

The Fall 784

Chapter 784: Collapse

Alvod snorted as he sensed the world-ending ferocity of the incoming Godslayer Spikes. The council's plans were truly sinister. They wanted to collapse the realm right at this critical moment, trying to force a singularity with the Realm Core as a medium for rebirth. Even if the worldly reincarnation failed, it would at least be a vicious strike at him.

It was with mixed emotions he looked out across the Twilight Harbor. Even if it was out of necessity, this little corner of the Frontier had been his home for the better part of his life. Certainly, he had spent most of the time in secluded cultivation or stasis, but he had still watched the fates of those who made the Twilight Harbor their home. Generation after generation of triumphs and setbacks, an endless cycle of ebb and flow.

"All for the Dao," Alvod sighed, his eyes hardening as he extracted another set of drops from the chalice.

This time, it was not just a few drops, but more than half of his whole reserve. He looked at the sphere of Primal Dao with hunger, but he kept his desire in check as he waved his hands. Eight Purifiers rose into the air, forming a circle around the blob as Alvod started forming Dharmic Seals with blinding speed.

The Tapestry of Twilight shuddered as a storm of meaning entered the purifiers under the control of Alvod, who added his own Dao to finish the process. Alvod quickly threw out the prepared materials at the moment of completion, before spitting out a blob of heavenly fire. The materials mixed with the Primal Dao, and Alvod breathed out in relief when the mixture congealed into a small ball of shimmering paste.

He had researched this method for close to two hundred thousand years, and spent another fifty thousand refining and preparing the materials. All that effort finally paid dividends as the compound exuded the purest of Dao and endless potential, but Alvod knew the most critical part remained. He took a deep breath before he made his move, and the whole realm shuddered as Alvod spat out a mouthful of blood.

The pain was blinding, but Alvod refused to let the darkness consume him as he released a steady breath toward the small ball. In his breath, his severed soul resided, and Alvod didn't dare as much as blink as he looked at the compound with worry.

The seconds passed after the shroud entered the Dao Paste, and Alvod's heart hit rock-bottom as nothing happened. Was it a failure? Had he sacrificed too little of his soul? He could spare a little bit more of his mind, but that would worsen his ability to withstand what would come next.

The spears were getting closer as well, and he knew that those foreigners wouldn't do all the work for him. They needed to weaken him, though not to the point he failed to conjure the Heavenly Descent. They would probably leave two or three spears for him to deal with.

As he agonized over whether to cut off another part of the soul, his dismay turned to elation as the small ball suddenly transformed into a simile of his own face. At the same time, Alvod felt his conception shift, suddenly seeing his surroundings from two directions.

It worked.

While Alvod knew his gambit was a success, he knew it wouldn't last long. A vortex appeared in front of him, and the small ball immediately shot inside, heading straight for the Realm Core.

"Eat your fill, little spirit," Alvod smiled, though he felt a pang of loss upon sacrificing so much Primal Dao. That small chalice had almost bankrupted him, and now only a third remained. "A remnant obsession thinking themselves an ancient cultivator. You thought I needed to kill you to achieve my aim? Since you are struggling to hold on, why don't you show me the comprehension of a vaunted Autarch? A final opportunity to rekindle your lost glory."

A piercing cry echoed out from the vortex just as it closed, and Alvod snorted as the wheels turned another 90 degrees. The shock of being forcibly infused with all that Dao had made the spirit lose its mind for a moment, allowing his plan to proceed. Of course, that was just an indirect benefit.

The ancient Dao locked in the Realm Core needed to be ignited. If that failed, all else was for naught. Without it to act as a sacrifice, the Heavens wouldn't descend, making fools out of everyone here. Thankfully, Alvod could already feel the buildup in the heart of the ocean, and the sky outside rumbled with even greater furor. It wasn't long now.

Satisfied, Alvod's gaze turned back toward the situation outside. The Godslayer Spears were almost upon him by this point, but he didn't even feel a ripple in his heart at these siege arrays that each had the power to completely extinguish the life of a peak Monarch.

"I guess I should be honored you use these things against me, but it appears I have been too low-key the past years. You dare stand in defiance of me, the Eveningtide Asura?" Alvod growled as [Lamentation Point], his trident and primary Spirit Tool, appeared in his hand. "I guess I have to slay a few chickens to keep the monkeys at bay."

Another vortex appeared, and he pointed his weapon toward the hole, unleashing his wrath.

Space groaned as Refestus desperately squeezed through the crack, the light from his ancestral talisman dimming by the second. The spatial turbulence pressed closer to his body, and panic filled his heart as he struggled with all his might.

Suddenly, he was through, shooting through the vacuum of space with the pent-up momentum of his daring escape. It had worked! Refestus breathed out in relief when he saw the familiar world disks in the distance, relief washing over him when spotting his homedisk. His clan should still be okay. He had been worried over the past two years, almost to the point he left early even if it went against his orders.

Refestus had known things were bad even after the first month inside the trial, but he only realized the true gravity of the situation when the sky started to tear apart. Suspicious events had passed one after another in the trial, with the foreign Hegemons causing one scene after another. Local elites such as himself could only stay out of the way, trying to fish in the muddied waters and complete the tasks they had been assigned by the council.

