

The Fall 531

Chapter 531: Peace

The island might be the only place where Zac held a captive, but it looked like a paradise rather than a dungeon. A vibrant array of colors spread across the hill as flowers covered almost every inch apart from a small path. It wasn't wildflowers though, but rather a meticulously arranged garden that stretched from the teleportation array down into a field below.

If that was all it wouldn't have been too surprising, as getting flowers to bloom was infinitely easier now that there was Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere. What actually surprised Zac was that the flowers seemed to contain a hint of the Dao, and together managed to form an elusive Dao Field.

Zac couldn't tell what it was as it was just a weak hint at the moment, but if given time it might grow into something impressive. He slowly walked along the path, spreading out his own Dao of the Bodhi to get a sense of what was going on.

"From what I'd heard about you I would have thought that your aura would turn my flowers into dust rather than fill them with happiness," a voice drifted over from a tree to the side, causing Zac's heart to lurch. "But your Dao almost feels like that of a farmer's. Or perhaps of a forest elf?"

Part of Zac's reaction was because he recognized the voice, but part of it was that Zac actually hadn't sensed David at all as he sat beneath the poplar at the edge of the forest. He had utterly blended in with the surroundings, causing Zac's senses to pretty much register him as another shrub or something.

Zac still felt some nervousness as memories of the meeting with David during his Tribulation flashed through his mind. However, it was a completely different David who sat beneath the tree and enjoyed the rays of sun that managed to make their way through the thick foliage.

He wasn't disfigured for one. He still had a bunch of scars, but they were only thin white lines on healthy sun-tanned skin, much like the ones Zac had before he evolved his Race to E-Grade. There was also not hatred and blame in his eyes, but rather an almost eerie tranquility.

Zac couldn't help but wonder just what had happened to the boisterous man during his months on this island. Or had the previously energetic personality already died from being captured by the cultist? Or perhaps it already happened during the Tutorial when Izzie died?

There was only one way to find out what went through his head, so Zac deactivated his Dao and walked over with a smile.

"It's called the Dao of the Bodhi, and it comes from the Seed of Trees and the Seed of Sanctuary," he explained, not hiding anything. "I actually have a class related to nature, though I focus more on fighting."

"That explains it," David said as he handed Zac a fruit from a basket next to him. "Taste it, I grew these myself."

Zac looked down at the fruit that looked like a red plum before took a bite, mostly out of courtesy. A sweet taste almost exploded in his mouth, making Zac wolf down the rest of the fruit in a second.

"This might be one of the most delicious things I've ever eaten," Zac said with wide eyes, not exaggerating at all.

The fruit wasn't quite as tasty as the Fruit of Ascension, but the plum wasn't actually a spiritual fruit. It contained a weak hint of Cosmic Energy, but so did everything else in this day and age. The taste must have come from something else, like how it had been nurtured by David.

"It's my first harvest," David smiled as he handed Zac another one. "Months of work for 29 plums. The next harvest will be bigger though, and I believe the fruits will be even tastier."

Zac ate the second one with a lot more reserve, but he actually stopped halfway through. It was nice sitting here like this under the rustling trees while gazing at the fields of flowers. But it was not why he came here.

"... I'm sorry," Zac sighed. "I'm sorry about you getting captured because of me. I'm sorry about putting off visiting for so long."

"You shouldn't carry the blame for the deeds of others," David said with a shake of his head. "And I know you have your hands full. We're all just scraping by here in the apocalypse. At least now I've found my path, and I am at peace."

"You know, I have a few islands that specializes in farming, and a spot on the main continent that has Spiritual Soil. You're welcome to head over there if you want if you need seeds or just experiment with various ideas," Zac offered.

"Perhaps I will one day. But I feel I still have a lot to gain by staying on this island. Besides, I don't want to leave Hannah here all alone," David smiled. "Both Izzie and Tyler passed away during the Tutorial, so there's only the two of us still alive of the old gang. There's no point in going back to Greenworth either. We have to stick together."

Zac didn't take offense that David didn't include him in his list of 'the gang'. He had just met Hannah a few months before the integration, whereas the four of them had been friends since the first grade. As for him not going back to Greenworth, it was no surprise.

Port Atwood had long since gotten a pretty good overview of who was alive and who was dead or missing around the world thanks to their cooperation with the Marshall Clan. It had already been confirmed that both of David's parents had passed away during the first chaotic month, while his big brother and cousin had passed away in the very same Tutorial that Kenzie was part of.

There was nothing really connecting him to their old hometown any longer, just like how it was with Zac.

It was the same for most people of Port Atwood. With only a tenth of the population of Earth surviving the Integration most had lost their whole families. A few lucky ones had been able to help their households move to Port Atwood or another city under his control, but most were left alone in this new reality of theirs.

It was a cause of concern as quite a few people were suffering from depression and post-traumatic stress on the island. The few therapists on the island had their hands full, and there were all sorts of supports group for those who had trouble acclimatizing.

However, there was undeniably something about cultivation that changed you to your core. Perhaps it was the increase in Intelligence of Wisdom that made your mind stronger, or perhaps it was the effect of their ruthless reality, but a surprising number of people were able to bear the mental strain just fine. They kept moving forward while the people around them were dying left and right.

