

The Fall 898

Chapter 898: Arbiter

There were two reasons Zac had held off on upgrading [Vanguard of Undeath] for so long. The first was that it was one of the most complex skill fractals he had. For a long time, he didn't feel confident in upgrading it. This issue was pretty much solved inside the Orom World, whether you considered strength of soul or tools to help with the process.

The real issue was that Zac had been hesitant in which direction he should take the skill. The skill on its own was great – it provided a noticeable attribute boost without any detriments, bolstered your defenses, and even had a powerful taunting capability that synergized well with his fighting style. Zac could easily upgrade it and call it a day, and he would have a skill most infighting warriors could only dream of.

The problem was that [Vanguard of Undeath] didn't synergize as well with his toolkit any longer. He couldn't even activate it without taking out a spare shield, and [Deathmark] no longer required him to get hit to retaliate against his enemies.

The way he defended himself had also changed. Between the support from the pygmy skeletons of [Profane Exponents] and Alea's chains, he didn't get much from using a shield. With his improved technique, he wasn't really in the business of trading blows like a brute any longer, even if he could still outmatch and outlast almost anyone at his level. So the skill needed to be reformed, which drastically increased the difficulty level.

Zac had two concepts he'd toyed around with, but both required extensive reworks even if the System simplified the process. His first choice was probably better suited for his needs, but it was more complex. The backup plan instead made use of most components of the old skill and only made the adjustments necessary to mesh better with his revamped fighting style.

The second choice was also more of an all-rounder skill, while the first more heavily leaned on [Love's Bond]. If Alea regained her form, the skill would be made useless. The choice between these two had delayed him for a while, but he had pretty much decided after Alea woke up for the first time. She was clearly in no hurry to regain a fleshy body, so this direction of his should last him through the D-Grade at least. The difficulty of this undertaking had prevented him from simply going ahead back on Earth, but now, Zac felt like everything was in place.

His mind was a bit exhausted from the previous epiphany, but the unfathomable aura that now permeated the temple recovered his exhaustion faster than even any Soldier Pill could. Meanwhile, it felt like a portal to the abyss had opened in his chest after swallowing the Natural Treasure, and the whispers of the underworld filled him with inspiration while his pathways became malleable.

Zac briefly considered taking out his other items, but he ultimately only pulled out two of his higher-quality Incense Sticks, whose only purpose was to recover Mental Energy. As for the others, Zac could somewhat sense they'd cause disharmony with the ancient altar. And since the altar was creating an effect far greater than all his other tools combined, he didn't want to rock the boat.

This time, he didn't use the [Fractal Framework Array] either. Like in the Twilight Chasm, Zac felt no need for training wheels. But in contrast to that time, his mind was almost impossibly clear. Back when

he had created [Pillar of Desolation], he had descended into an almost manic state, but he felt like a skilled surgeon now when he detached the Skill Fractal of [Vanguard of Undeath] with pinpoint precision.

One set of fractals after another was transformed or reformed, partly following the blueprint he had prepared. Zac didn't completely follow his original plan though, because he could clearly see some of his ideas wouldn't work thanks to his current state of enlightenment. Still, it was not enough to cause worry.

By this point, Zac was essentially in a stage where he was preparing to upgrade his E-grade skills to D-grade. Even a tricky F-grade skill like [Vanguard of Undeath] couldn't stump him anymore, at least not with the multilayered advantages.

At the first step of the transformation, the section focused on attribute boosts was bolstered at the cost of defenses. He still left a smaller defensive function in the skill, but it wouldn't be as obvious as the thick black armor created from pure Miasma. This part was dealt with in less than an hour since it wasn't the true focus of the skill or Zac's plans.

It was all about the taunting ability.

This was a feature Zac had never encountered in anyone else's skill, and it was shockingly effective. Only [True Strike] came somewhat close, but the skill he snatched from the Erudite Master was actually pretty useless. It couldn't affect battle-hardened and skilled opponents, and those were the only ones Zac needed it against.

That wasn't true for the taunt in [Vanguard of Undeath]. Its effect was far-reaching and extremely hard to avoid. It could even subvert the movement skills of enemies and have them appear right in front of him. No matter if it was to stop enemies from moving or controlling a battlefield, it could make the impossible possible.

