

The Fall 698

Chapter 698: Perennial Vastness

Zac floated in the emptiness of space next to Catheya, and his new allies formed a small clump in an endless sea of E-Grade cultivators. Thousands upon thousands of groups had gathered around him, in a roughly even mix between life and death. Of course, there were also millions of lone cultivators who were spread amongst the group, waiting for the Twilight Ascent to start.

The accumulated aura of over ten million warriors was something else, yet it was nothing compared to the one hundred thousand Hegemons who had gathered on the opposite side of the glowing star in front of him. Their frightful power could be sensed even at a distance of thousands of kilometers, and it was no wonder the two groups had been instructed to gather far away from each other.

The pressure didn't come just from afar though, as Zac sensed some auras nearby that could overpower his own. He even recognized a few faces from the intelligence missives he had prepared for the Trial.

Thankfully, one's aura wasn't an exact measurement of combat power. With Zac's accumulations and aces, he wasn't a fish at a chopping block in front of even the greatest of E-grade warriors. Furthermore, those monstrous elites from the Undead Kingdoms or living Empires would hopefully head for the core of the Twilight Ocean while his group wouldn't pass the 70% mark according to Catheya.

Still, Zac estimated himself to be in the top quartile among the trial takers after looking around. If he could evolve his Dao Fragments and find some more opportunities over the next three years, he might even make it to the top percent, which would allow him to complete Va Tapek's, Catheya's Master, mission with some degree of success.

Zac was suddenly dragged out of his thoughts as two new people popped up out of nowhere, their arrival not even causing the slightest ripple of Cosmic Energy. The clamor in the area immediately died down, as these two demanded everyone's undivided attention by their presence alone.

One was an ancient-looking treeman over thirty meters tall. On top of his head was a small tree crown with golden leaves, each of them covered in dense scripts. His body was generally humanoid in shape, with two legs and two arms, though his face was simply at the top of the trunk right beneath his crown. However, there were thousands of branches sprouting out from his back, forming an intricate diamond pattern.

But most striking was the vast aura of life he exuded.

His features somehow made him look old, but it felt like he would live forever going by his aura. It even felt like the glowing Twilight Ocean had dimmed in his presence. He was clearly a cultivator following some path of nature, and just looking at him made him feel like he was caught inside the energy emanations of the Dimensional Seed again.

However, it was just an illusion formed by his latent will. His aura was clearly restrained and it didn't hurt anyone. Zac wasn't actually inundated in any energies, since he would probably die if that happened. Furthermore, the powerful treeman wasn't alone. Next to him stood a hooded being, looking almost like a fly next to the massive treant.

But his aura was just as shocking as the treant's, and Zac felt the grip of death clutching his heart when glancing in his direction. The air itself seemed like it was teetering on the brink of collapse from the force hidden within those robes.

"It's the Goldenleaf Monarch and Kaard'Es Venarun, the Moonblight Monarch," Catheya said with a low voice. "Both are Middle-stage Monarchs and supreme elders of two of the council clans. I didn't expect such bigshots to appear today."

Zac nodded in understanding. Didn't know what force the treant was from, but he had heard of the Venarun Clan. The undead side of the council was manned by three clans, one Sect, and one Consortium, with the sect holding the greatest power. One of those clans was precisely the Venarun Clan, a local Revenant clan with some bloodline of the Izh'Rak Reavers.

"Welcome, trial takers," the Goldenleaf Monarch said with a smile. "The gates will open in a few moments, and the council wishes to make sure everyone understands the rules of the Twilight Ascent. Most of you are local talents chosen to represent your forces, but some are also faraway guests."

"The Twilight Energy will sap your energy, robbing you of your power. The Energy is unique and most likely modified by the Boundless Heavens. It will burrow into your body no matter whether you want it or not, and the amount is mostly based on your level and how deep into the ocean you have gone. There are various means to reduce its effect, but no method is as effective as improving yourself," the treeman said. "Making breakthroughs and boosting your attribute pool will allow you to reach further, to gain more from this Trial."

"The laws are the same one as in the rest of the Multiverse," the Moonblight Monarch continued with a rough voice, and Zac felt an almost primal fear just upon hearing him speak. "The law of the jungle. Kill, steal, and battle to your heart's content. Hone yourself through slaughter and mayhem. The council will not interfere."

A dense killing intent spread through the whole zone as warriors surreptitiously glanced around. Cultivators who had reached the end of E-Grade all had blood on their hands, some far more than Zac himself. It was an unfortunate reality of the world; cultivation didn't only require time and Cosmic Energy.

It required a steely conviction and mental fortitude that would allow them to keep going down the same path for centuries and millennia. And that kind of mental strength couldn't be cultivated inside a cultivation cave. It was gradually formed through risking one's life and bloodshed. There might be a few beings in perfect tune with their path and with sublime mental states that didn't require this kind of training, but those people were beyond rare in number.

