

The Fall 780

Chapter 780: Marvellous Beyond Compare

Zac's body was on the verge of shutting down, but he still couldn't stop himself from accepting such a lucrative task. How could he possibly say no to a treasure that a former Autarch called 'marvelous beyond compare'? It was even to the point he might form a Heart Demon if he turned away now, forever wondering how things would have panned out if he hadn't backed down at this moment.

"I knew I could count on you, young man," the Realm Spirit smiled. "By the way, you can call me Qi'Sar."

"First of all, tell me how to help my Tool Spirit," Zac said, trying to remember if he had heard that name before.

But he drew a complete blank, as there was nothing of the sort mentioned in the missives he had poured through, and neither had Catheya mentioned it.

"Her grade is too low, and she is overwhelmed by the ferocity of the energies she has absorbed. It is slowly tearing her apart as she is unable to refine the energies quickly enough," Qi'Sar said. "In her current state, she will last a few days at the best. Luckily, there are many ways to help her. The easiest method is to provide something that will seal the energy temporarily, allowing her to take out and refine it bit by bit."

Zac nodded in agreement, feeling the method feasible. After all, that was exactly what he was doing with the remnants in his mind. The fact that he had a few days was a relief as well, as he really needed to rest for a few more minutes.

"I just so happen to possess some refined Temporal Crystals. Have the Tool Spirit absorb a few of them, and she will be able to seal the rampant energies within a temporal field, drastically slowing the rate of destruction. It should be enough for her to refine them," the Realm Spirit continued.

"Perfect," Zac exclaimed. "Where are they?"

"I do not have them on me," Qi'Sar smiled. "Remember, I am just here as a projection. Lucky for you, they are right by the treasure. I have used quite a few Temporal Crystals to speed up its maturity so that it could be taken away before this realm collapsed."

"So just what is this treasure you want me to take?" Zac asked curiously.

"All in time," the Realm Spirit said.

Zac frowned in annoyance, but his brows quickly smoothed out. It was a bit odd that he didn't want to say, but hearing the explanation gave some indication of what kind of treasure it was. From the sounds of it, the item was something living rather than a fully-formed treasure. Otherwise, Qi'Sar wouldn't have needed to put it in a Temporal Field to mature it.

"Wait, it's not the item that the Divine Monarchs are fighting over?" Zac hesitantly asked.

"No," the Realm Spirit said with a shake of his head. "They are fighting over the true core of this Mystic Realm, a mutated World Core that contains echoes of the Daos my two predecessors possessed before dying. They are trying to take my place and directly connect with the core, which would allow them to

more easily transform and absorb the Dao within. Along with some other preparations, they have a decent chance of calling down the old Heavens."

Zac's heart beat an extra time when he thought of a core containing the Dao insights of an Autarch. Even if he could get a small whiff of that, he would probably push all three of his Daos to the peak of what the E-grade could withstand. Even that white light that passed through him in the valley would probably be unable to match up to something like that.

"Don't even think about it," the Realm Spirit snorted when he saw the greed in Zac's eyes. "Even if I helped you get close to take it, you would only get yourself killed. A sense of propriety is important for a cultivator, to know when to advance and when to back away."

"Alright, I get it," Zac muttered as he sat down on a dusty chair, not forgetting to keep restoring his body as best as he could. "Are we in a hurry?"

"We have some time, but I cannot linger too long," Qi'Sar said. "The System has deactivated the real restrictions of my castle, allowing the children to slowly make their way toward my sanctum. I need to return within fifteen minutes to stop them from trapping my spirit. I want to die on my own terms."

"Fifteen minutes," Zac sighed. "Barely enough to make some field repairs. This better be worth it."

"Don't worry, you will not be disappointed. The item I want you to take away is of lower grade than the World Core, but it might be just as useful to an Edgewalker such as yourself."

"An Edgewalker? What?" Zac said with confusion.

"It is what you call people such as yourself, beings that innately hold two opposing paths. You walk at the edge between two grand Daos," the Realm Spirit explained.

"There are more people like me?" Zac asked with a mix of relief and disappointment.

"What is truly unique in the Multiverse?" the man smiled. "But I can't remember ever encountering one such as yourself before. It should be quite rare, especially Life-Death Edgewalkers."

"How would the Undead Empire react to someone like me?" Zac asked hesitantly.

"I am afraid I do not know. Truthfully, I thought you a covert member of the empire, sent here because of your unique constitution. Too little remains of my memories of the inner workings of the Undead Empire. Too much time has passed," the man said with a shake of his head. "But your constitution and the fact that you have already climbed that broken peak with some success should warrant some nurturing."

"The Dao of Chaos?" Zac muttered. "How come everyone calls it a broken peak? Is it because it's unorthodox?"

"No Dao is unorthodox," the Realm Spirit snorted. "The Dao is the Dao. However, as the eras turn and time itself grinds to dust, the balance of the Heavens shift. Eventually, a cataclysm will take place, one where the Heavens themselves are ripped apart."