This was the most crucial function of the skill, so even if he was in an almost empty state of clarity, he still felt some worry as he started to make sweeping changes. Whole new sections were added to the system, making it infinitely more complex. Meanwhile, the core patterns of the taunt were bolstered, pushing the boundaries of what was possible with an E-grade skill.

With these many patterns, the skill's energy expenditure would skyrocket. But Zac didn't care. His energy stores were simply monstrous for an E-grade warrior, and the plan was to step into Hegemony in a few years. He would have more energy than an E-grade skill could ever expend by that point.

More and more patterns were added until the skill was almost unrecognizable. Even then, there hadn't been a single moment of imbalance in the Skill Fractal or a single close-call where he almost messed up. Fuelled by the deathly treasure and the mysterious state of emptiness, he was like a machine that methodically worked through the process. Like this, the hours passed until a snap almost broke his focus.

It was the altar. A deep crack had split it in two, and Zac was surprised there really wasn't anything inside it. It was just ordinary rock all the way through. It was worrying that the altar had just broken apart like that, but it wasn't a big deal. Apart from the altar getting a crack, the rest of the temple was fine. The tranquil aura still lingered in the prayer hall, and Zac was already wrapping up the upgrade.

A few minutes later, the process was complete, and he released a pent-up breath as he inserted the skill into his pathways again. Zac spent the next couple of minutes just sitting in peace as the connections stabilized. Only then did he finally open his Skill Screen to see the results of his hard work.

[E] Arbiter of the Abyss – Proficiency: Early. Wield the chains of finality. Become the justice of the abyssal legions. Upgradeable.

Zac nodded in satisfaction upon seeing the description of the skill that had replaced [Vanguard of Undeath]. The previous flavor text said, 'Become the eye of the storm. The storm of the abyssal legions.' The drastic change of [Arbiter of the Abyss] proved that some of its fundamental features had been revamped.

He was no longer in the eye of the storm, no longer a meat shield meant to run at the forefront of an army. Instead, the skill's fundamental themes now centered around chains and finality, which was far more on point with his class. If not for Vai and possibly others spying at the valley, he would have run out to test the upgraded skill on the Yeti Kings outside. Unfortunately, that would have to wait, and Zac instead turned his focus to his other skills on the status screen.

Class Skills

[E] Blighted Cut – Proficiency: Late. Corner. Seal. Devour. Upgradeable.

[E] Deathmark – Proficiency: Late. Join your forces in dance to death. Upgradeable.

[E] Fields of Despair – Proficiency: Late. A desolate haze, both entrapping and illuminating.

[E] Profane Exponents – Proficiency: Late. Fatewarded by the profane masters. Upgradeable.

[E] Indomitable – Proficiency: Late. The will of the underworld is intractable, undeterred by the screams of the bound. Upgradeable.

[E] Pillar of Desolation – Proficiency: Middle. Stuck and struggling. Inexorable Desolation. Upgradeable.

[E] Desperation's End – Proficiency: Early. Bind them. End them. Upgradeable.

[E] Arbiter of the Abyss – Proficiency: Early. Wield the chains of finality. Become the justice of the abyssal legions. Upgradeable.

Zac nodded with satisfaction as he closed his status screen. While his new skills and big finishers were lagging slightly behind, he was making decent progress on the skill front. But he could tell there was a clear difference in how the E-grade skills progressed. Back in the F-grade, his skills upgraded as he fought, often mid-battle when he pushed himself.

That still happened on occasion, but it was clear that improving his skills required a more concerted effort in the E-grade. Now, they needed him to understand the underpinnings of the skill and how to improve their effectiveness and comprehend the Daos that made them possible. Thankfully, it didn't require affinities or profound knowledge of fractals.

Zac had seen how quickly his mastery skills progressed when he put his mind to it back in the Orom World. As long as he dedicated a year or so to it, he should be able to push most of his skills to the peak.

And just as luck would have it, an opportunity would soon present itself, provided he got out of this place in one piece.

After all, he would have to make some inroads with his newly minted [Void Vajra Sublimation] before heading over to the Perennial Vastness.

