

The Fall 783

Chapter 783: One Shot at Eternity

Alvod looked at the array of items in front of him as he sat in the center of the Ascension Array, his heart beating with a mix of trepidation and anticipation. Four hundred thousand years of preparation, all for this moment. He would either defend his Dao and begin the next step of his journey, or he would turn to dust, as so many had before him.

His gaze turned to the chaotic scars that covered the tapestry, and he shook his head with a wry smile. Things had turned out alright, but that young Draugr was a troublemaker of unprecedented proportions. To think that he had managed to form a shadow of that elusive Dao with the help of those two cursed objects. Even more surprising, he was still alive and kicking.

It was no wonder the brat had such confidence in his path. Alvod had always thought it a fool's errand. But who knew, he might just be able to keep climbing a while longer. Of course, seeing that fragmented Dao didn't shake his Dao Heart at all. That little animal had his path, and he had his own.

The descent of the System and the hastened collapse of the realm was unexpected, but it didn't change things overly much. He had lost a year of preparations, but so had those on the outside. Besides, his whole road of cultivation had been bumpy, so why should his ascent be any different?

Thankfully, the two intrusive whispers in the back of his mind had been quieted just before the System descended, which improved his odds of success by at least five percent. Most likely, it was the Draugr who, either wittingly or unwittingly, destroyed the preparations of his fellow imperials while hunting the remnant that Alvod had set loose.

Alvod had figured that one of the two being destroyed by the hand of Arcaz Black would be a good outcome, but he had underestimated the control the Draugr held over Creation and Oblivion. It appeared the masters Arcaz Black mentioned were real, as they must have provided him with something to curtail the madness of the ancient remnants, at least until they could be harvested.

It was time.

Alvod closed his eyes and focused while the array lit up around him, and his Dharma Treasure emerged from his glabella a moment later. The small wooden rowboat rose above his head, forming an illusory tidal wave beneath itself. It crashed against the daybreak, an endless cycle of ebb and flow. It was the herald of the Evening Tide, the harbinger of his Dao.

Next, Alvod threw out the Wheels of the Six Paths, each one of them taking a position on the crumbling tapestry. He couldn't help but once more open his eyes and look at them with mixed emotions. Finding the first wheel of this ancient and heretical Buddhist treasure, the Wheel of Preta-Gati, on his homeworld had completely remolded his destiny.

It had allowed him to defy the heavens themselves as he became a ravenous ghost that fed on the world itself. It had made him unsurpassed and unmatched in might, but it had also set him down a path of tragedy. He became a calamity for his homeworld far more dangerous than any invaders. When he woke up from his stupor, nothing but ruins remained.

Things had only somewhat stabilized when he found the Wheel of Manushya-Gati as well, in the hands of a young woman he had killed in his madness. He even managed to seize a Body Tempering Manual in the Tower of Eternity that more efficiently made use of the unique energy the wheels generated.

These wheels had made him extraordinary. Without them, there was no guarantee he would even have survived the integration. Even if he did, the odds of him reaching Hegemony were slim. Monarchy was but a distant and unrealistic hope. At most, he would have managed to become a local warlord on his home planet at the edge of the Multiverse, destined to never come in contact with the real truths of the universe.

But for all the wheels had given him, they were also the cause of endless suffering. Alvod knew it wasn't just a matter of their value causing avarice in others. The more he made use of them, the heavier his Karmic Debt would become, which maintained the Law of Balance. It had become so suffocating he had been forced into hiding for hundreds of thousands of years, unable to even gaze upon the sky.

Now, mighty foes had gathered to interrupt his ascension, making a nigh insurmountable task even harder. However, with the last two wheels collected in the Havarok Empire and his imminent ascension, things were finally about to reach a turning point. As long as he succeeded, the Six Paths would open, and he would shed the Karmic Debt he had accumulated by severing his chance at reincarnation.

He would only live once, but Alvod was fine with that. One shot at eternity was all he needed.

"I am the holder of the Evening Tide," he said, and reality shuddered as he imposed his will on the wheels. "The ages turn, Karma dies, and the world is reborn."

The tapestry resisted, or rather the Realm Spirit did. When the wheels had turned one full circle, the Twilight Ocean would be gone, reincarnated as an avatar to his path. Alvod only smiled at the struggle, and his gaze turned to the small chalice hovering in the air, its receptacle filled to three-quarters with Primal Dao.

Seven drops, one for each wheel while the last one entered his Dharma Treasure. The rowboat was already at the peak of its grade, and the infusion pushed it one step further, putting it right at the threshold. Seeing that the treasure held, Alvod grinned his gaze turned to a small clay figurine.

"Life is not life, death is not death," he muttered as the figurine floated into his hands.

A million dense scripts flashed into being on the small figurine as it started exuding an inscrutable and earth-shattering aura. But that was nothing compared to the radiant display in his inner world, where a ten-thousand-meter-tall statue lit up in a similar manner. An unprecedented storm erupted in his inner world, with the crashing waves reaching thousands of meters in the air.