Zac listened with confusion, not quite getting it. But he ventured a guess. "Like the Dark Age preceding the System?"

"The birth of the System cannot truly be considered such an event," the Realm Spirit said. "This current era and the era of Emperor Limitless, they are one and the same, far too short timespans to be considered eras on their own."

"But the System has been around for an extreme amount of time, far longer than even the lifespans of A-grade cultivators," Zac countered. "That's not enough to be considered an era?"

"The lifespan of those at the peak can seem endless to most, but it cannot compare to the age of an era. When Emperor Limitless began his mad experiment, the era was still in its infancy, and the Heavens were still recovering from the previous cataclysm. Most likely, that's the only reason his attempt succeeded," the Realm Spirit smiled.

Zac's eyes were wide as he listened with rapt attention, almost forgetting the wretched state of his body and Alea's situation. This Realm Spirit clearly had access to knowledge far beyond the scope of the Frontier. This was a huge opportunity to get a deeper understanding of the Multiverse and the Dao of Chaos.

"Most factions call this current era the Era of Unification. A harmonious balance of Dao, centered around the Dao of Order," the Realm Spirit continued.

"But the Apostate of Order was just the third one to appear?" Zac said with confusion. "How can his Dao be the main one?"

"He is the first true Apostate," the Realm Spirit smiled. "The Beast Progenitor was on equal standing to Limitless Emperor even before the System was born, most likely even more powerful. They simply infused their Dao into the System to give the myriad beasts of the Multiverse a path in this new reality. As for the First Defier, he was an aberration that likely will not appear again. Talomis A'Pakrava, the Apostate of Order, was the first one to reach the peak under the guidance of the System."

"How is this related to the Dao of Chaos?" Zac hesitantly asked.

"The Order and Chaos, two opposite realities," the Realm Spirit mused. "This era is one where Dao is harmonious and orderly, but during the previous era, Primordial Chaos ran free, influencing the will of the Heavens. That's why we generally refer to the previous era as the Primordial Era."

"Did everyone cultivate the Dao of Chaos back then?" Zac said as he shuddered, remembering just how terrifying that energy was.

"Hardly, but it was the glue that held the Heavens together, and its influence could be seen in all paths. Conversely, this Era is one forged through Order, where your pathways, your skills, your Titles have the echoes of Order within," Qi'Sar said.

"How do people know all this?" Zac asked. "I thought people barely knew what was going on in the age of Emperor Limitless."

"The Eternal Heritages," the Realm Spirit smiled. "I had the luck of witnessing one such site in my lifetime, it is my greatest source of pride."

"Eternal Heritage?" Zac said, never having heard of anything like it before.

"All life in the Multiverse was extinguished at the end of the Primordial Era, all matter returned to the Primordial Chaos. But some things... Are beyond the Dao itself, eternal. There are a handful of items and places that survived the cataclysm of the Primordial Era. Each one of those Heritages is beyond your comprehension, powerful enough to turn empires to dust."

"It is through those Heritages much about the ancient past was discovered. I personally know of two eras that have left behind such items, a testament to the might of their time. Apart from the Primordial Era, there has also been an era where the Five Elements were the basis of all reality. There are most likely more of them out there, but the peak factions are fiercely guarding them," Qi'Sar said.

"Greater than the Dao," Zac muttered, unable to imagine just how powerful those places were. Did they surpass the A-grade?

"In contrast, not a single such Heritage has been created in the Era of Unity, at least not to my knowledge," Qi'Sar said, confirming Zac's guess. "The beings that created these Heritages... They would be unmatched and unopposed if they appeared in this age."

"And this is somehow related to the Broken Peaks?" Zac asked.

What Qi'Sar said was interesting, but time was limited and he needed to get something tangible he could use.

"The cataclysm ended the Primordial Era, and the Heavens themselves were destroyed. Of course, the Dao is eternal, and it slowly reformed itself, giving birth to the current age. However, some parts were more affected by the cataclysm than others. The Dao of Chaos and a few others have still not been completely reintegrated into the Heavens. Then the System arrived, complicating things further," Qi'Sar said.

"Does that mean cultivating the Dao of Chaos is impossible?" Zac frowned.

"Nothing is impossible," the Realm Spirit said. "As I said, the Dao is Eternal. While cultivators call them Broken Peaks, it's more apt to say they are obscured. You can still climb them, but it puts greater requirements on your affinities. However, walking the trodden path within the purview of the System... It has its own issues."

"Is that why the Undead Empire doesn't want its followers to cultivate pure death?" Zac ventured.

"No, that is due to another issue, but I cannot discuss it," Qi'Sar smiled. "The compulsions still bind me, even in this state."

Zac wanted to ask more, but it looked like they had run out of time. The Realm Spirit shuddered as a couple of new cracks appeared on his face.

