, and he was the cure.

Conviction had pushed him forward, but Zac was all-too-aware of the gravity of his action, of the risks. This was not the time or place to form the Glimpse of Chaos. He didn't have two intact remnants to provide the fuel for the fusion. What was left was his soul and his life-force, both of which would probably be drained beyond a breaking point to conjure that glimpse.

Zac desperately pushed the two forces apart before they had a chance to fuse in his chest, even if doing so felt like breaking his soul apart. He pushed and pushed, and two storms surged through his arms, pouring out into the radiant egg.

A clap of thunder shook the cosmos, and Zac was thrown dozens of meters away, his body racked with pain. The nebulous clouds churned and cried as he pushed through them in his desire to return, ignoring the mounting feeling of wrongness of the runes around him. The intricate patterns inside the seed of Twilight shuddered and fluctuated wildly, its millions of small runes slowly warping into something new.

And as the egg changed, so did the universe.

A cascading ripple spread through the valley, with the delicate system of Twilight unraveling as it was supplanted by something that resonated with Zac's soul. However, he immediately spotted a problem. While the original Tapestry around him had felt like a cop-out, a defeat in the face of the true peaks of the Grand Dao, it was complete, a self-sufficient system existing in harmony with itself and the universe.

Meanwhile, the chaotic storm he had introduced into the system was just that; a storm.

It was raw power that might hold the potential for a peak creation. But for now, it was incomplete, insignificant insights nibbling at the edges of the truth. Zac didn't exactly know what this place was designed to accomplish, but he knew that his own Dao was not up to the task. It would sooner or later break apart, even when powered by the distilled essence of the remnants.

Before that happened, he needed to make his move.

"Take it," Zac said with grit teeth, and the chains once more stormed the egg with rapid ferocity, clawing at it with desperate hunger.

But yet, it was hopeless. It was still fixed in place, the core of this microcosm of Dao. Zac sensed a wave of disappointment, followed by the coffin lid slightly opening to start absorbing the dense clouds of Dao in the valley. It looked like Alea had given up, opting to make the best of a bad situation.

Zac shook his head with a sigh, and thoughts of escape started to take hold. However, he suddenly spotted something changing. The arrays protecting that pure beam of light were fast crackling, suddenly looking like brittle glass as they were imbued with the distilled inspiration wrought from Zac's path. They clearly weren't designed or able to hold the energy the egg was now releasing.

Part of him was elated, but part of him was horrified. He could feel it. When the arrays broke apart, that light would be gone forever, like a star being extinguished. It would become sullied by the mundane, and the world would be a little bit worse by it. He couldn't sit by and watch it unfold, but what could he do?

Another crack echoed out, and Zac lurched forward and swallowed the light before it was too late.

It must have looked like Zac swallowed a sun, but there was no searing pain spreading through his body. If anything, his body was suddenly wrapped in a soothing embrace, no longer beset by the overpowering Daos in the valley. His body had become the Heavens itself, a universe unto its own.

Some of the light illuminated his soul, and he felt his three Dao Avatars blazed into life, each one of them radiating an unprecedented verve. He wasn't in a state of inspiration, he was the Dao itself. But

the blinding radiance of supremacy was slowly wearing off, and perfection was slipping through his fingers.

That piece of heaven he had swallowed was not so easily absorbed, in a way he had never encountered before. This was not like when swallowing the Cosmic Water or a treasure beyond his grade. He didn't feel like exploding at all. Rather, he felt like a leaking sieve, where his body simply couldn't hold that miraculous light.

The infinitely pure understanding was gradually leaving him, instantly decomposing into lower Dao the moment it touched the environment. Try as he might, Zac found absolutely no way to stem the tides. Zac sighed with despondency, but his eyes soon regained a sense of purpose. Why lament over the loss of borrowed glory when he should make the most of this precious moment in time?

While incomplete, he had branded the egg with his Dao, and it had, in turn, distilled it into something greater, something that was now on full display in the valley. The runes that once held the tapestry of Twilight now held a ratified version of his path. Zac smiled as he suddenly disappeared from the pedestal.

Thump.

[Verun's Bite] ripped through the glittering veils shrouding the valley, its primordial roars echoing the lust for power. Each swing left golden arcs behind as motes of stardust stuck to the bone edge. The arcs seemed like the leaves of the bodhi, not one exactly the same as the others.

It was alive; everchanging and evolving, eternally struggling against death. It was the predator stalking its prey, it was the plant mutating to endure the harshening summers. It was everything, constantly adapting. It might be struck down, but it would never give in. It would rise up again to defy fate, stronger, evolved. And this dance would continue until the end of time.