"Remember, the council will not have any opinions on your actions inside, but that doesn't mean your actions have no consequences. Cause an undue amount of slaughter inside, and trouble might find you, either inside the trial or even the moment you exit. Furthermore, slaughtering the weak is a dead end with meager rewards. The true opportunities are waiting for you in the depths of the Twilight Ocean," the old treant said.

"The Council has studied the ocean, and we expect it to stay open for 3 years and 2 months. Staying the whole duration is not required to take a position on the Fate-Plucking Ladder. Knowing when to retreat is an important skill of any adventurer."

"But remember. The gates will be closed for one year. You better have the means to stay alive if you want to enter the ocean. Otherwise, you'll just turn to fertilizer for others," the Venarun elder snickered. "The first year and the last months are always the bloodiest."

Zac inwardly nodded in agreement, not surprised at all. In the beginning, there would be ten million warriors at the starting continent, all full of adrenaline and greed for treasures. Bloodshed was bound to happen. Things would gradually stabilize as people died and people started leaving after a year, but the carnage would pick up pace by the end.

By that point, everyone's Cosmos Sacks would be bulging with loot, and a single battle might double people's net worth. Beasts die for food, men die for money.

"I am sure everyone is curious about the reward this time around?" the treant smiled, causing an excited murmur among the people.

A huge plaque appeared the next moment, clearly listing the treasures.

1st – [50-year Perennial Vastness Token].

2nd – 5th – [E-grade Reforged Providence Gem] & One unique treasure presented by the Twilight Council

6th – 10th – [E-grade Reforged Providence Gem] & One supreme treasure of the Twilight Vault

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5,001 – 10,000th - 3rd Class E-grade Treasure from the Twilight Vault.

Zac read the list with interest, and he found that the rewards even at the top thousand were pretty good. For instance, the top 100 would all get to pick a Special Class E-grade treasure from the Twilight Vault. The Twilight Vault was a shared hoard guarded by the Twilight Lord and the Council, and it had accumulated mountains of valuable items over millions of years.

A Special Class E-grade Treasure were all at the level of the items at the second part of the auction, and every single one could provide a drastic improvement if you found a suitable one. As for the top 10 prizes, they were all things that wouldn't reach a public auction, especially the top five items.

Zac didn't hold out much hope for those things after seeing the preliminary duels, but he still read the rewards with interest.

"Perennial Vastness? What's that?" Ravan, one of Zac's new team members, muttered with confusion, sparing Zac the need to ask.

Ravan was a local to the Twilight Harbor, an elite naturally-born Corpselord from a subsidiary force to the Sharva'Zi Clan. He was just like Mhal in a sense, though his accomplishments far eclipsed the general that caused Zac so much trouble back then. His role in the party was as a pure offensive combatant, though Zac still didn't know exactly what kind of class he held.

His aura indicated some sort of spellcaster class though, which was a bit surprising to Zac considering the buff physique of the man.

"It is a high-grade Immemorial Realm. Some say it's older than the System itself," Catheya said with a small frown. "I'm surprised the council would put something so valuable in the reward, or that they even have one at all. Our competition might just have gotten more heated."

"It's that precious?" Ravan asked, and Zac looked over with curiosity.

It was the first time he had heard about Immemorial Realms in a while. It was exactly the kind of place that his mother wanted to enter with Kenzie, but even she wasn't confident in succeeding. That alone told a story of just how valuable the Perennial Vastness token was

"I'm not sure about the details either," Catheya shrugged. "The Perennial Vastness is controlled by a mysterious unattached force that sends out a million tokens into the multiverse every thousand years or so. Even some descendants of B-grade forces would try to get one for themselves."

"Why isn't the Empire snatching that place if it's so good?" Zac asked.

"I'm not sure. That force must possess extreme power for it to remain for hundreds of millions of years," Catheya said. "Besides, it's very far away from the Undead Empire, which is why I didn't expect a token to appear in this region."

"What's the value for us E-Grade warriors?" Ravan asked.

"Evolution," Catheya said. "Any peak E-Grade cultivator who enters the Perennial Vastness is essentially guaranteed to emerge with a Cultivator's Core. More importantly, their cores are far sturdier compared to normal, approaching perfection."

"What!" Ravan exclaimed as his eyes turned back to the board, his whole face turning into a mask of desire.

Zac understood the feeling, and his own heart beat with greed. He had long learned the goal of the D-Grade. If the F-grade revolved around collecting as many titles as possible and the E-grade around finding and opening hidden nodes, then everything in the D-grade circulated around the Cultivator's Core, or rather the Cosmic Core.

Successfully forming the Cosmic Core was just the first step. The whole D-grade was spent strengthening and perfecting it. That's why so many considered the first step the most important one as well. One could gradually improve a core through hard work and various opportunities, but you would obviously save a huge amount of effort if you started with a sturdy foundation.

If you started with a low-quality Core you might exhaust all your momentum perfecting it over millennia, if you ever reached perfection at all. After all, the main goal of the D-Grade was to elevate one's core to the point that it could withstand the formation of an inner world of the C-Grade.

