

The Fall 779

Chapter 779: Company

Zac smiled as he let Catheya release some steam through the communication crystal. She had probably been under a lot of pressure the past days, and letting her lecture him a bit actually helped him readjust his psyche. He could feel how his mental state was a mess at the moment, a chaotic skein with fraying ends.

It was no wonder, with how brutal the battle had been.

It was the first time he had been pushed like this since fighting Void's Disciple, where death loomed at every corner and there was no way for him to back down. He had been close to dying many times over down in the chasm as well, but it was far more palpable when getting pushed beyond your limit in a head-on collision against a peer.

"I guess that's par for the course with you," Catheya continued through the crystal, her volume growing louder as she went on. "Why wouldn't you destroy a Mystic Realm or two? Most people would be happy with the Title and the treasures they harvested, but I guess they simply lack ambition of a greater man."

"Well, you know," Zac coughed, and immediately grimaced when some pain flared up in his side.

"I am guessing Uona fell by your hands when the Heavens descended," Catheya muttered.

"I'm sorry to implicate you guys. She gave me no option," Zac sighed.

"That's fine. We both knew that this was a likely outcome by how things turned out. I'm more shocked you actually managed to take her out than anything else," Catheya said. "But tell me, did you kill the Eidolon as well, or was that someone else?"

"Oh? Aia Ouro died?" Zac exclaimed with surprise. "I thought they would survive my attack after they fled."

"So you did battle the ghost as well," Catheya groaned. "And their preparations on the inside?"

"Destroyed. By me," Zac admitted.

"So you have now managed to infuriate not one, but two, of the great factions of the Undead Empire?" Catheya groaned. "A shame there are no reavers around, or you could have aimed for the trifecta. I already dread the day you visit the Heartlands. I wouldn't be surprised if you managed to enrage one of the Founders as well."

Zac simply snorted in response as he kept focusing on restoring his body while doing some field repair of his pathways with the help of [Spiritual Anchor]. It would take weeks of work to restore the pathways, but some small alterations would at least lessen the amount of Miasma he was leaking every second.

"Well, what's done is done," Catheya eventually relented. "Do you need me to head over?"

"No, that's okay," Zac said after some hesitation.

He didn't know exactly how things would play out when the Mystic Realm broke apart, but he figured that it might be a bad idea to get thrown out together with the Draugr scion. Her master would probably

move to either capture or save her, depending on exactly where his allegiances lay. She, in turn, would inform him that she had valuable intelligence for the Empire.

Her master wouldn't be able to kill her due to the compulsions, and he would be forced to take her to an ambassador or representative without any undue delay. Catheya would essentially use the information about him as a method to protect herself in case her master had turned traitor against the Sharva'Zi Clan.

It was the least Zac could do after all the trouble he had caused her and her clan by killing not only Uona, but even Aia Ouro by the looks of it.

"However, the arrays in the town have broken apart. The inner mansions probably have a lot of good things," Zac added. "It might be a good idea to continue your looting in here."

"Really?" Catheya exclaimed, some excitement apparent in her voice. "Well, if the realm is going to collapse in an hour, I might as well give it a go. If I'm going to get ripped apart by the void, I'd prefer to die a wealthy woman. Besides, we have long run out of targets here on the outside."

Zac wasn't surprised. While he had entered the City of Ancients, Catheya had enacted a plan of her own. She wasn't willing to enter the obvious trap that the city represented, but that didn't mean she was simply going to sit around. She had instead decided to target some cultivators on the outside.

Many had come for the treasures in the City of Ancients, but fewer than half had ultimately entered. There had been quite a few enterprising individuals who set up shop as well, and they had absolutely cleaned up by profiteering on the cultivators preparing to enter the city. They had charged exorbitant prices for things like defensive talismans or puppets and the like, often taking the natural treasures of the Twilight Ocean as payment.

Catheya had decided to rob these merchants whose Spatial Rings were overflowing with low- and middle-grade treasures.

"The Havarok and Radiant Temple have entered the core of the city by the looks of it. You'll have to contend with the regular elites of the Mystic Realm though," Zac added.

"That's fine. Our little trio has become pretty adept at fleeing by this point," Catheya laughed at the other side. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," Zac grunted, though his heart suddenly lurched. "Well, I have to go now. We'll talk a bit later."

Zac wouldn't have minded talking with the Draugr a bit longer, but something had changed. He wasn't alone in the forest any longer.

He immediately cut the connection to the communication crystal while bracing himself in case he would have to fight the new arrival. A middle-aged man had suddenly appeared out of nowhere right in front of him, without producing as much as a ripple of energy. Zac's danger sense didn't give off any indication of mortal danger upon the arrival of the man, but he still felt an immense sense of pressure as he stared into the eyes of the man.

