

The Fall 375

Chapter 375: Free Lunch

It was 4 pm the next day when the crystal in Zac's lap vibrated, indicating that his sister or Ogras was trying to contact him.

"Everything is ready," Kenzie's voice emerged from the crystal after he picked it up. "We couldn't get a hold of Ibtep, but everyone else is here."

"Ask Alyn if she wants to try. I'm on my way," Zac said as he stood up. "Can you bring the prayer mat from the cave?"

"It's already here."

Zac had spent the better part of a day picturing the Dao of the Axe, or at least the part of the Dao that represented his path. He still did not know if his conclusions were correct, but he was simply out of time and would have to roll the dice.

He walked over to the Academy in quick steps and found that everyone apart from Ogras was waiting outside. There were also 50 Demon Soldiers and 30 Valkyries who stood ready to guard the structure against any interruptions. Alyn stood there as well, though he was not sure if it was because she was there to oversee the event or to join it.

Alyn was the back-up he decided to fill Ibtep's spot in case he couldn't be reached. She was not really a core part of his fighting force, but she had contributed a lot to Port Atwood in her own way. He also thought that if Alyn's accomplishments in the Dao increased, then she would also be able to teach the students more efficiently.

"Finally we're doing this," Ogras' voice drifted over, but the usually lazy tone contained an undeniable hint of excitement this time.

The demon sported a new small scar on his left cheek, but other than that he seemed fine even though he had fought an undead general the other day.

"Let's hope we got this right, otherwise this will turn into a tragedy," Zac wryly smiled as he looked across the people who would participate.

All of them belonged to the absolute peak of Port Atwood's forces. The only exception was a motley mix of youngsters who looked a bit nervous. It was the students that Alyn had recommended, seedlings with potential to become powerhouses under his banner.

If something happened to all of them, including himself, then both Port Atwood and Earth was finished.

"So maudlin," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "It's just a bunch of Origin Dao, what can go wrong?"

"Famous last words," Zac snorted, though he felt the demon had a point.

"Let's head inside and I will explain things," Zac said as he looked over the group before entering the circular building.

Zac only took a few steps before he froze for a second, looking with some shock at what his sister had created. The walls were covered in a dense pattern of inscriptions, reaching pretty much from floor to ceiling. Even the stone floor and ceiling contained inscribed lines that went in circles around the outer layer he stood in.

Kenzie truly hadn't been slacking off.

The group was led into the central chamber where the first group would meditate on the Dao when the Dao funnel was cracked open.

The Dao funnel was placed on an altar in the middle of the room, and the altar itself was covered in fractals as well. According to Kenzie the platform had the same effect as the spatial disturbance arrays he had used to block out the usage of teleporters. It was likely that it was these kinds of altars, albeit far more advanced versions, the Undead Empire used to block out the teleporters in the area surrounding his forces.

Whether such a thing would be needed or not wasn't sure, but Kenzie added it as a precaution. They simply knew too little about Origin Dao, and Brazla hadn't been helpful no matter how much Kenzie had begged or cajoled.

Their best guess was that Origin Dao was a mysterious energy that existed in the air around them, just like Cosmic Energy, but that it was impossible for people at their level to detect. It seeped into their souls from exposure, and absorbing the Origin Dao strengthened people's connection to the Dao.

Kenzie was afraid that the energy would dissipate too quickly, perhaps through leaving into other planes of existence. So she had prepared an array to seal space itself, in addition to the arrays that would hopefully keep the Origin Dao consigned to the room they were in.

The inner chamber wasn't actually sealed off, but it rather had an open layout with eight vaulted arches that provided vision to those who would sit outside. Even the inner chamber was separated into two rows, meaning that the group would be split into three priorities.

The innermost row was just two seats, one on each side of the altar. Just behind the seats was a line of fractals forming a circle around the seats and the altar, along with two small glass cylinders covered in fractals. Each of the glass pillars was roughly half a meter high and placed next to the two seats. Finally there were four large fractals on the floor tiles, one on each side of the innermost seats.

"Crack any of those pillars and all the restrictive arrays and the altar will be destroyed immediately, which would hopefully let the Origin Dao dissipate quickly," Kenzie explained when she saw Zac's gaze. "It's like a panic button."

"What if I only want to release the Origin Dao toward the next layer?" Zac asked.

"See the fractals that are placed next to your seats?" Kenzie asked. "They are shortcuts to the energy pathways that feed Cosmic Energy to the two sealing arrays. If you disrupt the pathway the array will lose its power in a second or two, allowing the Origin Dao to spread. It doesn't matter what order you crush them, so just destroy one to open up the second layer, and two to open up the third."

"So just punch the tile or something?" Zac asked, receiving a nod in confirmation.

Zac asked a few more questions about the details of the arrays before he turned toward the group still waiting behind them. Even the demons were wide-eyed as they looked around, clearly confused and slightly apprehensive about the dense inscriptions covering almost every surface around them.

"I know that most of you don't know why you have been summoned here," Zac said, drawing everyone's attention. "It's because Ogras and I are ready to present you with a unique opportunity to become stronger."