Body Tempering didn't take as long as Soul Cultivation if you managed to withstand the torturous pain that would grow increasingly severe as you progressed. But Zac figured it would still take a year or two to reach a level equivalent to his Draugr constitution. During the downtime, he would be able to work on his skills to make sure they wouldn't hold him back the moment he became a Hegemon.

Zac opened his status screen next to see if there were any other notable changes.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

145

Class

[E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation

Race

[D] Draugr – Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

Titles

[...] Runebinder, Runic Erudition, Grand Fate, Blooddrenched Baron, Connate Conqueror

Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star – 14th, The Final Twilight, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao

Branch of the War Axe – Early, Branch of the Kalpataru – Early, Branch of the Pale Seal – Early

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

19304 [Increase: 133%. Efficiency: 287%]

Dexterity

8065 [Increase: 98%. Efficiency: 206%]

Endurance

14325 [Increase: 119%. Efficiency: 287%]

Vitality

12420 [Increase: 107%. Efficiency: 273%]

Intelligence

3322 [Increase: 92%. Efficiency: 206%]

Wisdom

6412 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 216%]

Luck

663 [Increase: 116%. Efficiency: 229%]

Free Points

Nexus Coins

[D] 933 647

There was nothing new to see on his Status Screen. He had somewhat hoped he'd get a new title for creating the Body Tempering Manual or his new skill, but the System hadn't seen fit to provide anything this time around. Perhaps it wasn't too surprising. He had already created something unique like [Pillar of Desolation], which possibly surpassed the limits of E-grade skills since it used a bit of Oblivion Energy to activate.

Meanwhile, he had to admit he hadn't actually created a Body Tempering Manual, even if what he had accomplished was almost as impressive. It was ultimately monks who researched all the theories, and Zac had only made alterations to suit him better.

Zac briefly considered whether he should top off the two missing levels on his Draugr side, but ultimately decided against it. The attributes from two levels wouldn't make much difference, and he had used up the little Kill Energy he got from killing yetis on [Surging Vitality]. Instead, he swapped back to his human form to once more open his status screen.

Class Skills

[E] Axe Mastery – Proficiency: Peak. The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable

[E] Ancestral Woods – Proficiency: Middle. Oneness with nature

[E] Rapturous Divide – Proficiency: Peak. Between the Abyss and Arcadia is an endless chasm. Upgradeable.

[E] Arcadia's Judgement. – Proficiency: Middle. Only judgment awaits those who encroach on the mandate of Arcadia. Upgradeable.

[E] Nature's Edge – Proficiency: Peak. Nature is the most ruthless weapon. Upgradeable.

[E] Arcadian Crusade – Proficiency: Middle. Nothing will deny the vengeance of Arcadia. Upgradeable.

[E] Forester's Constitution – Proficiency: Late. All living beings under the Heavens, one entity. Upgradeable.

[E] Earthstrider – Proficiency: Late. Traverse the boundless worlds, unrestrained and unfettered. Upgradeable.

[E] Empyrean Aegis – Proficiency: Middle. Become as unshakeable as the pillars of life. Upgradeable.

As expected, there was widespread progress on his human side as well, where most skills had taken a step forward. One positive difference to his Draugr side was that [Empyrean Aegis] had reached Middle Mastery, while [Desperation's End] remained at Early Mastery. It wasn't a surprise, really, with how often he had been forced to use his defensive skill while inside the Void Star. Meanwhile, he had barely spent any time in his undead form since getting his ultimate finisher.

With both his [Void Vajra Sublimation] created and the surprise boost of his skills, Zac could finally turn his attention to the more troublesome matters. His eyes turned to the cracked altar, or rather the anthracite dust that had formed a small pile at its edge. The figurine was gone, but it was still firmly engraved into his memory.

That hatred and sense of irreconciliation directed at the Heavens was beyond anything Zac had ever felt, and this was just from a small figurine that had almost been completely eroded over the countless years. It was a shame. Zac believed that if he had been able to confirm who it depicted, he would have been able to get closer to the background of Ultom and the secrets of the Left Imperial Palace.

There were also the voice and the ominous message.

'Another cycle, another Flamebearer. Will you break the chains or become another link?'

