

The Fall 786

Chapter 786: Rip and Tear

Zac was startled awake by pained cries and rampant energies that rocked the area. It looked like the transfer out of the Twilight Ocean had knocked him unconscious, which wasn't surprising considering the wretched state his body and soul were in. Thankfully he had covered himself in defensive talismans just in case, and they had activated just like they were supposed to.

Not that it was completely necessary. Zac looked around with his bleary eyes, and he saw how people kept appearing in golden bubbles that contained the aura of the System. As expected, it had provided some measure of protection for the trial takers upon their departure from the Twilight Ocean.

However, it looked like the System wasn't willing to overexert itself. Zac's own barrier was already gone, exposing him to the harsh realities of his surroundings. He had felt himself under immense pressure from the moment he woke up, and Zac recognized that aura all-too-well. It was the Heavens, the real one that had almost blasted him to smithereens a few times.

The whole area was drowned in that ancient wrath, and Zac felt his Cosmic Energy extremely turbid, barely answering his call. Not only that, but there were extremely powerful insights suffused into the air. Zac didn't know it was a result of vast Dao fields that covered thousands of kilometers, or if it was the lingering result of two powerful attacks colliding in the distance.

In either case, it meant trouble, and the more he saw as he looked around, the more horrified Zac became. The whole Twilight Harbor was on the brink of collapse, with thousands of spatial tears stretching like tendrils as far as he could see.

It was like he was caught in the middle of a three-dimensional spider web, where the wrong move would end with him becoming swallowed by the void or cut apart by the scars in reality itself. Apart from the tears, space was littered with everything from struggling cultivators to whole palatial ruins floating about.

There weren't too many cultivators appearing in flashes of light any longer. Most had either fallen or left already, and he spotted quite a few fleeing people far in the distance, moving away from the inner parts of the Twilight Harbor. Problem was, the Twilight Rivers with their spatial arrays were gone while space was unstable. Traversing this kind of war zone at the E-grade was extremely perilous, and you would have to survive for at least half a day in this environment until you could reach the outer edge of the harbor, where the teleportation arrays waited. Provided they still worked.

As to where the huge buildings and other debris came from, it wasn't a mystery. Zac could see that he had been let out somewhere in the middle of the harbor, with world disks both in front of him and behind. More than half of the disks had already broken apart, and whole civilizations had become space debris that drifted about.

And there were corpses. So many corpses.

It was to the point that Zac's brain could barely comprehend such a loss of life. The space between the destroyed world disks was littered with bodies, most of them F-grade mortals judging by the lack of spirituality on their bodies. They had probably been subjected to the void of outer space the moment

the atmosphere of the Twilight Harbor collapsed, and that wasn't something a mortal could withstand for more than a couple of seconds.

Of course, they might have already been dead by the time their word disks broke apart. The force required for something like that would most likely be powerful enough to extinguish their souls in an instant.

Zac couldn't actually see the source of the mayhem. A huge chunk of a broken world disk, spanning hundreds of kilometers across, hovered in front of him, blocking most of his vision. It was a bit disconcerting to not see what was going on, but he knew that it might have been this chunk of stone that had protected him while he was unable to protect himself.

A huge shockwave from the heart of the harbor made reality groan, and large cracks spread across his protective disk. However, it withstood the impact, severely weakening the destructive wave. Not only that, but it was like space was suddenly lit up with millions of shimmering stars, and they seemed to absorb a lot of the errant energies before dimming again.

There was no need to guess where that shimmer had come from. It was the method of the Radiant Temple, where someone had set up a massive protective array that stretched as far as his eyes could see. It helped restrain the errant energies somewhat, and it had no doubt saved countless lives already.

Of course, Zac didn't believe the temple only protected him and the other E-grade cultivators out of benevolence. If killing a bunch of mortals and low-grade cultivators put a stain on your Karma, then the opposite was probably true as well. Since Ventus liked to meddle with fate, some elder from their faction was probably using the situation to rack up Karmic Merit. Saving lives to cultivate.

But Zac couldn't be picky. Their motives might be impure, but it was still a lifesaver considering the might contained in those strikes. Even with [Void Zone] activated, he felt his bones groan in protest as the wave passed him by. Zac was so exhausted, but he knew that he needed to hold on for a while longer.

There were a few things that he needed to do be done immediately, and he hurriedly took out the prepared item. In front of him, his twin appeared. Or rather, a body that looked almost exactly like Arcaz Black, except for his abyssal eyes being gouged out. Runes covered his skin as Zac infused the body with his Dao, but the marks were fading fast. In a few moments, they would be gone entirely, having fulfilled their purpose.

It was not a clone of his, but rather something darker in nature. The man was once a Revenant, one of the stronger enemies he had fought on the way back from the chasm. He had been part of an elite squad that had tried to ambush him, but now he had been reduced to a tool that would hopefully help Zac out.

Arcaz Black's identity had become extremely problematic, and he had to do everything in his power to steer attention away from himself, from Earth, and from the Zecia Sector as a whole. Otherwise, Alvod Jondir might come knocking in a few centuries, at that point an Autarch bent on revenge.