No one would say no to a power-up, and people's eyes lit up in anticipation. Only a few of the more experienced demons kept their cool demeanor, clearly understanding that nothing came for free or without risks. They immediately understood from the building they stood in that this wasn't a simple bestowment of some treasures.

"You should all know about Salvation and his deeds by now," Zac started to explain. "The Integration turned him insane, and he killed hundreds of thousands of people, turning them into puppets. Ogras and I killed him after an intense fight."

"What you don't know is that Salvation had a mysterious treasure on his body, something that he had stolen from the Inheritance site of the Great Redeemer," Zac continued pointing at the golden fractal on the altar. "The purpose of this item was to steal Origin Dao."

"I'm sorry, what's Origin Dao?" Mr. Trang spoke up, and Zac noticed there was a noticeable hint of confusion on the faces of most people.

Only then did Zac realize that the knowledge of Origin Dao hadn't been spread through Port Atwood. It was something that not even Ogras knew the word for before Brazla explained the concept, so it was no wonder that not even the demon soldiers had heard of it either. They only knew that people improved Dao Seeds easier on newly integrated planets for some reason.

"Before the System came there was no magic in your world," Ogras spoke up to explain. "But now you gain levels and Dao seeds. This is partly because of Cosmic Energy. But the second half is Origin Dao. It's a unique energy that can be found on newly integrated planets for a short time, an energy that connects your world to the great truths of the Universe."

"Origin Dao is why people on newly integrated planets gain insights into the Dao far quicker than the rest of the universe. You should have heard of how hard it was from the Demon soldiers back on their home planet," Zac said, drawing a few nods.

"In any case. This item contains the stolen Origin Dao of all of Salvation's victims. And we intend to crack this thing open and release the Origin Dao into this building," Ogras explained, unable to completely hide his impatience.

"What will happen when you do?" Mr. Trang asked hesitantly.

"No idea," Zac frankly said, drawing confused looks. "Ideally we would have liked to study this for years before attempting this, but we are running out of time. Threats loom in all directions, and we aren't strong enough as things stand. I will take this risk in order to become stronger, to protect our planet."

"We hope that the massive amounts of stored Origin Dao will forcibly put us into a prolonged state of epiphany, drastically improving our insights into the Dao," Ogras explained. "But we might be way off base. Perhaps nothing will happen. Perhaps we will be turned into idiots."

"There is no such thing as a free lunch," Mr. Trang muttered, drawing confused looks from the demons.

"Exactly," Zac said. "This is an opportunity, but there are also real risks involved. I will not force anyone to undergo this experiment, everyone here is free to leave."

Low discussions spread across the hall, as people talked about the situation with their close friends. But eventually the discussions died down, and not a single person chose to leave. Zac nodded in satisfaction, happy that the seedlings that Alyn had picked out had the guts to brave danger. It would be impossible to become a powerhouse otherwise.

"Good, prepare your mental states and ponder on the direction you want to evolve your Dao Seeds. Your results will most likely be more impressive if you have a plan in mind before we start," Zac said.

After Zac explained the situation Kenzie took the floor, explaining the intricacies of the array and how it worked. Zac had been a bit worried that people would be offended by being placed in different tiers around the Funnel, but no one even raised a brow after learning about it. Perhaps they knew the value of the thing they were being offered, and that the leaders could make the most use of it.

Everyone quickly got into position and started to stabilize their mental state while Kenzie did a final test-run of the arrays. The building had already been sealed from the outside world with an extremely strong defensive array.

Since it only covered a small building rather than a whole town its shielding was extremely formidable, and even Zac would probably need some time to crack it open. The array also isolated any sounds, so there would be no disturbances from the outside world while the people meditated.

Zac looked around the inner chamber as he waited for everything to begin. Only thirteen people sat in the room, with the third group sitting at fixed positions outside the arches. Ogras and Zac were the two in the innermost layer, as they were the two top tier powerhouses of Port Atwood and also the ones who had secured the item.

Zac had initially wanted to put his sister there as well, but she had staunchly refused, instead opting to sit at the second layer. With her were the two demon generals, Emily, Sap Trang, and finally the three strongest demons and Valkyries respectively. Mr. Trang was obviously the weakest person in the room, and not technically one of the elites.

But the old fisherman had been with Zac almost from the start, and he had performed above all expectations in every endeavor so far. This was the chance for him to go from a normal elite to a powerhouse without having to solely rely on his scary pet.

Zac knew that Mr. Trang still hadn't been able to improve his race to E-Grade due to his age, but the old man looked at least 15 years younger compared to when he first arrived thanks to the continuous medicine baths he was taking. He would probably have no problem living for a few more decades as things stood, and Zac hoped he would find a solution for his predicament by that time.

Zac already sat on the second of the two prayer mats he owned. The other mat ultimately went to Ogras, even though Zac felt apologetic for his sister. But things were dire, and they needed to push their two strongest as much as possible for the coming fights.

It was also a distinct possibility that she would receive some assistance of her own through her AI, making the prayer mat superfluous.

“You guys ready?” Kenzie asked after having confirmed that the arrays were activated and that everything worked as it should.

“We’re ready,” Zac nodded as he took a deep steadying breath. “Do your thing.”