

The Fall 794

Chapter 794: Freedom's End

The world they had been trapped in was simply called the Orom World, and they were currently in a town that was somewhat morbidly named Freedom's End. There were 17 more towns in total, though you were allowed to set up a cultivation cave almost wherever you wanted. Traveling this world from end to end would take about five months even with their current attributes, proof of just how massive this place was even if it was just the innards of a Leviathan.

There had to be some high-grade spatial manipulation at play for this to be possible. The Orom had been larger than a planet, but it ultimately wasn't large enough for someone with 1,000 Dexterity to take almost half a year to rush from end to end.

Thankfully, there was a system of teleportation arrays that only required 10 Purchase Points to use. Even better, the first three uses were on the house, allowing the newcomers to check a few things out. After that, you had to use the points you collected. The most straightforward method to gain more points was to make improvements to your cultivation.

Every single Contribution Point you gained, also awarded a single Purchase Point. Unfortunately, there was no clear explanation of how many points different breakthroughs awarded. It was all up to the discretion of the Orom, or rather the brand on their hands. You could also gain Purchase Points through trade or a few other means, but Contribution Points only came from making progress.

As to why there were eighteen towns in total, it was related to the cultivation like most things in this place. Freedom's End had no particular attunement, but there were seven neighboring zones that all had different attunements related to nature. Zac looked around the square, and he could sense that most cultivators in the area had an earthy aura. Freedom's End was probably where these nature-aspected cultivators completed any business they had.

Most of the other towns had similar functions, being central hubs surrounded by enriched cultivation environments following various peaks, from Space to the five elements. Zac's eyes eventually stopped at the 8th settlement; Samsara's Edge. It was a town surrounded by zones of Life and Death.

Wasn't that just perfect for him?

The description of Samsara's Edge even had an additional note that the Death-attuned Zones were filled with Miasma rather than Cosmic Energy, and Zac guessed that was where most of the undead cultivators in the Orom cultivated. It was perfect for his purposes. Zac had already realized that escaping right away was impossible, no matter how much he wanted to get back to Earth.

Whether the escape method he landed on would rely on Kenzie's Teleportation Arrays or him making use of his Bloodline, he would probably only get one shot at it. So first, he needed to recuperate to a perfect state, and if possible empower himself even further before making his move. Secondly, it would take some time to devise a plan, considering it was a proper Autarch keeping him trapped.

He couldn't just plonk down the Teleportation Array in the middle of the forest and expect it to work.

As for rescue, Zac didn't hold up much hope. Even if someone from the Undead Empire became interested in him after Catehya's report and the events in the Harbor, how would they even find him?

He had stopped counting after passing through 50 dimensional layers on his way to the Orom, and the beast most likely used various top-grade methods to avoid being hunted down all this time.

And while his Mother was technically an Autarch as far as he could tell, there was no way she would be interested in helping him. The only way Zac could see that happening was if she felt his imprisonment an affront to her own exalted name or something similarly insane. He would have to rely on himself to get out of here, and he kept reading the large stele in hopes of gaining any clues that could help with that.

As to why the Orom was interested in so many different peaks of cultivation, Zac had no idea, and neither was it explained. Perhaps it was hoping to draw inspiration from all kinds of sources. Besides, Spatial Cultivators were just too rare, just like Karmic Cultivators. There was no way it would be able to fill a whole world like this with spatial cultivators, at least not without garnering a whole lot of unwanted attention.

Zac guessed that using his Annihilation Sphere had marked him as a unique talent of Death or perhaps even Oblivion, which was why he was sent to cultivate rather than turned into food. He guessed that the sphere originally had some sort of affinity tester, and he wasn't surprised that it didn't consider him a target for nurturing at first.

Not all the towns were these kinds of elemental hubs though. One of them housed an arena where you could fight against both beasts and other cultivators. You could even bet your Purchase Points there when fighting, but betting on others wasn't allowed. You needed to earn any points you gained in the Orom World.

Another town held the gate to the 'wilderness', a vast sector teeming with beasts. It was a place to temper yourself, to confirm the insights you had gained while meditating.

The space in the wilderness was far larger than the rest of the Orom World combined, but that resulted in the cultivation environment being worse. Setting up a cultivation cave there would be impractical, but those who confirmed their path through slaughter would invariably spend a lot of time there.

Skill fractals were unlocked there as well, though the attribute limiters were still active. Zac didn't quite understand how you could possibly power up a Monarch's or Hegemon's skills with only 1,000 attributes available, but he guessed the Orom had figured out some way to let cultivators use lesser versions of their skills.