"It is time for me to return. Follow me," he said.

Zac got back on his feet with a grunt, and the Tool Spirit led him deeper into the mansion, passing one opulent room after another. Eventually, they entered a seemingly unassuming study, but Zac realized what was going on when the Realm Spirit indicated for him to move a small statue. Zac walked over and pushed it, prompting a trap-door to smoothly open.

"This pathway will lead to the cellar of my castle, allowing you to circumvent the cultivators guarding the entrance aboveground. The treasure room is located down there as well. The others are busy breaking through the restrictions to reach my core. If all goes according to plan, you will not meet any of the other trial takers in this venture," Qi'Sar said.

"Simple enough," Zac muttered. "Will you tell me now what it is you want me to take away from here?"

"It's a special crystal I have nurtured with the energy of realm for millions of years," Qi'Sar relented. "A unique creation of life and death."

"No wonder," Zac whistled, though he inwardly wondered if things really were that simple.

"As long as you take that thing away, you're free to help yourself to everything else left in the treasury," the Realm Spirit added.

"Very generous," Zac said with a slightly raised brow.

"I can't take it with me into the cycle of reincarnation," the Realm Spirit laughed when he saw Zac's skepticism. "I might as well do a good deed by helping someone on a similar path as my own. Besides, the less that is left to the vultures outside, the easier I'll be able to pass on."

"I hate to ask, but are you able to control where I am let out when this all goes down?" Zac ventured. "I have essentially angered every party in this conflict. If you want me to take this treasure of yours away, I could use the assist."

"I might be able to slightly move you further away from the core of the action. But you should understand that I will be facing my end the moment the realm collapses, and I cannot guarantee anything," the man said after some thought. "But if you help me with this task, I will do my utmost."

"That's fine, I can manage from there," Zac slowly said.

While he said that, Zac wasn't quite as confident as he let on. In fact, he felt the odds of him being able to smoothly return to Zecia pretty slim. There was no guarantee that the Teleportation Arrays would work when he exited. The platform housing the arrays might have been destroyed already. And even if it still stood intact, there was no way that Alvod would keep it operational.

Shutting that thing down would be the first thing he did to prevent any powerful enemies from joining the struggle. Zac had some cards prepared, but they probably wouldn't work in the middle of whatever chaos waited outside. But as long as he could get far enough away, he had a shot. If not, he would have to figure something out. There would be a lot of cultivators stranded, and a solution would hopefully present itself.

Zac couldn't expect the Realm Spirit to accomplish something impossible, and he even felt embarrassed to ask. After all, no matter who won on the outside, the man standing in front of him would die. A former Autarch, someone who had towered over trillions of beings, one of the true rulers of the Multiverse.

"Are... you okay?" Zac hesitantly asked.

"Most of my old life is hazy, but the little I remember was grander than what most could ever dream of experiencing. I have seen civilizations rise and fall, I have witnessed miracles and experienced sorrows,

all in the pursuit of the Grand Dao," the man smiled. "But everything must end. I have already overstayed my welcome. It is time for me to enter Samsara."

With that, he was gone. Zac thoughtfully looked at the spot where the Realm Spirit disappeared for a few moments before his gaze turned to the hidden corridor leading toward the castle. He tried to make sense of the former Autarch, but it was impossible to draw any definite conclusions. He had been congenial, but was Qi'Sar's intentions really as pure as he let on?

The spirit hadn't made any threats or tried to force his hands, but he had made it almost impossible to say no. The material to stabilize Alea just so happened to be in the same room as the mysterious crystal? The spirit would help expel him at a safe spot if Zac helped him?

Their talk had been harmonious, but if there was one thing Ogras had taught him, it was to never take people at face value. This was an old monster, two even, who had come close to the peak of cultivation. That was something that required not only talent, but also smarts, ruthlessness, and an unbendable will.

Was he really resigned to falling here and becoming fuel for the Eveningtide Asura's ascension?

Zac knew that existential exhaustion was a real thing, but it was surprisingly rare among peak existences. Their conception of time shifted as their grades increased, and they only got where they were because of an obsession with the Dao. So it was a very real possibility that this Realm Spirit had some plans of their own, a gambit to continue their pursuit of the Dao.

The question was what role Zac's mission had in this mess, and whether there was anything he could do to protect himself from any further machinations.

His thoughts turned for the next couple of minutes, but he ultimately shook his head and started to get ready. No matter what the true reason was for the Realm Spirit approaching him was, Zac still had to go through with it. But he would keep his eyes open and play things by the ear.

A stream of energy entered his Specialty Core, and a moment later, life spread through his body. However, Zac's eyes widened with alarm when he felt terrifying fluctuations in his chest as a storm of Twilight Energy surged into his body. It felt like his body was being ripped apart by a million spatial tears, and like his pathways were on fire. He fell down on the ground with a scream, barely able to stay conscious.

What the hell was going on?