And even internal worlds differed greatly from what Zac had heard. The sturdier the core the larger the inner world you would be able to form, which would make you comparatively stronger compared to other Monarchs.

That's what made this opportunity sound so overpowered. To guarantee a successful formation by itself was to beat the one to a million odds, but greatly improve its foundation as well? That greatly enhanced the chances that you'd be able to reach the C-Grade as well, something that might only happen once every 100,000 years in peak-force in the Zecia sector.

"You can put that out of your mind," Catheya snorted. "We're a pretty powerful group, but we're far from a peak squad. With this token on the line, the hidden Heaven's Chosen will come out in force, unleashing a bloodbath in search of Twilight Fruits."

"Anything's possible," Ravan muttered, but it wasn't with much conviction.

Zac saw that the fires hadn't died out in Ravan's eyes, but he didn't hold out much hope for the Corpse-lord. He was clearly a cut above most, but there was ultimately only one token. Furthermore, even if you managed to get the token through some huge stroke of luck, would he be able to hold on to it?

This kind of item seemed like something good enough that even Monarchs would make a move, since giving it to an elite of their faction greatly increased the odds of another Monarch appearing in a few thousand years. That could completely shift the power dynamic of a faction. In fact, Zac even bet that it was the System that forced them to add the token as a reward, and people were already planning in the shadows how to snatch it.

"Nine redo-token as well," Sharpo, their spectral scout, said with longing. "I heard that only the 2nd and 3rd position got one last time."

Zac had learned about "Redo-tokens" before, or rather [Reforged Providence Gems]. Zac could absolutely understand the ghost's desire; the gems were definitely good stuff.

One thing that Zac had always felt was weird was how those who didn't perform that well in the F-grade were relegated to always lag behind those who managed to gather the best titles. However, it turned out that wasn't completely true. One method catch up was to perform similar exhibits of power in the later grades. That would usually result in a similar, but diminished, title.

The redo-tokens were another method to catch up.

They really gave you a shot at a do-over in case you performed badly in the early stages of your cultivation. For example, what if you only got the Giantsbane back then, the title for killing a beast 5 levels above you? It was actually possible to use the gem to shoot for the Apex Predator title again with a token like this, something that would be impossible in the E-grade even for Zac.

The token would let you choose a title to improve and generate a fitting trial for it, just like his own Sovereignty-quests, though the difficulty would be increased compared to getting it right the first time. Most importantly; the System would use your current attainments as the template before restricting you down to the F-grade. It would still be an extremely challenging task to get the Apex Predator particular title, but it was at least achievable if you had gone from an average cultivator to a supreme Heaven's Chosen.

Zac definitely wanted one if he could get his hands on such a token, but he wasn't too enthused since he had most of the peak titles. His interest might have been bigger if it worked on trial-related titles such as the one from the Tower of Eternity, but the token was limited to general achievement titles.

Perhaps it was possible to improve the Child of Dao-title, which he suspected was one of the greatest progenitor titles. Otherwise, he might be able to hunt down some other low-quality title in the future and use the re-do token to turn that title into a top-quality F-grade variant. But in the end, he was just making up scenarios since his odds of getting one of the nine tokens were pretty abysmal.

"The items provided to the top 1,000 aren't bad at all, and it is a far more achievable goal," Catheya snorted. "A first-class treasure from the vault can probably improve either your strength or chance of reaching Hegemony by 10%."

Zac personally had his eyes on the top 100 reward, though he didn't have much confidence at the moment. It all depended on how things panned out over the next three years. That was his biggest advantage. Many of those with auras far surpassing his had mostly exhausted their potential in the E-Grade, while he still had ample room to grow.

The other warriors floating in space animatedly discussed the unusually generous rewards as well, while some looked at the sign with troubled faces. Zac understood their worry. The rewards were one tier higher than normal across the board. It was almost like the Council was encouraging a mass slaughter for the Twilight Fruits. The mortality rate would definitely be higher than normal this time around.

Everyone had their own thoughts on the situation, but the clamor quickly died down as an enormous scar appeared in front of them. It kept expanding until it was over a thousand meters across, at which point it stabilized and turned into what looked like a gate.

"Here, take this," Catheya said as she took out a round stone ball that looked almost like an orange. It even had ten detachable wedges. "Keep it on you. Our first goal is gathering before we set out. You'll be able to sense me more than the others, but group up if possible. If a single one of us falls in the initial phase the rest will have a harder time gathering the pearls."

She took off one slice after another, giving one to each member of the squad. Zac simply put it into one of his pockets without comment. The item was a tracking device, which allowed the squad to sense the position of their allies as long as they infused the item with some Miasma. It was a higher-grade solution compared to the flares Galau used back in the Tower of Eternity.

The group didn't need to wait more than thirty minutes before the massive gates swung open, and it looked like a wall of water with a greenish hue waited on the other side.

The Twilight Ocean.