The cultivator was a variant human judging by his appearance and clothes, but he didn't feel like a trial taker. The man rather gave off the indomitable aura of an old master, even if he didn't emit even a speck of spirituality. However, while he looked pretty imposing, his state was pretty wretched.

Blood ran down his nose and from the side of his mouth, and small cracks covered his face and exposed hands. Zac frowned when he sensed the familiar aura in the wounds, and he quickly formed a hypothesis, one that was all but confirmed after a few seconds had passed.

"You are the Realm Spirit everyone has been looking for," Zac hoarsely said.

"Correct," the man nodded. "Of course, this is just an Avatar. My true self is still in the castle. You really did a number on my body just now."

Zac was about to answer, but he was shocked silent when the man shuddered until the visage carrying the telltale pallid complexion of a revenant. Zac's mind short-circuited for a second as he looked at the transformation. Was the Realm Spirit like him, someone with two races?

"I see your thoughts are racing, but I'm sorry. We are not the same, young man," the middle-aged man smiled. "I am not the real thing."

"The same?" Zac hesitantly said.

"There's no point to play ignorant with me. You have been walking inside my body for years," the man snorted, his voice suddenly having a slightly different cadence since changing form. "I realized something was different about you the moment you entered the realm. Truthfully, I most likely wouldn't have noticed you if not for the fact you brought that ancient Dao Purifier inside. Since then, I have been keeping watch."

"It was only after you transformed in the Hollowtongue Mountains I could confirm your situation. Don't worry. No one, not even the usurper hiding in the depths of this realm, knows of your true situation. In fact, I have helped obfuscate your exact situation from Alvod Jondir's gaze."

Zac knew the jig was up the moment he mentioned the Hollowtongue Mountains, and he inwardly cursed Va Tapek again for having him mule such a dangerous item into this place. The Hollowtongue Mountains was where he swapped races the first time, and where he first deactivated his array. Thankfully, it looked like the Realm Spirit Didn't care, but Zac still felt extremely exposed with his secrets out in the open like this.

"Don't look so worried. Us meeting is a good thing for you. Here, a small greeting gift," the man said and threw over a small gemstone.

"What's this?" Zac asked with confusion as he looked at the unfamiliar gem.

"It is the spatial treasure of the ghost you fought earlier," the man explained.

"Aia Ouro?" Zac said as he looked at the man suspiciously.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" the man snorted. "I'm just a Realm Spirit, how am I supposed to kill someone? The ghost hid inside one of the side buildings and started to cut off parts of their spirit body to rid themselves of the energy you infused into them. But their luck was truly lacking. The

moment you called on the Heavens, they were restrained and lost control. The Creation energy consumed them.”

Zac looked at the Realm Spirit with wide eyes, before he wryly shook his head. Aia Ouro really had bad luck. The situation the man described sounded perfectly plausible. Of course, it was possible the Realm Spirit was lying and finished off the ghost himself. He knew too little about Realm Spirits to know whether that was possible or not.

He had tried to find out more since arriving at the settlements outside the City of Ancients, but the little he had managed to gather seemed mostly hearsay. That alone proved they were extremely rare, and definitely not something all Mystic Realms or world possessed. But from what he had gathered, they were supposed to be a unique type of latent consciousness that could awaken inside a Realm Core or World Core, somewhat resembling a Tool Spirit.

These beings would essentially turn the planet into a living entity, depending on how you defined living, which could absorb energy quicker than a normal world. This would provide all sorts of benefits for the natives, like increased energy density. More importantly, many believed a Realm Spirit could actually evolve planets by themselves, something that generally needed extremely precious treasures or help from the System.

However, the appearance of this man didn’t seem like what the missives had described. Realm Spirits weren’t supposed to be this human. They could ‘live’ for billions of years, as long as a planet, so their consciousness was supposed to be completely different compared to a cultivator. Communicating with them was supposed to be like trying to communicate with nature itself, and this situation clearly didn’t fit the bill.

So considering that most of what he knew was a bit off, it was impossible to tell whether this Realm Spirit was lying or not. In either case, things had already progressed to this point. He had been willing to take the blame for Aia Ouro’s death until now anyway, but now he did at least get his hands on their Spatial Tool.

“Thank you,” Zac slowly said as he stowed away the crystal. “But I’m assuming you didn’t just come to have a conversation and bestow gifts upon me.”

“Why not?” the man smiled. “My life is ending soon enough, isn’t my last moments better spent in company than alone?”

Zac didn’t answer the question and only kept his gaze level at the man.