The small wooden boat became an avatar of the storm as it crashed forward, the eventide churning in its wake. It slammed into the weakened tapestry, causing reality itself to crack. The wheels turned ninety degrees, and Alvod took a shuddering breath as he felt cracks spread across his world. However, he wasn't deterred at all, and his mouth curved upward in a bloody smile as he heard an earth-shattering rumble on the outside.

It had begun.

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"It's all wrong," Elou Alu'Valadir muttered with a frown as she gazed up at the churning clouds that were accumulating, covering an area far greater than the whole of the Twilight Harbor. "What should we do, Lord Nether?"

The deep thud of an immensely tyrannic heart echoed out, its power enough to cause ripples in space itself. It pushed into the churning anomaly of the crumbling Daoworld, searching for answers within.

"The effigy has failed," Nizu Noz'Valadir frowned. "I cannot sense the presence of my descendant either. Something unexpected must have happened by the end."

"If the effigy has failed..." Grifon Alu'Valadir hesitated as he glanced at the sea of crystals that were slowly waking up, each one of them emitting the troublesome Shroud of Azur to hide the movements of the Eidolon cultivators.

"No matter. Chaos has taken hold of this event, and no side will be able to seize a clear advantage," Nizu muttered with a sigh as six golden rings appeared behind his back, each one of them throbbing with the Dao right at the edge of the threshold. "But when it comes to foundations and strength, the Eternal Clan fear no one, certainly not some frontier Monarchs. I will force my way. You two, restrain those scheming natives, and monitor the movements of Hive Ouro."

"Will they even dare-" Grifon snorted, but the grin on his face froze when space cracked.

Out from the void, nine spears emerged, forming a perfect encirclement around the spatial anomaly. Each one was almost ten kilometers long and covered in dense scriptures that palpitated with destructive energies. The next moment, nine Monarchs appeared, each one hovering above a respective spear.

A ripple echoed through the Twilight Harbor as the nine spears shot forward, heading toward the anomaly with crushing momentum.

"Godslayer spikes," Nizu muttered with some surprise. "The locals are going all out."

"Lord, we cannot..." Elou hesitated as her aura started climbing.

"Not to worry," Nizu smiled as he took out a large sanguine crystal. "You are not alone. Stopping three of them is enough. The Eidolon will be forced to make a move as well. As for the final three, the main character will have to deal with them himself."

The two elders breathed out in relief, and they looked over at the crystal in Nizu Noz'Valadadir's hand. Suddenly a flash of light emerged from its core, spreading its radiance for tens of kilometers and prompting the heavens to rumble.

"That's..!" Elou exclaimed, her eyes wide with shock and hunger.

"This Heavenly Descent belongs to the Eternal Clan," Nizu smiled as the crystal cracked.

As expected, the Realm Spirit had mixed truths with lies. The crystal really appeared to be a nascent Realm Spirit, and the array actually had the capability to protect the crystal within. But it also contained the ability to transfer a consciousness, which was a huge problem.

There was no way Zac would feel comfortable infusing a deceptive Autarch into Earth's World Core. That was a disaster waiting to happen. He would rather break the cage and risk losing the young Realm Spirits than risk having it become a vessel to Qi'Sar. It was possible the former Autarch only wanted to find a new home to continue living, but there were all kinds of mysterious and weird abilities out there.

What if he wasn't content staying a Realm Spirit forever? Wasn't Zac's dual races a perfect vessel if Qi'Sar wanted to embark on the path of cultivation again? Even worse, Zac only understood a small part of the array on the cage, and it might have contained even more hidden traps than just the Soul Transferring Array. Just the fact that it was supposed to run on his Dao was suspicious.

Zac had immediately decided to strike, even if he didn't have all the facts.

As to why Qi'Sar was insistent on not putting it away just before the realm collapsed, his motivations were probably true. However, he wasn't just talking about this young Realm Spirit being locked to the Twilight Ocean, but also himself. Qi'Sar probably wasn't able to transfer his consciousness while the realm was still standing, indelibly bound to the Twilight Ocean.

The moment the realm collapsed, he would be free and have a short window of opportunity. It was right before that moment Zac had destroyed the cage, using the surge of chaos in the atmosphere to guide his timing.

"So you figured it out," Qi'Sar's voice echoed through the chamber, the previously congenial voice now rife with sinister intentions. "I didn't expect you to understand that array from how clueless you've acted over the past years. You truly hid yourself deeply."

Zac wryly smiled, happy that his ignorance had worked in his favor for once. The Realm Spirit had clearly been spying on him, and it must have witnessed the months he spent studying basic patterns that most elite clan members had already memorized by the time they started cultivating. How could someone like him have known about an esoteric unorthodox method like a Soul Transferring Array?

Even Zac's greed where he had looted everything he came across had worked in his favor, and Qi'Sar hadn't suspected his motivations to loot the side chambers at all. Zac had even happily looted the worthless Twilight Fruits and low-grade herb over the past years, so why wouldn't he go mad with greed for D-grade materials?