If one of the plaques held the various spots and highlights of this world, then the next one held the rules. As Zac read one after another, it became all-too-apparent that the luxurious and carefree front of this place was all but an illusion. There were extremely strict rules put in place to maximize the benefits of the Orom.

Just as Murbot mentioned, there were recurring relegations. E-grade cultivators were measured once every five years, Hegemons once every fifty years, and Monarchs once every five hundred. The rules were simple; There were only so many spots on the first string, and those spots were handed out based on the number of Contribution Points you had gathered since the last relegation.

If you were a first-string cultivator and got stuck at some bottleneck, you'd probably get replaced by a second-string cultivator soon enough. And the lowest-performing members of the second string were

straight-up killed as a warning to the others. That essentially meant that any Hegemon who found themselves unable to make any progress for a few hundred years would get executed.

As new arrivals, their situation was a bit special. Murbot had mentioned being safe from the first relegation, but that was only against the old prisoners. Their group of new arrivals would have one reshuffle in three years before they started to compete against the main population for slots. Zac guessed that was an extra measure because those prison bubbles were only so accurate to determine talent.

So if you didn't perform you'd quickly fall out of grace and enter a world of hurt, but conversely, there were perks of making large strides in your cultivation. The more Contribution Points you gathered, the more Purchase Points you could exchange for kinds of cultivation treasures without affecting your placement. Even better, high placements would provide additional benefits such as access to restricted cultivation grounds.

And from the sounds of it, there were marvelous spots inside the Orom that were attractive to even Monarchs.

As for the other rules, they were like most clans except stricter. That was actually a good thing for Zac, considering how he was at the bottom of the totem pole in this place. Killing was strictly prohibited, and even harassing cultivators who were meditating resulted in harsh contribution penalties.

The method to become Orom Attendants like Murbot was simple enough as well. You needed to gain a certain amount of total contribution, while also completing some quests the Orom assigned.

There were a few other rules that made it clear that this place wasn't some sect though. For example, procreation was banned in this place. Having a child would result in harsh penalties, and the child would be taken away. Zac guessed that the Orom didn't want sprawling clans springing up inside its body, draining its resources, and it took draconian measures to make sure that didn't happen.

That resulted in there only being roughly 500,000 cultivators living in the Orom World. Of course, this small group alone would most likely be able to easily conquer a sector like Zecia considering most of them were elite Hegemons and Monarchs that the Orom felt was worthy to keep around.

"Three years, I'll have to go all out," the old man said with a grimace before he turned to Zac. "So what will you do, brat?"

"I'll rest a week or two before I start looking for a place to set up camp," Zac sighed. "I was almost killed a few times over before getting captured, I need to recuperate a bit."

"So you were in the middle of a fight as well? Where did you come from?" the old man asked curiously.

Zac didn't immediately answer, prompting the old man to snort. "What a careful brat. I am just trying to figure out how wide a net that big bastard was casting. I am from the Yr'Lyserium Sector, a subsidiary sector of a faction called the Radiant Temple."

A few of the new arrivals walked over and a tattooed warrior spoke up. "23rd Outer Regiment of the Havarok Army."

The old man and two others looked at the beastman with small frowns, but he soon relaxed with a shrug. "I guess old grudges are irrelevant in this place."

"I came from the Twilight Harbor," Zac eventually said, and many indicated they had the same origin, just like he had suspected before.

"Oh, that trading hub in the frontier?" the old man exclaimed with surprise. "Quite a distance from us. This big bastard has quite some reach, it should have made use of the Tarramak Vault somehow. It must have defended its Dao under the Path of Space to accomplish something like this. And how come so many of you came from there?"

"I don't think Twilight Harbor exists any longer," Zac said. "I'm not sure exactly what happened, but a full-scale war broke out, destroying a whole Mystic Realm while I was still inside. It was simply pandemonium outside, and I was dragged into a spatial tear. I was captured before I found a way back into the main dimension."

He obviously wouldn't mention that he played a pretty big role in destroying the Twilight Ocean. As far as he was concerned, Arcaz Black had nothing to do with him. He wasn't sure he would ever be able to use that identity again, depending on the Undead Empire's response to his actions.

Of course, this was all dependent on him actually finding a way out of here.

"The Twilight Lord sacrificed the Mystic Realm to create a chance to form a Ladder to Eternity," a beautiful woman with two long tails sighed. "I was thrown into the Void before I had a chance to see the result."

"An ascent in the frontier?" the old man exclaimed, and a few others had faces full of longing as well. "I wish I was there to see it."