Now, there was also Hive Ouro and the Eternal Clan to worry about. He couldn't put all his faith in Catheya's ability to trade his allegiance and the fact of him being an Edgewalker in return for safe harbor. Especially not after his talk with Qi'Sar. Zac had thought himself something unique, but if a sliver

consciousness of an ancient Autarch knew about people like him, he might not be as valuable to the Undead Empire as he had hoped.

And even if Catheya managed to garner some interest for him, it might only be among the Draugr factions. So it would still be in his interest to throw off the scent for the others, specifically by having Arcaz Black 'die'.

This solution was something he had prepared while waiting for the gates to the City of Ancients to open, though Varo and Catheya were the ones who did most of the heavy lifting. The corpse in front of him had become fatelinked with him, where any Karmic Links that led to Zac would also lead to this corpse. With him having used multiple Karma-cleansing items along with activating the Array around his Duplicity Core, those links should now only lead to the corpse.

Essentially, pinning the blame on a dead guy.

Initially, the method was only meant to obscure one's Karmic threads, but Zac had taken it one step further after Catheya and Varo were done with their ministrations. With the help of his Shard of Creation, he had transformed the man's body into a copy of his own. However, he hadn't managed to recreate the signature Abyssal eyes and had opted to simply gouge them out.

Thus, Arcaz Black had fallen at the end of the Twilight Ascent, his body set to drift in the ruins of the Twilight Harbor. This trick wasn't perfect, but it should make any attempts of tracking him down far harder. An adept Karmic Cultivator would probably realize something was amiss, but with the corpse's karmic threads shining brightly, it would become nigh-impossible to find the real Zac.

Thankfully, the harbor itself would help him even further according to Catheya. With so many old monsters gathering in one spot and duking it out, the fate of an E-grade warrior should be drowned out in the white noise of their Dao. Even the Heavens had descended to muddy the waters. It was one of the few good points with the current chaos.

"Thank you," Zac sighed as he pushed the body away, letting it drift away and join the innumerable corpses that littered the area.

Ideally, Zac had wanted to take an [Coward's Escape]-pill as well the moment the realm collapsed. But he had ultimately decided against it, even after getting the prompt that indicated he had cinched the first-position title for the trial. He really wanted to get rid of the quest that the Eveningtide Asura had forced upon him, but eating that pill would mean he would fail the quest for upgrading the Creator Shipyard as well.

[Materials for Karunthel] was a chained quest, and Zac feared that not getting the customized D-grade Cosmic Vessel would be the least of his losses if he ate the pseudo-death pill. Most likely, he'd be stripped of the qualifications to upgrade the shipyard altogether. He was on good standing with Karunthel, but that didn't matter considering it was the System that set the rules.

He didn't have any other means to deal with the lingering quest and the threat it might pose, but Zac realized the issue was fast solving itself as he looked around. The whole harbor was falling apart, so the quest should automatically fail sooner or later, considering how it was a decree quest linked to the Twilight Harbor.

Having discarded the Karmic dummy, Zac wasted no time to start his own escape. He didn't know who was winning between Alvod and the other factions, but between the heavenly wrath and the earthshattering clashes, he knew it was just a matter of time before disaster struck his area as well.

He first tried activating the escape bangle on his arm, but as expected, there was no response. The first function of the bangle only worked in the Zecia sector, unfortunately. Zac tried various other escape treasures as well, but they only fizzled out, failing to activate. It was no wonder that the people in the distance were flying rather than zapping away.

Space was sealed, making teleportation impossible.

Zac had no option but to start moving as well, and he started releasing some Cosmic Energy to move through the vacuum of space. Thankfully, there were tons of debris lying around, allowing him to continuously use [Earthstrider] to drastically increase his speed. Unfortunately, each activation resulted in a throbbing pain in his nodes, and activation was extremely arduous because of the heavenly pressure.

Thankfully, both those issues were solved by using [Force of the Void]. With his bloodline talent, no energy circulation was required, alleviating the pressure on his nodes. At the same time, the restrictions from the heavens didn't seem to affect his unique Bloodline Energy. It allowed him to move quickly, though he was expending quite a bit of Void Energy.

A scream of danger in the back of his suddenly made him flash out of the way. Just a moment later, a gust passed by the area where he previously stood. At first, it looked like nothing, but Zac was filled with horror when space simply disintegrated where he had flown a moment ago. A scar tens of kilometers long and hundreds of meters high had appeared out of nowhere.

The corpses that littered the area were utterly disintegrated by the attack, and the nearby debris was dragged into the enormous spatial tear that was left behind after the gust. Zac felt the pull as well, and he desperately activated his movement skill over and over until he got far enough.

Zac's heart beat like a drum as he looked back, only to find that the world disk that had protected him before had finally been cut into two, exposing the scene behind. The first thing he noticed was the enormous avatar almost looking like Poseidon, wielding an immense trident as dozens of rivers surrounded him, each one of them piercing toward the sky.