Zac himself was a prime example of that. Someone who had gone through so much bloodshed and near-death experiences over the past years should be a broken mess by now. But he honestly felt fine, apart from exhaustion that could be felt all the way to his core. Even the fact that his ex-girlfriend tried to murder him just a few short months ago barely registered on his mind.

“... How is she?” Zac asked.

“Not bad. Not great. She doesn’t like this island as much as I do. But I guess she agrees that it beats prison,” David said with a wry smile. “We... are dating.”

“That’s good,” Zac only nodded in response, not surprised in the slightest.

The two of them shared a deep history, and they had survived the Tutorial and everything else together. Besides, something was almost bound to happen with only two people marooned on an island with just the occasional visitor there to drop off supplies. It was either start dating or turn on each other.

“It’s her who planted these flowers around the array, though I made the pattern. I think she sees the arrays as the door to her cell, and she wanted to hide it in beauty.”

“Do you blame me for sending her here?” Zac asked.

“No,” David smiled as he looked across his fields. “She was under the influence of that infiltrator, but she was ultimately exploited because there was a character flaw to exploit. Luckily, you survived, or she would have been a real sinner of Earth.”

Zac sighed as he looked out across the flowers, not sure what to say next.

“Come, let me show you what I’ve done so far,” David finally said as he stood up, and Zac was relieved to see him walking with neither a limp nor needing some sort of cane as he did in the vision.

The two toured the fields and the pruned forest that David spent his days tending, mostly talking about things of lesser import. Zac described some of the races and odd things he had encountered during his visit to the Tower of Eternity, and David spoke about his life on the island and his insights into the various plants he cared for.

The longer they spent together, the more Zac felt that David reminded him of someone else; Abbot Everlasting Peace. Not in their manner of speech, but some sort of mental tranquility that made them one with their surroundings.

However, Zac didn’t feel that David had become one with the universe and taken the first step on the paths of Karma or Samsara, but rather that he had become one with nature. Zac was the one with a mid-tier Nature-aspected Dao Fragment, yet it felt like David was the one who was more in tune with the plants around them.

Zac even asked David about it, but he didn’t have any real answer. He only felt that it was a natural result of persistence, and being wholehearted in his desire to grow and connect with the plants. David

said that he believed that everything had a soul, or at least the potential for birthing one, in this new reality of theirs.

There was an important truth in there, something that Zac felt might one day become extremely important in his own cultivation. The matter of sincerity toward the Dao, something that he felt that he was currently lacking a bit. He had made amazing gains to his understanding of the Dao over the past year, but he wouldn't say that he was sincere in his interest.

He had worked so hard on the Daos in order to get stronger, rather than having a desire to delve deeper into the mysteries of the universe. He honestly didn't care all too much about trees or coffins, but rather the power the fragments represented.

But that might become a bottleneck that kept him back in the future. He was just scraping by, reliant on treasures and lucky opportunities to shore up his weakness. Zac felt he would need to find some sort of common ground with his Daos sooner or later, and he felt that taking a hint from David was an important first step.

He slowly his Dao Field once more, but he let energy naturally seep out of his body as he tried to connect with the fields around him. And he had to admit that David was onto something. It felt like many of the trees were living and the energy inside them responded to the touch of his Dao.

"You see," David said with a smile, somehow understanding what was going on.

Their stroll soon took them to a small hill by the sea some distance from the teleporter. On top of it stood a beautiful farmhouse surrounded by flowers. It almost looked like something out of a fairy tale, with the glistening sea and rustling plants creating an extremely soothing atmosphere.

However, Zac wasn't able to completely immerse himself in the beauty as his eyes were trained on something else; his former girlfriend who was currently tending to a small patch outside one of the windows of the house. She wore a simple dress that somewhat reminded Zac of the Amish, but there were lines of fractals lining the hem.

Zac guessed that it was something that his sister had sent over, as he doubted that the Demons would be so accommodating. Hannah looked up when she heard them approaching, a small smile on her face. However, the smile immediately froze on her face when she saw Zac standing next to David. Zac only looked back at her, surprised at how calm he felt inside.

The same couldn't be said for Hannah as she hurried back inside the building with her head hanging low. The door slammed shut, leaving the two of them outside. Zac was a bit surprised by the violent reaction, though he guessed she might be afraid that he was coming here for revenge.

"I'm sorry," David sighed. "I guess she's not ready to face you just yet."

"It's fine. We can talk another day," Zac said with a shake of his head. "Tell her that I don't carry any resentment for what happened."

It was true that Zac didn't mind not being able to talk things through with his ex. He had mostly come here for David rather than Hannah, as he was a victim while she was ultimately a perpetrator. Seeing that she looked fine was enough for him, as it allowed him to erase the image that had built up in his mind since the Heart Tribulation.

Zac was just about to leave, but David suddenly spoke up after some hesitation.

“Wait, before you go. Hannah wrote you this some time ago, but she never sent it out,” he said as he took out a sealed envelope from his Cosmos Sack. “I think she would regret it if you just left like this though.”

Zac accepted the letter, and a movement in the periphery caught his eye. It was Hannah who looked at them from the second story of the small house. Their eyes met once more before Hanna sighed and shook her head. She receded further into the room, while Zac turned toward the Teleportation Array without another word. He felt a sense of serenity, but also some lament as he walked through the fields, the beauty of the island barely registering in his mind.

Peace because he finally faced a fear that had been buried deep in his heart, and sadness because it felt like yet one more of his scant few connections to the past had been severed.