

The Fall 793

Chapter 793: Experience

"Settling down is fine for some, but my Dao is confirmed through slaughter," a scarred human said with a frown. "Settling down would destroy my path."

"Don't worry. There are designated zones for that as well," the metallic man with a lazy wave as he started walking, and a shimmer across the glade indicated that the barrier had been deactivated.

"Come, it'll all be clear enough soon. Of course, you're free to go wherever you want. I won't stop you."

The hundred-odd cultivators looked at each other with confusion, and most shrugged before following the Orom Attendant. A few others, including the man who walked the path of slaughter, walked off in their own direction, soon blending with the foliage. Zac guessed those people were wandering cultivators unwilling to become part of a collective.

As for himself, Zac decided to follow the bulk of the captives. It didn't make much sense for the attendant to be lying at this point, and he needed to understand this place better if he wanted to attempt a prison break. The old human who spoke up earlier walked along as well, and Zac slowly walked over to walk next to him.

"Excuse me," Zac eventually said with a low voice. "Could you explain why the Orom captured us?"

"What makes you think I know?" the old man said with a raised brow.

"You looked like you did. I think only a few of us were left out of the loop," Zac said with a helpless shrug.

"Well, whatever," the old man sighed. "You can see this one as a freebie, seeing as we got caught together. Do you know the most common way to reach the peak of cultivation?"

"Talent and lucky encounters?" Zac ventured with some confusion.

"Hardly," the man snorted. "Theft!"

"Cultivation is endless, but resources are lacking," the old man sighed. "Especially at the top. Not only that, but the demands on understanding become greater and greater, soon to the point that even the most talented cultivators get overwhelmed. So, they steal. Steal resources. Steal cultivation havens. Steal Dao and Fate."

"Steal Dao and Fate?" Zac blurted, but he quickly thought back to the events of the Twilight Ascent.

It was clear that the Eveningtide Asura had turned the whole Twilight Ocean into some sort of cultivation resource. And come to think of it, the quest was designed to 'perfect the tapestry of twilight'. Was that the same thing? Using generations of cultivators to shore up his understanding. Each death, each breakthrough; a fragment of it was all siphoned to himself.

"Looks like you get it," the old man nodded. "This big bastard is using cultivators to speed up its progress from the looks of it. It's a crooked path, but it's better than doing nothing. It's the same as what most cultivators keeping people inside their inner worlds are doing."

Zac's eyes widened a bit at that. This was common practice?

"Of course, it's usually descendants who gain resources, safety, and a superior environment in return," the old man added. "Absorbing hostiles into your world would be extremely dangerous, and it's impossible in most cases. This big guy can only do it because we're not actually inside an inner world. We're rather inside its body like parasites."

"How does that affect us?" Zac asked. "If our fate is getting robbed?"

"No idea," the old man grimaced. "But it's not like your Daos can get ripped out of your body. Most likely you will find progress and cultivation slower, as some of the benefits goes to the landlord. And being trapped like this might slow down your momentum, subverting your fate. But I guess we'll find out more over the following centuries."

"Centuries," Zac muttered with a helpless shake of his head.

"Don't tell me you're part of the younger generation?" the old man exclaimed as he looked over at Zac with surprise. "I thought all of us were old hands who had already confirmed our paths. But now that you mention it... Your aura..."

"E-grades and early Hegemons being dragged here are somewhat rare. I think you're the third one to pass the filter this time around, though a few more should arrive over the following week. Your insights are too shallow to bring any benefits to the Orom, but it has decided to take a bet on you. If one is snatched, they usually have something interesting going on," the metallic man grunted as he looked back from the front. He had clearly heard the whole conversation. "If you want my advice kid, avoid the combat-oriented places for now."

"Why?" Zac asked with a frown, realizing he might have inadvertently divulged more than he should have. "Isn't everyone sealed the same?"

A few of the captives immediately started laughing, and the old man looked at Zac like he was a fool. "Brat, stop my fist."

Zac looked over with surprise, only to find a punch already flying toward his face. Zac's own body was thankfully already moving by instinct, and he used one hand to divert the blow while countering with a gut-punch of his own. There was something off with the old man's attack though, and Zac was forced to adjust his body over and over to avoid its trajectory.

However, no matter what he did, the fist just kept getting closer, while his own attack was somehow way off-mark. A moment later he suddenly found himself on the ground with a blazing pain in his head. He tried to get back on his feet, but he was actually groggy enough to fall back down on his ass.