But how could they deal with kill-squads of foreign Hegemons with far superior equipment and Heritages? He had personally witnessed a clash between the Eidolon and some elites from the Radiant

Temple. The cataclysmic battle had rather seemed like a struggle between Monarchs than Hegemons. Since then, Refestus had just gone through the motions to complete his tasks, instead focusing on survival.

It didn't take a genius to realize something was different about this trial, and the whole cursed realm collapsing was the final straw. Most Hegemons opted to set up protective arrays and weather the storm until they would be sent out by the Heavens, but seeing the actions of those two Eidolon had filled Refestus with doubt.

Would some defensive arrays really be enough?

If it was, then why did the two ghosts cover themselves in awe-inspiring arrays and slip through the spatial cracks in the sky, leaving the Trial early? Refestus had quickly come to a decision, and he followed in the wake of the two imperials, opting to squeeze into a spatial tear in a bid to survive. The lack of other cultivators around him proved that he was among the first to find their way out.

However, a single look around tampered his celebratory mood, and once more filled him with dread. Heedless anything else, he once more started flying for his life in a desperate struggle to get as far away from the Twilight Ascent as possible. What sort of madness had gripped the old monsters this time around?

A sea of blood churned across the sky, the crashing waves sounding like a million heartbeats that set Refestus' blood ablaze, like it wanted to slip out of his body and join the sanguine waters. There were also innumerable crystals that emitted a mysterious haze, and the lights within threatened to pull his soul out of his body.

Most terrifying of all were the nine spears that were shooting toward the heart of the Twilight Ascent, each one of them controlled by one of the harbor's true leaders. Refestus' eyes were wide with shock when he spotted the Faebloom Monarch, the leader of the treants, his crown radiating blinding power as he shot toward the ghastly lights.

Another spike was pushed forth by Artolo, the warmongering Corpselord whose infamy was known across the whole Zervereth Sector. Even Rhodium, the Bluearch Monarch and the current leader of the Twilight Council, controlled one of the spikes as it shot straight toward the Twilight Ascent.

Refestus almost cried in relief upon following his guts, leaving early before those shockingly large needlepoints stabbed into the Twilight Ocean. The Mystic Realm was already teetering at the brink of collapse, and the Twilight Council seemed intent on putting it out of its misery.

A red light suddenly illuminated the area for a moment before it disappeared. It didn't seem like much, but that brief flash was enough to fill Refestus with even greater horror. He puked a huge mouthful of blood as innumerable wounds opened up throughout his body, and he desperately ate one of his lifesaving pills while trying to get his rampaging Miasma under control.

He glanced back to see what was going on, just in time to see two towering giants rise from the bloody ocean. Both of them reached over ten kilometers in the air, bloody devils with four wings on their backs. One of them held a spear even larger than the incoming spikes, while the other was surrounded by three spinning rivers of extremely condensed blood.

A similar scene was taking place in the ghastly haze as three massive ghosts took form. Refestus wasn't very clear about Ghost Dao techniques, but he felt a deep dread as he saw the twisted visages of the three avatars. The ghost in the middle also had a long horn that emitted a sinister pitch-black aura, and Refestus screamed with horror when he felt his Soulwarding Gem crack.

He hurriedly looked away before more of his protections broke, his mind reeling at the implications of what he had just witnessed.

Dao Avatars. Refestus blanched upon realizing these foreign Monarchs were going all-out, unheedingly unleashing large-scale skills that were banned in almost all cities of the Multiverse. Similar scenes took place atop the nine spikes as well as the vaunted members of the Twilight Council fully unleashed their auras.

Normally, Refestus would be cheering on the Council with all his heart, perhaps even joining the struggle. But this was so far beyond his capabilities that it wasn't even funny. No matter what side would walk away victorious from this, it was doubtful the Twilight Harbor would even survive the event.

His thoughts turned to his descendants on the disk, and he forcibly rotated his energy to start moving again. Their clan only had Six Hegemons. The Clan Leader had already fallen in the Twilight Ascent, and who knew if the third elder would make it out now? The two elders who had remained behind had only entered Hegemony with the help of pills and other resources. They were stuck right at the beginning, barely stronger than an elite E-grade cultivator.

Refestus was the only one who would be able to protect the clan from the upheavals that would follow this war. He couldn't take any risks here.

However, horror filled his heart as Refestus felt another towering aura appear behind him. An enormous trident had appeared, and its very presence put immense pressure on the whole area. The bloody ocean seemed especially affected by its appearance, and its waters frothed furiously in response.

The already towering aura just kept rising, until Refestus felt it reach a crescendo. He felt death looming over his shoulders, and he couldn't help but look over one more time as he ran for his life.

Two golden balls of frantic waters shot forward, their surface covered in immensely powerful runes. They shot toward the incoming spears, aiming for both the weapon and the controller. Artolo summoned thousands of enormous chains, and space itself was ripped apart as they drew a ruthless arc toward the water bombs.