“Alright, I do have something important to discuss with you,” the man said, changing back to his human form mid-sentence. “But first, we should take a walk.”

“A walk?” Zac repeated with a raised brow.

“A group of eight warriors is closing in, four of which are possessing Dao Branches. I assume you don’t wish to encounter them in your current state?” the man smiled.

Zac worriedly looked around through the forest. He couldn’t see anyone, but his vision was limited. It wasn’t impossible someone was approaching now the arrays covering the city had broken down. Most

people would probably still be out of their minds from the killing arrays, but the elites would probably make a play now that things had reached this point.

He was pretty exposed as well since he had only managed to take a few steps before toppling over. Zac groaned as he got back on his feet, barely able to perform the task by using a random spear from his Spatial Ring as a cane. Normally, he would have used the chains of [Love's Bond] to move when his legs wouldn't listen, but that was impossible at the moment.

Alea had fled into the coffin the moment the Heavens had appeared, taking that terrifying ball of blood and Oblivion with her. Since then, Zac hadn't sensed her presence in the slightest, and he looked over his shoulder at the coffin with worry. Cracks covered its whole surface, and it emitted dangerous fluctuations.

"The little girl is ferociously holding on," the Realm Spirit sighed. "But she has overextended herself."

"Can you tell her situation? Do you know anything that could help?" Zac hurriedly asked.

"I guess you could say we are kindred spirits," the man smiled. "I do have a solution. But for now, let's walk."

Hearing that the Realm Spirit might be able to help Alea, he quickly ambled forward to keep up. Following the Realm Spirit was a bit risky, but if it wanted to attack him, it would probably already have done so. The fact that he could help Alea trumped most of his misgivings as well, not to mention that it might be able to send him out of this place early.

"Kindred spirits?" Zac asked curiously as the two walked toward the core again, though Zac noticed the Realm Spirit didn't move exactly toward the central castle.

"Just like the little demoness, I was once a cultivator. Two actually," the Realm Spirit explained. "Of course, so little of my original identities survived that I'm more of a new being than an old."

"So you were a cultivator?" Zac exclaimed, but he wasn't overly surprised.

Seeing the appearance of this man had made Zac think of the Eveningtide Asura, and of how he had become one with Twilight. It somewhat seemed that Alvod Jondir was trying to walk down the same path as this Realm Spirit, or perhaps use their resemblance to access the core of the Mystic Realm.

"This place, which is now called the Twilight Ocean, was once part of my inner world," the man sighed, once more swapping over to a Revenant. "The two faces you see me wear belong to two first-step Autarchs that fought to the Death extremely ago. Because of a certain treasure we fought over, our deaths wasn't the end.

"A small part of our inner worlds survived and fused into this Mystic Realm. Innumerable years later, my two siblings and I woke up, each one controlling one version of this realm. Now, I am the last one to remain, and I will join the others soon enough," the man sighed. "But before that, I have some matters to attend to."

"So this is what the inner world of an Autarch looks like?" Zac muttered as he looked around with wide eyes.

“Hardly. We had both defended our Dao and connected our Inner Worlds to the Heavens. Our inner worlds were far grander in both depth and scale compared to this desolate Mystic Realm,” the Mystic Realm snorted. “Here we are.”

Zac looked around with interest. The Realm Spirit had taken him to one of the mansions that were right next to the towering inner wall. Zac hadn’t passed this particular one before, but it resembled most of the other mansions that he suspected to have been lived-in by undead cultivators.

“This town was created in an attempt to live as a cultivator once more after waking up,” the man sighed as he looked around. “Alas, some things were not meant to be. Time is different for a Realm Spirit. I fell asleep, and when I woke up, everyone had been dead for a million years. Some time later, I was modified by the System to become a trial ground.”

The two entered the courtyard, and Zac felt a bit of trepidation when he saw the dispersing haze congeal behind them, blocking his escape.

“Just a small measure to make the treasure hunters look elsewhere while we talk,” the Realm spirit explained. “My time is running short so I will make it brief. I have a task I would like to entrust you.”

Zac looked hesitantly at the Realm Spirit, trying to suss out his motives.

“I’m sorry,” Zac eventually said, steeling himself for an eventual outburst. “I have run myself ragged completing tasks for old mons- ehm, masters. You’ve seen the state of my body. I can barely help myself at the moment, let alone others. I will have to decline.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” the Realm Spirit said with a raised brow. “But what if the task I’m talking about is for you to take a priceless treasure away from here? Something marvelous beyond compare, and something that should be highly beneficial for someone with your unique situation.”

Zac blankly looked at the Realm Spirit for almost ten seconds before he released a deep sigh.

“Alright, what do you need me to do?”