"I'm sorry, I don't feel comfortable carrying an old schemer like you out of here," Zac snorted. "It probably wouldn't end well for me. But don't worry, your legacy will live on through your children."

The safest option would simply have been to stall things out until the realm collapsed, giving up on the twinned life-death Realm Spirits. That way, he would make it off scot-free with a hoard of treasure. However, Zac was unwilling to give up on this unique opportunity. Qi'Sar had been lying about some things, but Zac didn't think he was lying about how useful this crystal was.

Who knew what kind of benefits a pair of mutated and connected Realm Spirits could bring to a young world like Earth? Right now, it was unclear if the planet would even survive the two clashing elements it had been imparted with. But with these little things, Earth had the potential to become a proper C-grade world. Perhaps something even greater if Zac managed to nurture the planet properly.

There was no response from the Realm Spirit this time, but Zac suddenly felt a scream of danger, and he unhesitantly activated [Earthstrider] to flash away. It was just in time as well, as something weird happened to the spot where he just stood. Space somehow twisted on itself, like a rag being squeezed. The area was returned to normal in an instant, but the pedestal that had held the crystal and array cage had turned to dust from the spatial twist.

Space itself seemed hollow as well, like it was somehow destroyed.

Zac's eyes were wide with alarm, and he started running for his life, exiting the treasury in a mad dash. Another pang of danger warned him that he still wasn't safe, and he ignored the protests of his body as he kept activating his movement skill, shifting almost a hundred meters in an instant. Space kept falling apart where he had been standing, and Zac knew it wasn't just a random occurrence.

From the looks of it, Qi'Sar was destroying his own body to take out Zac.

Zac rushed toward the tunnel leading out of the castle, hoping that the Realm Spirit's control would be weaker further away from its seat of power. However, he grimaced when he saw the whole storeroom twisting before being ripped apart. A moment later, he heard a rumble from within, indicating that the tunnel had collapsed.

One way out of here had been destroyed, but that didn't mean Zac could stop moving. The only reason he was still alive was no doubt because Qi'Sar lacked any real means of attack by the looks of it. After all, any random skill of a former Autarch would not only be immensely powerful but also extremely difficult to avoid.

Besides, Zac figured he probably had his hands full as he felt a series of tremors. Some came from directly above, most likely a final clash between the Havarok and the Radiant Temple. But there was also the occasional shake that rocked the whole realm, and they didn't seem to be a result of the realm collapsing.

The old monsters on the outside had probably made their moves.

Luckily, Zac had not only spent his time looting scraps after entering the castle cellar. He had studied the layout, which included the path leading up. Before, it had mostly been to keep watch for other people sneaking up on him, but now it turned into a lifesaver as Zac flashed up a set of stairs, finding himself on the ground floor.

Another rumble shocked the castle, and Zac looked upward with some surprise. The force the two sides were unleashing in their battle was nothing to scoff at. Without the remnants assisting him, Zac didn't feel confident at all dealing with something like that. He remembered the army standing behind Ykrodas Havarok, guessing that they used some mighty War Arrays in the struggle to either protect or kill the Realm Spirit.

Having reached this point, Zac muttered a silent prayer that Ykrodas Havarok would fail at this final juncture, allowing the Radiant Temple to kill Qi'Sar, or at least harm him to the point he couldn't waste any of his attention on Zac. After quickly orienting himself, he flashed away once more, barely avoiding the increasingly frantic attempts at killing him.

“I might fall here, but I will have you accompany me across the bridge of forgetfulness,” Qi’Sar raged, and Zac’s eyes were wide with alarm as the whole castle started to rumble.

The infuriated Realm Spirit was actually collapsing the whole building after having failed to take Zac down. He desperately made his way toward the exit, but even with his movement skill, he knew he wouldn’t make it. D-grade Boulders from the ceiling were already raining down on him, and the walls were on the verge of collapsing entirely.

Having a castle fall on his head wouldn’t necessarily kill him, but that wasn’t the real problem. He had already experienced just how difficult these stones were to break through. Becoming trapped in D-grade rubble would make him a sitting duck for the realm Spirit. One spatial twist and he would be a goner.

Seeing no other option, Zac grit his teeth as infused some Void Energy into two skill fractals, prompting a large leaf to appear in front of his axehead. Two bursts of Mental Energy were squeezed from his drained soul, prompting two clouds to shoot forward just as his path was about to be blocked.

The divide of the Abyss and Arcadia appeared from two vertical slashes, its power almost unstoppable thanks to the Twilight Energy and the fact that space had become extremely brittle by now. Not even the sturdy rocks could withstand the attack, and Zac desperately squeezed through the void, emerging outside the castle in front of two shocked sentries.

Zac only glanced at the two Havarok soldiers as a sea of killing intent rippled out from his body, prompting the two warriors to instinctively step back in fear. Their short lapse was enough for Zac to make his move, which was to heedlessly run away with [Earthstrider]. Behind him, the towering castle completely collapsed.

“You little bastard!” a roar echoed out with enough force to make the whole City of Ancients shake, but Zac didn’t even glance back as he fled through the tunnel leading out of the inner courtyard.