A huge golem appeared as well, conjured by the elemental who controlled another spike. The golem punched into the air, and enormous cracks of vibrant life spread forward, rushing through space with blinding speed. The councilors' attacks clashed slammed into the incoming spheres, but they had clearly underestimated the power they contained.

Chains snapped and the golem crumbled as the spheres continued forward. The two Monarchs seemed shocked, and huge amounts of energy churned around them as they prepared their next move.

But there was no time. After the initial clash, the runes on the spheres of waters lit up, and the two balls veritably teleported forward, prompting them to become impaled on the enormous spears. It felt like time had stopped for a moment, but reality soon came crashing down as the water bombs burst.

It looked like two golden suns had appeared as enough energy to turn Refestus into cinders a thousand times over were unleashed. The explosion swallowed the whole spears along with the two Monarchs who had controlled them. Refestus' mind turned blank as he felt the Dao contained in the shimmering light.

It was like he was gazing into the eyes of the Heavens themselves, two fiery orbs of life and death. But the impression only lasted for a moment, before a shockwave rocked reality itself. Space was twisted and compacted as the chaotic wave of Dao and unbridled energy pushed forward, each moment swallowing tens of kilometers while the epicenter became a zone of utter destruction.

There was no time to run. There was no time to set up any defenses, not that it would do him any good. Refestus could only say a mental prayer for his descendants, hoping that they would survive this calamity. Or at least that they would face as painless an end as himself.

A moment later the wave passed him by, and Refestus Ynovium was no longer.

Zac looked around for any more attacks, but a pained wail from the Realm Spirit suddenly rocked the whole City. It seemed the Radiant Temple had managed to pull one over on the Havarok Empire and Qi'Sar, much to Zac's delight. Of course, that only dealt with his most immediate problem.

Huge scars spread across the sky, vortices leading out of the Mystic Realm. He saw how torrents of energy and matter were being dragged inside every second as the Twilight Ocean collapsed. Zac peered into the void, looking for any clues about the outside, but there was nothing to be found at the other side of those tears. There was just endless darkness, making it uncertain if they actually led to the Twilight Harbor.

Another shudder rocked the whole mystic realm, and Zac heard a fearful shout in the distance. It was almost time, and he took out the communication crystal one final time.

"This is it," Zac said. "Good luck out there."

"There's a minute or two remaining I think," Catheya sighed on the other side. "Should we gather up?"

"We better not," Zac muttered after some hesitation. "I kind of infuriated the Realm Spirit just now."

"Of course you did," Catheya laughed. "It's comforting to see that some things stay the same even as the world crumbles."

Zac smiled as he looked over his shoulder just in case.

"It's been fun traveling together," Catheya continued. "I hope we can meet up again. The road of cultivation is long, and it's better traversed with some company."

"Likewise," Zac smiled. "I think I will have to lay low for a bit after this, but I hope we can meet again. Perhaps in the Heartlands, even."

"The Heavens protect us," Catheya giggled.

Zac hesitated for a second before he decided to come clean. "I have spoken with your ancestor."

“You have?! How?! What did she say?” Catheya exclaimed with shock.

“Nevermind how. She said that she cannot halt her cultivation right now. But she promised me that the threat facing the Sharva’Zi clan has been averted,” Zac said.

He couldn’t bear telling the whole truth, where it seemed like Be’Zi had abandoned her previous self altogether. Instead, he mixed truths and falsehoods.

“She cannot come, after all?” Catheya said with some despondency. “Well, thank you for try-”

Catheya never finished the sentence as a weird fluctuation rippled through the Mystic Realm, causing the communication crystal to malfunction. Zac sighed as he put the crystal away before he looked up with a mix of anticipation and trepidation. The tears in the sky had combined, turning into an enormous hole that expanded with extreme speed.

In just a few seconds, it had covered half of the sky, and the Ocean Waters were suddenly just gone, reduced to a chaotic mix of Miasma and Cosmic Energy. Zac knew that this was it, and he transformed into yet another appearance while he covered himself in talismans. He urgently swore at the System to hurry up, and finally, the prompt he had waited for appeared in front of him.

The enormous spatial tear was descending like a shroud of darkness, and Zac hurriedly ate two pills while he fervently covered himself in an ashy mixture. One of the pills was another healing pill, while the second was a Karma-breaking Pill that would hopefully strengthen the efficacy of the compound he used on his body.

Next, he finally activated the array around his Specialty Core, hiding his unique constitution from any prying eyes outside. The darkness was almost upon him by this point, and Zac looked around the crumbling world with a mix of emotions. He couldn’t help but wonder if Catheya was right as he thought back to the events over the past two years.

His goal for the Twilight Harbor had simply been to push his Draugr Race to D-grade, and perhaps buy some cultivation resources for himself and the Einherjar. How had it ended up with an ancient Mystic Realm collapsing and him making enemies of multiple factions that could annihilate the whole Zecia sector if they so desired?

Were these shocking events related to the Stele of Conflict as well, or was it simply the System pushing him further down this path of no return? Or was it simply bad luck? In either case, it had left him with few options of what to do next.

It was time for him to die.