What had just happened? Their attributes were the same, yet it felt like the old man was twice as fast as he was.

"Brat, I could defeat ten of you simply based on my experience," the old man laughed. "And I am just a Late-stage Hegemon. The Monarchs would be able to take on an army of you brats even while having the same attributes. Our attributes are locked, but that doesn't mean we can't benefit from our understanding of combat and the Dao."

"Well, shit," Zac muttered as he shook his head to regain some clarity.

It was true. He'd be able to take out at least ten people with similar stats back on Earth based on his combat experience alone. Add to that the combat stances he had started to form based on his Daos and his Path, and he was undefeatable. But compared to a late Hegemon, he was still far lacking in experience. They had all fought longer than he had lived.

Furthermore, those who had made it to this place rather than getting killed were all unusually talented from the looks of it. It would be odd if they hadn't all formed a path of their own by now, and spent millennia polishing it.

"Well, it's not all bad, kid," the metallic man laughed as he started walking over. "You're at the bottom of the totem pole right now, but the fact that you were dragged here proves your talent is uncommonly high. People in your situation seem to have the highest chance of leaving this place, only exceeded by the high-grade monarchs right at the precipice. Some of us might rely on you in a few dozen millennia to get word to our families."

Zac looked at the metallic man with gratitude, realizing he was helping him out here. The last sentence could act as a deterrent to the old monsters around him. Messing with him might be nice to relieve some stress in this messed-up situation, but it might come back to bite them in the future.

Besides, he had one unique advantage to defend himself in this place if it came down to it; his bloodline.

"Have there been people saved by their families?" a graceful woman asked, speaking up for the first time.

"There are occasionally such things happening," the metallic man nodded. "Some people have been teleported out from this place without breaking through. Others have just disappeared. Most of these people have been ransomed by the Orom, or perhaps the Orom was threatened to spit them out. But don't expect anything unless you have Autarchs among your elders."

"And some have disappeared?" another man said speculatively.

"They might have died, or they might have figured out a way to escape. No trap is perfect," the attendant shrugged. "And don't ask me how since I have no idea. If you lack the confidence to confirm your Dao but have some powerful ancestors, I'd suggest you start making fate tokens and giving them out to those who seem to have the potential to leave the normal way. Usually, when someone confirms their Dao, a few more people are freed within a few centuries."

"Is it possible to break through grades in this place?" Zac asked.

"Most look at the Orom like a jailer, but you can also consider it a gardener," the metallic man said as he reached a hand down toward Zac to help him up. "We are the crops it's growing. And how could crops grow without the proper nourishment? You'll find that this place has some advantages that are hard to find elsewhere. I'm Murbot, by the way."

"Zac," Zac grunted as he got back on his feet. He shot a glance at the old man who had explained things to him earlier. "Some punch."

“Don’t feel too bad, I’ve been beating up brats like you for 2,000 years,” the man guffawed. “Your reaction wasn’t bad, much better than my shitty descendants.”

Zac smiled in return, though he was a bit surprised inwardly. The Hegemon looked pretty old, to the point that Zac suspected he was running out of longevity. But 2,000 years was nothing to someone at that level. If anything, he was still young, completely different from the old Hegemons who had been stuck at some bottleneck for eons.

He didn’t know why the man looked like that, though it probably was just a mark of eccentricity. Most people preferred to stay young-looking, but some went in a different direction. On second thought, Zac should have figured that was the case. What would the Orom want with an old man stuck at a bottleneck? How many insights and breakthroughs could someone like that provide?

The group started moving again soon enough. However, they only moved for another few minutes before they stopped again. It wasn’t due to Murbot stopping to explain something, but rather because of the appearance of a densely engraved pyramid in the woods.

“A seal mountain, Pseudo C-grade!” the old man exclaimed, and more than one warrior rushed forward with greed in their eyes.

However, Zac stayed behind, as did most of the captives. Greed had made even these Hegemons forget themselves, but Zac understood it wasn’t a coincidence they passed this thing. How could something so valuable just be up for grabs? And how would anyone even stow it away with their Spatial Treasures locked?

As expected, the old masters soon returned a bit shamefaced a minute later, all of them unsurprisingly empty-handed.

“What a waste,” the old man groaned sighed as he threw a wistful look at the mountain. “That’s at least 100 C-grade coins left lying in the wild.”