"He was really trying to become an Autarch?" Zac asked curiously as he looked at the two-tailed woman. "I thought that wasn't possible in the frontier."

He had already discussed the situation with Catheya at length, but the people around him were all old monsters who should know more. He would have to be crazy to not make use of the opportunity to play dumb and glean some hard-to-access information.

The woman hesitated for a bit, but she eventually asked. "That is normally the case. I'm just a Hegemon as well so I don't know how it was possible."

"As the universe matures, the Dao grow scarce," the insectoid woman spoke up. "The Boundless Heavens have ushered in an era of prosperity, but the Heavens can't keep up. The ancient factions refuse to give up their advantages and draw the heavens to their side, leaving the Dao scattered in the frontiers. Still, the Dao is omnipresent, and the Heavens can be recalled to the frontier with the right catalyst."

"The Boundless Heavens occasionally integrates unusually energy-dense dimensions, allowing for a burst of progress before those at the peak intervene," another old man smiled. "Those ancient factions say it's for the safety of those on the Frontier. With them shrouding the heavens, no Autarchs will naturally appear. In return, Autarchs will find travel on the frontier a constant drain on their foundations."

The cultivator didn't say it outright, but his expression told Zac all he needed to know what he thought about the protection of the ancient factions. It was just an excuse to drain the weaker sectors and enrich their own cultivation grounds. Those kinds of things were beyond him, but it further explained why Leandra had been so insistent on taking Kenzie away from Zecia at least.

"So anyone breaking through to Autarchy inside the Orom and freeing everyone is impossible?" Zac sighed, realizing that insight would never be enough to reach Autarchy.

It didn't matter how deep your insights were or how great a foundation you had laid down. If you lacked that pure connection to the Heavens, no one would be calling down the Heavens to defend their Dao. If Zac was a Space Fish abductor, then his first order of business would be to make sure that kind of connection was impossible.

"Unless someone figures out a way to steal the foundation of the Orom itself to fuel their Ascent," another man said with a lazy shrug. "It is already a link to the Heavens through its own confirmed Dao. It seems like it doesn't want to find out if such a thing is possible, thus booting anyone with a confirmed Dao."

The group kept discussing the Eveningtide Asura's attempt for a while longer, but people started setting out soon enough. Ultimately, they had only been gathered together by chance, and only two pairs seemed to have any relation to each other on the outside.

"I guess something like this is hard to stomach for a youngling like you," the old man sighed as he looked at the people walking away. "For me, this place might be the only chance I have of ever forming an inner world."

"Just when I was about to try out for the Radiant Temple as well," Zac said with a smile. "I received a token to head over to Yr'Vanium Sector and all."

"Really?" the old man guffawed. "Well, if you manage to get out, you can always contact my old friend. He's just an information officer in the Radiant Temple, but has some good connections and a soft spot for outside hires. His name is Io Sardovar."

"You have that much hope in me?" Zac smiled.

The old man grinned a bit as he furtively looked around. "Your reaction is the same as ours, but our situation isn't the same. This place might actually improve our chances to reach Divine Monarchy. I essentially had no hopes before, but this place... at least gives me a sliver of a chance. But a young E-grade fledgling like you should be a lot more struck to have their Path derailed. I think you have some confidence in getting out of here. Do you have an Autarch ancestor perhaps? Are you perhaps a descendant that one of the Grand Elders sired outside the temple?"

Zac only gave a blank look in return, knowing all-too-well what the old man was thinking.

"Well whatever," the old man snorted when Zac refused to answer. "In either case, I'd like to leave a message with you as soon as I figure out how. In return, you can come once a month to get pummeled by me. You still have a lot of room for improvement, so it should provide you with some inspiration. I will reside somewhere in Glimmershroud."

Glimmershroud was one of the towns, and it was surrounded by zones related to the Dao of Order and the Dao of Space. Zac couldn't sense which one the old man followed, but he leaned toward the former considering what he had learned about the Radiant Temple.

"Alright. Those paths unfortunately aren't for me, but I'll come over if I get some points to spare," Zac smiled.

"Bring some alcohol if you do. A vigorous brat like you should be able to gather a lot of Purchase Points in short order. Don't be stingy with your friends," the old man said before he sauntered away.

"Friends? You didn't even introduce yourself," Zac muttered with some exasperation before he walked toward the contribution exchange.

There were two functions the Contribution Store filled; to sell the cultivation resources available in the Orom, and to unseal the items locked in your Spatial Treasures. Zac wasn't sure which one of those services he was most eager about, and the prospect of treasure almost allowed him to forget the predicament he was in.