Even if the message was cryptic, Zac believed the voice and figurine had together given some critical clues. He was competing for an inheritance, but the inheritance was not treasures or the palace itself. At least not only that. It was an inheritance of destiny, of a goal.

But a goal for what, Zac had no idea, and he wasn't sure he wanted anything to do with it going by the burning anger toward the Heavens the figurine held. If Zac had to guess, it would be that the figurine wanted to destroy the Heavens themselves. Not even the shimmering lights were enough for Zac to get hitched to such a maniacal wagon.

He was already skating on thin ice with all his borderline unorthodox methods. He was just looking for some solutions to take his wonky constitution into the D-grade; anything beyond that was asking too much. Perhaps he was even better off if he skipped out on getting the fourth piece of the seal. If he could figure out how to form his Life-Death-Conflict core with the next seal, he might as well stop and count his winnings.

Then again, Zac had been around long enough to know it was not necessarily up to him whether he wanted to partake or not. The first vision of Ultom had literally crammed itself into his head out of

nowhere, and it was entirely possible the System or Ultom itself would somehow derail his plans to keep going at it.

Apart from the meaning of being a Flamebearer, there was also the issue of the Sangha. Three Virtues was the personification of a shifty monk, but Zac had never felt he was sinister. But the trap hidden within the [Boundless Vajra Sutra] was one of the most diabolical methods he'd ever seen. It was essentially possession, except your body was seized by a Buddha-loving avatar of your own creation.

Zac didn't get it. Why had they imparted him with something like that? And was it the intention of Three Virtues or the Sangha itself? And why did it feel like it all was related to Ultom? He had no proof for his hunch, but Zac couldn't shake the nagging feeling that everything that Three Virtues had done was to alter the events related to this inheritance. He might just be paranoid, but the suspicion might also be an effect of his high Luck and how it attuned him to the winds of fate.

It also just made sense—the voice before mentioned cycles. Zac was confident it referred to eras, like the current Era of Unification. Zac didn't know about the Left Imperial Palace, but Ultom was definitely an Eternal Heritage. Some monstrously powerful faction had failed in some undertaking and created the Ultom Courts to keep the flame of hope alive.

It was no shocker that even the Sangha would compete for something like that. From what little Zac had learned about Eternal Heritages from Qi'Sar and Kaldor, an Eternal Heritage was the most powerful strategic resource a faction could possess. Getting their hands on one was enough to shift the balance and possibly impact the whole Multiverse.

With so much on the line, it wasn't inconceivable that the Buddhist Sangha would go so far as to try to turn him into a puppet. Perhaps Three Virtues had somehow realized Zac had a connection with the Left Imperial Palace and chosen to take a chance. If Zac actually practiced the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation], the Sangha might have gotten a Flamebearer for free in a few years when Zac reached the third layer and became a mindless Vajra.

And if one peak faction knew about Ultom and was looking for it, what about the others? Even if they didn't know now, they would eventually. The unorthodox cultivators from the other sector were already looking for pieces of the seal, so Zac keeping his mouth shut wasn't enough. Eventually, old monsters would come crawling out of the woodwork.

How would this all affect Zecia? This was just a tiny frontier Sector without any powerful guardians. That golem who accompanied Iz Tayn could probably annihilate all of Zecia's peak factions in a week or two. Even if the powerful factions didn't actively target the natives of Zecia, it was undoubtedly a calamity if the sector became the battleground for an Eternal Heritage.

For something like that, even Supremacies might make a move. Could Zecia withstand something like that? Zac almost regretted fleeing from that crazy firebug before. If anyone had the answers to this mess, it would be her and her golemoid guardian. Of course, Zac didn't know about Ultom back then, so it was a bit of a moot point.

But one thing was for sure; the upcoming war was not as simple as it seemed, and more was at stake than losing to some unorthodox cultivators. He also knew that his strength wasn't enough to secure

Earth or even protect himself. He was like an ant standing between towering giants whose whims could mean his life and death. He needed to find a solution to this predicament.

Perhaps he could crawl up the leg of one of those giants? After all, being a Flamebearer should hold some significance to the factions who wanted to take Ultom for themselves.