Thump.

The Dao clouds churned as they were ripped apart by four chains dancing to the tune of inevitability, streaks of darkness forming an inescapable cage. They sealed everything they encircled, like a spider trapping its prey. It was patient, since death would always win in the end. They were the grinding gears of time, the inexorability of fate.

Clouds of Dao kept being swallowed, as this path was always taking, and never giving.

Thump.

He was conflict, ever-changing, never-ending.

He was a storm that raged through the valley, and the cosmos itself answered his call. His body shone with radiant luster as the impossibly pure Dao left his body. However, while he couldn't contain it, it had still been marked by his path. And as it changed, so did the valley. The runes that danced all around him were no longer a river. They had split into two armies that were locked in an epic struggle.

The murky green had turned into shimmering gold and oppressive black, life and death.

This was the truth of Twilight. Such a fragile harmony was bound to be broken as the convoluted ultimately returned to the primal. Oblivion is the inevitable end of Creation, just as Creation invariably

will follow Oblivion. Each clash would birth something new, just like each swing of his axe could change his fate.

A thousand scenes flashed through his mind as Zac kept swinging his weapon, memories that had led him down the path he now stood on. Try to avoid it as he might, conflict was inexorable. To accomplish anything in this universe, he would have to keep fighting. If he wanted to change the fate he had been dealt, he would have to keep struggling.

Zac felt his momentum increasing, and the gently swirling clouds of stardust were swept up in the hurricane of his path. Raging wind blasted the black and golden runes, forcing them into even greater clashes. The world shook and thundered, but Zac kept swinging, feeling he was getting closer and closer... to something.

His movements were mirrored by the avatar in his mind. However, it no longer sat on top of his Soul Core but rather danced on top of the waters of the two oceans. The fading radiance of the bead of light still illuminated its body, and torrential amounts of the Dao Clouds entered his avatar form.

A swing from the avatar illuminated the deathly ocean with streaks of golden light, and a swipe subdued the golden ocean with the threat of death. With every breath, Zac's movement grew more precise, and a dense aura spread out from his body. And as his aura spread, the struggling runes subtly changed.

One moment they were life and death locked in their eternal struggle, the next moment weapons clashing in a pitched war. Zac felt his momentum reaching a precipice, and his Dao Field suddenly congealed. First, it became a condensed ball of his insight hovering above his head, but it soon took a more distinct shape.

It was two axes reaching over twenty meters into the air, one glimmering in gold and the other shrouded in darkness. They both emitted an aura of supremacy, neither willing to give in. Their edges were locked against each other, and the pressure they exerted impacted reality itself. The surroundings twisted and cried from their mere presence, their conflict being imprinted into space itself.

Suddenly, crashing thunder intruded on the scene, and Zac's abyssal eyes widened as the secluded valley of life and death had been encroached upon by churning clouds crackling with purple lightning. A boundless fury subdued the clouds of swirling Dao beneath, and the shimmering runes fast lost their luster. Not even the egg dared to keep beating, now once more a simple stone.

Soon enough, only Zac and the two axes remained, the rest shrouded by the descending clouds. The true Heavens had descended, unwilling to share the truths of the Dao.

This was the price of the Boundless Path, but Zac was undeterred. He raised his axe, and the massive projection shrunk before entering [Verun's Bite], prompting it to give off a hair-raising aura. Meanwhile, the avatar in his soul returned to its position on top of the Soul Core, its presence rapidly rising.

The Heavens were clearly enraged by Zac's actions, and he was suddenly drowned in purple light as it gathered its punishment. A bolt of condensed wrath descended, and Zac swung his axe in an upward arc, unleashing a wave of terrifying destruction as a smile spread across his face. The Heavens wanted a conflict, but that would only solidify his Dao.

However, the smile turned crooked as the two forces clashed, followed by his outburst of Dao being instantly crushed. The bolt continued completely undiscouraged, slammed into Zac like the fist of an angry god, the force so tremendous that cracks spread across the now-exposed valley. Another bolt soon followed as thunder crashed, and Zac felt his vision blurring as he desperately tried to withstand the electrified fury.

Suddenly, he lost his footing as a massive section of the valley simply crumbled, unable to withstand the presence of the Lightning Tribulation. He felt a surge of ocean water come crashing toward him, but he barely had time for a final thought as a third bolt knocked him unconscious.

Uh oh.