

The Fall 781

Chapter 781: Linked

Pain far beyond what he had endured during the fight spread through every part of Zac's body. He feared that the Duplicity Core had somehow been damaged during the battle without him noticing, resulting in a flawed transformation process. Thankfully, Zac quickly realized that wasn't what was happening.

The issue seemed to be coming from his recently completed [Quantum Gate]. He didn't know exactly what it was doing, but he figured that it shouldn't be harmful. However, the torrential amounts of Twilight Energy that surged into his body was a problem, and he quickly took out a couple of Supreme Nexus Crystals and crushed them.

The Twilight Energy around him was quickly being replaced Cosmic Energy, but the neutral energy barely had time to appear before it was dragged into Zac's body as well. He was like a voracious vortex, but it wasn't actually the hidden node itself that was the source of the pull. Every single part of his body greedily sucked in energy, even though his Human form shouldn't be energy-starved at all.

He started to regret swapping races as the pain threatened to drive him mad, but he didn't have much of a choice. He was running dangerously low on Miasma, and his pathways were an absolute mess. Meanwhile, his Arcas Black persona had become public enemy number one, and who knew if this place would blow up early.

After all, the one-hour deadline was simply his estimate based on the chaotic decay, but there was no guarantee that Alvod or someone on the outside wouldn't make their move before that. Someone might strike early to seize an advantage, resulting in everyone getting thrown out early.

But now, Zac started to wonder if he would even survive the transformation as he was beset by pain that far surpassed even that of the Bone-Forging Dust. Even if whatever [Quantum Gate] wanted to do was beneficial, his body wasn't really in a state to undergo any large transformations at the moment.

The process thankfully only lasted for a couple of minutes, but that short moment had felt like an eternity. Zac took a shuddering breath as he got back to a sitting position, but he froze and looked around with wonder. A few seconds later, he quickly turned his gaze inward to inspect his body.

It only took a cursory scan to figure out what was going on, and Zac breathed out in relief. Seeing the changes had pretty much confirmed that the node was implanted by his mother and her clan, meant to work in tandem with the Duplicity Core. And luckily, its function definitely wasn't related to the Dao of Technology.

He was elated to see that his pathways had grown thicker and sturdier compared to before. Not only that, but he felt his whole body was tougher, and touching his skin confirmed that it had further strengthened the extra subcutaneous layer. He had already gained some of its benefits upon reaching D-grade race, but now it had been pushed to the same level as his undead side, along with his energy reserves.

Furthermore, the first thing he had noticed when the process was complete was that his eyesight had improved, now naturally able to spot lifeforce just like his Draugr-vision did. Seeing the result, Zac had a

pretty good idea what his mother's clan had been planning for him. He didn't want to confirm it right now, but he was somewhat certain that his poison resistance in his human form had shot through the roof as well.

The [Quantum Gate] was designed to carry over benefits. His main form, the human side, was an empty receptacle, while the other side of the Duplicity core was meant to feed things into it. Thus, he had now gained all the unique benefits of his Draugr race on his human side as well.

From the looks of it, the benefits only seemed to be those that were related to race. He didn't have any Miasma to control, and the skills of his other Class were still out of his reach. A glance at his status screen confirmed that he hadn't gained any attribute points either. Furthermore, it looked like the gate was a one-way street, since he hadn't noticed any improvements at all in his Draugr form after the Hidden Node had been completed.

Perhaps, Leandra and the Kayar-Elu had meant for his other race to be machine-related, allowing them to sneak the Dao of Technology into his human body through the [Quantum Gate]. Or perhaps they had planned to infuse some weird chimera bloodline on the other side, providing various unique benefits to a human cultivator.

As to why they didn't simply make him some more powerful race, Zac wasn't certain. But there was generally some balance in the universe. Humans didn't have any advantages, but they didn't really have any disadvantages either. Meanwhile, many beings with unique abilities had harsh downsides to match.

Of course, the most likely reason was that the Kayar-Elu tried to pull one over on the System with the so-called Root Compact. Making the impossible possible.

Zac couldn't help but have his imagination run wild with the possibilities, and he felt some mixed emotions when remembering how Leandra had felt disappointment when talking about his Draugr side, like it was a waste of their hard work. However, Zac quickly threw those useless thoughts aside, knowing that things had turned out pretty good all things considered.