It didn't take him long to realize who it was; Alvod Jondir, the Eveningtide Asura. He was right in the middle at it, attacked from every single direction. From the front, a humongous avatar peered out through a vast spatial fold, and Zac's heart sunk when he felt his aura. It was even greater than his mother's, meaning it was a bonafide Autarch who had made an appearance.

However, his aura was not that much stronger than hers, and Zac didn't get the sense of immensity or profundity from this tattooed man as he did from Be'Zi or A'Zu. Most likely, it was a First-Step Autarch who had barely managed to break through. Of course, that still meant he was a terrifying existence who could essentially run roughshod in the frontier.

A Havarok Autarch wasn't the only thing Alvod had to deal with at the moment. Simultaneously, a huge depression had opened up in the churning clouds above, and Zac looked at the shimmering lights that

descended with marvel. It was Dao, pure Dao that held the secrets of the universe. If he could just absorb a sliver of that light...

Zac shook his head, knowing his limits. He saw those white tendrils falling like rain, the terror they contained. The Eveningtide Asura controlled the rivers having them clash with the descending punishment. The Twilight River was filled with unprecedented levels of energy, yet they were no match for that mysterious light.

The rivers only managed to withstand the energy for a moment before they disintegrated, resulting in similar eruptions like the one that had almost killed him just now. Alvod seemed undeterred, and he kept reforming the rivers as a golden pillar rose slowly from his body, heading towards the Dao in the sky.

That pillar was a true marvel, and it contained everything Zac had sensed inside the valley and more. He heard the crashing waves as he looked upon the light, he was transported to the edge between night and daybreak. Life was not life, death was not death.

Zac hurriedly shook his head to clear his thoughts. That pillar was perhaps even more lethal to him than the lights in the sky. It represented the path of a Divine Monarch, and its intrusive influence was incredibly powerful even at this great distance. Even worse, it was just one of three such pillars that rose toward the sky.

Alvod's Dao Pillar wasn't even the tallest one. While Alvod was busy clashing with a celestial army led by the Havarok giant, tens of thousands of huge red seals hovered right next to him, seemingly trying to fuse with his avatar. Zac could smell the stench of blood all the way to where he was, meaning it was no doubt the Eternal Clan.

The shortest pillar was aquamarine-white, and it flickered ominously like it was about to break apart. Three enormous ghosts surrounded it, but a sudden swipe from the Eveningtide asura cut one of them apart. Alvod received a fierce attack from the Havarok Autarch in return, but his gambit was enough to push the Eidolon over the edge, causing the pillar to collapse.

Zac was shocked at all that three people were trying to break through at the same time, while fighting each other at that. He had heard that most Divine Monarchs secluded themselves for thousands of years before making their attempt, as the smallest of distraction or stray thought might adversely affect their chances of success.

The situation had become untenable for the ghosts, and an infuriated shriek rippled through the Twilight Harbor. Zac felt his mind blur as his soul was covered in cracks, but the churning oceans in his Soul Aperture along with [Soul Guardian] thankfully absorbed enough of the wail for his soul to remain intact.

Others weren't as lucky, and Zac saw how many of the others who were escaping suddenly stopped moving, their souls accidentally crushed by the Eidolon Monarch. Not even the elder from the Radiant Temple could provide enough protection from that shriek.

That wasn't the end of Zac's worries as the ghosts seemed intent on retaliating. The pillar contained a Divine Monarch's condensed Dao, and Zac saw how it was turned into a terrifying attack directed at

Alvod. A ghastly fire consumed the whole avatar in an instant its radiance overshadowing the Heavens themselves for an instant.

Over twenty Twilight Rivers were ripped apart, and more than half of the bloody seals were broken as well. The destruction resulted in a chaotic mix of energies freed from their respective owner's control, and they immediately rippled outward, destroying everything in its path.

Zac desperately push his movement skill to move even faster, but he felt the wave of destruction come closer and closer. He wracked his mind for solutions, but he couldn't come up with anything better than throwing out hundreds of talismans behind him, expending almost half of his Cosmic Energy to activate them all.

The Defensive Talismans lit up, forming layers upon layers of barriers between Zac and the Monarchs. Zac wasn't done there, and he quickly activated [Void Zone] as well. He cursed the fact that he didn't have any defensive skills to help out at the moment, and without any better options he simply took out some of the D-grade rubble he had swiped on the way out of the castle, forming a final layer of protection.

The wave finally crashed past him, and he felt the barriers crumble in rapid order. Next came the boulder in front of him, turning into dust after enduring just an instant. But thankfully, [Void Zone] was extremely efficient at weakening uncontrolled energies, and he almost cried in relief when his body was only lacerated with deep cuts all over as the wave passed him by.

He ate a Soldier Pill and Healing Pill as he resumed his escape, but Zac worried about his prospects. It was one thing to dodge those condensed cuts that ripped space apart. But he only had it in him to block one or two more of those all-consuming waves of destruction, even with the stellar light weakening them considerably.

Meanwhile, there was still half a day's worth of travel before he reached the edge of the harbor. Zac wracked his brain to find a solution, but he suddenly froze as he spotted something all-too-familiar not too far away.

Wasn't that..?