Zac looked at the mountain with shock and avarice, plans already forming in his mind. Perhaps there would be an opportunity to snatch it in the future with the help of his bloodline talent. Perhaps there were even better treasures waiting out there for him.

“It’s a good reminder for you all,” Murbot grinned. “As I mentioned before, you will be able to transfer your items to local Cosmos Sacks, but you need to be careful. You need the strength to put the items back again. This thing was left here three hundred thousand years ago by a Gold Badge wanting to show off to a new batch of recruits. No one has been able to take it away since.”

Zac snorted, and a few laughs emerged from the group. The scene was a bit odd considering everyone had just become a prisoner, where most of them were bound to be trapped for the rest of their lives. If it was earthlings, most would be deep in a pit of despair by now. Then again, these people were all Hegemons and higher who had confirmed their paths and were elites in their own right.

Something like this probably wasn’t enough to cause a ripple in their mental state even if they didn’t have the hidden means as he had.

The group kept walking for another two hours, their progress feeling uncomfortably slow now that his Dexterity had been cut down to a tenth. Then again, Zac’s annoyance was nothing compared to the

Hegemons who probably weren't used to walking long stretches anymore. People kept peppering Murbot with questions, but he was not too interested in divulging any secret tricks of this place.

He kept saying that everything would be made known when they reached their destination. And finally, they reached a small town, looking almost like something you'd find in a fairy tale. The streets were wide and clean, and the homes were beautiful mansions. Not only that, the ambient energy was extremely dense. In fact, Zac had noticed that since being dragged into this place. It wasn't just a matter of quantity, but quality.

Catheya had talked about outer realms being "far from the heavens" when describing the frontier, but he hadn't understood what that meant. However, now it felt clearer. He wouldn't say that the Cosmic Energy was attuned, or that the air was filled with Origin Dao. It was simply... Better.

He could sense his Daos with greater clarity, like the opposite feeling of when he was in the Tower of Eternity and the Dao felt hollow from the time dilation. It didn't feel as palpable as when Earth was newly integrated and rife with Origin Dao, but it was rather stable and pervasive. Perhaps it was equivalent to a C-grade continent, considering that people had managed to achieve Divine Monarchy in this place.

"As far as prisons go, this is probably the best one I've been locked inside," a beastkin muttered, prompting a few laughs.

"If you like this place, then you better work hard. You remember those second-string cultivators I mentioned?" Murbot said as he glanced back at the group. "Their environment is... Not quite as nice. You are presented with a carrot, they are presented with a stick. If you don't progress fast enough, you will be relegated down and they will take their place. And let me tell you, those people would be ready to slaughter their clans for a chance to move here after a few years in that place."

Zac shuddered, once more reminded that the Orom wasn't some benign being that provided cultivation opportunities for the fun of it. It was doing all this for its cultivation, and any dead weight who didn't provide insights would be discarded. He had heard a few stories about the kind of places where established factions created Deathsworn, squads of humanoid killing machines. The Orom was most likely using those kinds of cruel methods to squeeze out any potential it could from those second-string cultivators.

"I'll give you a warning. You are safe from the first relegation, after which you will have to fight for your right to stay. Things might look relaxed in this place, but everyone is desperately cultivating to stay ahead," Murbot added. "Now, follow me. There is one last place I need to show you before I set you loose."

The group walked for a few more minutes until they reached a large square filled with people, a mix of old prisoners and other cultivators who had just been dragged here as well. The old cultivators seemed to belong to two groups. The first group was walking in and out of a large building, clearly having some errands to run.

The other group was just there to look at the newcomers, and Zac noticed that a few of the new captives were approached. Zac's eyes thinned, his scammer-sense waking up. It felt like the prisoners

were trying to take advantage of the newcomers somehow. Of course, no one who had made it here was a fool, and it looked like the attempts were met with failure.

“This place is the beginner’s square,” Murbot explained as he pointed at the large hall that had constant foot traffic. “The store is over there. There are more towns out there on this continent, and they all have roughly the same items. You all get 1,000 Purchase Points to start off, which can help you get settled in the Orom World. There are various ways to gain more points but read about that yourselves. Alright, I’m off. Good luck, hatchlings.”

The attendant walked away the next moment, using his superior attributes to zip away. Zac looked in his direction for a few moments before turning to the two massive steles that were erected in the center of the square. They listed the rules of regulations in this place, and the more people read, the worse their expressions got.

Zac was the same with a furrow on his face. This place looked nice and orderly, but in reality it was pretty sinister.