As far as races went, Draugr were pretty close to the top, barring those unique and rare existences. The benefits he would get from his undead side, provided his speculation was correct, were bound to surpass what he would get from most races. It also made him even more determined to try and excavate some racial Hidden Nodes for his Draugr bloodline before breaking through to D-grade.

Besides, his undead side was what had made him walk down his current path, and possibly what had made the System steer him toward the remnants in the first place. Learning about the Primordial Era and the fall of Chaos had not dampened his willingness to walk down his current path at all.

If anything, it had strengthened his resolve. From the sounds of it, the main drawback of cultivating a broken peak was that it put greater demands on your affinity to that Dao, apart from the System not shielding you from the tribulations, but Zac circumvented the issue of affinities altogether.

He wasn't too worried about the Tribulation Lightning either. Most missives talked about them with extreme dread, but he hadn't felt that way at all when getting zapped. They had hurt pretty bad, but he hadn't felt like his soul was about to be extinguished as some missives warned. If anything, the lightning almost felt beneficial to him.

Meanwhile, it sounded like cultivating within the purview of the System's Dao had its problems as well. There were some unknown drawbacks to cultivating the incorporated Daos according to Qi'Sar, though they most likely only became apparent at the higher stages. Otherwise, he would have heard about it already.

As for the history of the Multiverse, while interesting, Zac didn't really put it to heart. The fact that the universe was eternal and cyclical was pretty shocking, but it wasn't like those theories weren't floating about before the integration as well. That before the Big Bang, there had been previous universes.

It didn't impact Zac's life in the slightest, especially considering Qi'Sar said the current era was still in its infancy. There were possibly trillions of years before the people of the Multiverse would have to worry about the next cataclysm.

The most interesting part was the mention of Eternal Heritages, particularly those from the Primordial Era. Being able to visit such a place would be a huge opportunity, especially for someone like him who aimed for the Daos of Oblivion and Creation. Problem was, those places seemed to be monopolized by the peak factions in the Multiverse, which wasn't a surprise, really.

The Frontier didn't even seem to possess Ancient Realms, let alone Immemorial Realms like the one his mother was taking Kenzie to. Worrying about these Eternal Heritages was a waste of time. But simply knowing of their existence was valuable, since you never knew what you would encounter in the future.

Having confirmed the situation with the node, Zac went over his body a few more times to get a sense of how much power he could exert. The result was decent but not great. Even if his pathways were fine in his Human form, his nodes were shared between the races. They were still damaged, making it dangerous to overextend himself. The damage wrought from the remnants remained as well, and Zac could feel the hidden cracks in his foundation.

He would definitely have to avoid any more battles if possible, especially with elites who would push him. Just to be safe, he altered his appearance to that of a middle-aged man. At first, he had been worried that his true appearance would have been changed by his large expenditure of life force, but losing a few centuries at D-grade race thankfully wasn't enough for something like that to happen.

Zac also turned his black with a greenish tint, just like how some human natives looked after cultivating among Treants on the platforms that were covered with life-and-nature-attuned arrays. Having confirmed with a mirror, Zac also hadn't gained the pallid skin or abyssal eyes of his Draugr side, even though he had received the benefits they brought.

Hopefully, that would allow him to disguise himself as a local elite if encountering anyone, especially with his Fragment of the Bodhi. He did hold off on activating the array around his Specialty Core though, in case something unexpected would crop up. He would switch that thing on just before the realm collapsed.

Having prepared everything that he could, he walked into the corridor behind the open trapdoor, wielding a random axe he had looted during the hunt. He was relieved to see he could turn [Love's Bond] into its amulet form without issue as well since the big coffin on his back was pretty hard to hide. This way, he should be completely indistinguishable.

The hidden tunnel was simple and unadorned, but it seemed to be protected by some sort of shielding array. Zac couldn't sense anything from the outside at all, even if he only walked a couple of meters beneath the surface. Soon enough the stone around him changed, and he realized that he was passing through the inner wall.

The pathway was only so long, and after a few minutes, he reached the end; a solid stone wall. The Realm Spirit had disappeared before explaining the next step, but Zac looked around thoughtfully, pushing and pulling on anything. Suddenly, one of the stones lit up with a small array, prompting the wall to slide open.

Zac walked through, surprised and slightly alarmed to find himself in a clean and well-lit room lined with a couple of sparsely-stocked wooden shelves, rather than the dusty ruins he had come to know in the City of Ancients. He breathed out in relief upon realizing there was no one around, and the cleanliness was thanks to the arrays on the walls still working.

"There is a crystal on the second shelf. It contains the path you need to take," Qi'Sar's voice echoed out in the room, giving Zac a start.

"Could've just led the way," Zac muttered as he walked over.

"I couldn't split my attention and keep that projection going. I am being attacked from multiple directions, and I had to shrink my consciousness from the whole realm to just this building to endure a bit longer," the Realm Spirit sighed.

"Alright, sorry," Zac coughed as he walked over to the shelf.

Just like the Realm Spirit said, Zac found a small information crystal was hidden underneath a cloth. Inside it was a map of the cellar, giving Zac the directions to the hidden treasure room. From the looks of it, he would only need to travel around five minutes through the corridors at a decent pace to make it there, giving him some wiggle-room.

So he didn't immediately leave the room but rather gave the small storage space a second look. The shelves were mostly empty, but there were a couple of urns that looked a lot like the vats that Ogras used to age his wine. Anything left to age had probably spoiled by now, even with spiritual energy increasing the shelf-life many times over.

But that didn't stop him from taking them away.

Zac wasn't done there, and he gripped one of the wooden shelves, exerting some pressure on the material. His eyes lit up as the shelf only groaned a bit in response to his strength, proving it was most likely made from D-grade materials like stones outside. It wasn't inscribed either, meaning it could perhaps be reforged into proper D-grade equipment.

Leaving behind such good materials would be a huge waste, so the shelf joined the vats in his Spatial Ring.

"What are you doing?" an exasperated voice echoed out after a moment. "I am straining myself to us time over here."

"I thought you were busy," Zac said as he stowed away another shelf. "This is ancient D-grade wood. It's worth a pretty penny."

"You're heading toward a treasury as the realm is collapsing around you, yet you're shopping for furniture," Qi'Sar sighed. "Besides, wood is a living crafting material, like Spiritual Herbs. It is too old by now, and it has lost its spirituality. It would be one thing if the shelves were made out of refined metals or stone, but this..."

"I hear you," Zac nodded as he put the last two shelves into his spatial ring as well.

He considered ripping out the illuminating crystals from their sockets as well, but they didn't seem like they were worth anything. He finally left the room, following the map. Outside was a spacious but empty corridor, and multiple doors were lining it. He flashed over to the closest one, and it opened without any sound, except a groan from the Realm Spirit.

The room on the other side was far larger compared to where he came from, but Zac quickly closed the door and moved on. Inside, there had been a few massive basins with large but exhausted crystals hanging in the ceiling. It looked like the room had been made to cultivate some water-based treasures, but the arrays had long failed and the water had dried up.

Zac flashed from one room after another on the way to the treasury, sweeping up everything in his path that even looked a little bit valuable. The spurring from the Realm Spirit grew more urgent by the minute, but Zac wouldn't just leave money on the ground when visiting a former Autarch's castle, even if time was limited.

A sudden shockwave from above shook the castle and made him stop in his tracks for a moment, but he quickly started moving again. He had first worried it was the Mystic Realm finally starting to collapse, but it rather seemed to have been the result of a clash between cultivators above him. It looked like the Radiant Temple and Havarok Empire had finally encountered each other.

Still, the scare filled him with enough urgency to just perform cursory glances into any room he passed, and he only took things that still emitted some spirituality. Still, he managed to fill his Spatial Ring with valuable metals, stones, and all kinds of tools. The rooms in the cellar all seemed to be geared toward crafting, either nurturing materials or refining them.

However, they were clearly not the 'top rooms' that the master of the castle himself would use, but rather for the live-in craftsmen of the manor who created items meant for the day-to-day operations of this vast compound. The top-tier rooms were probably upstairs, which was why the treasury was hidden down here. And soon enough, he reached the nondescript wall that held the entrance to the treasury.

Zac's heart drummed with excitement as he followed the instructions in the crystal. A hidden chamber slid up soon enough, prompting an immensely condensed wave of Twilight Energy to waft over him. It was even beyond what he had been forced to endure in the bottom of the Chasm, and he hurriedly activated [Void Zone] to not get overrun.

The terrifying amount of energy only served to fan Zac's excitement, considering that it probably meant the room was filled with treasure. The ambient energy was so dense that it had turned into a thick haze, but it was dispersing now that the door had opened. Zac unhesitantly pushed inside, and his eyes kept growing wider as more and more of the treasury was exposed.

He had struck it rich.