

The Fall 798

Chapter 798: The First Clue

Zac shook his head with some helplessness as he pushed his makeshift raft across the lake. He had been so full of purpose as he sealed himself on his little island a month ago, yet he found himself leaving without having accomplished what he set out to do. But who could have expected it would take over a month to fully digest those two Soul Treasures that Aia Ouro left behind?

At first, the energies the items contained simply floated about in his Soul Aperture, but he quickly found that each cycle of [Nine Reincarnations Manual] had infused a little bit more of the energies into his Soul. Absorbing the treasures worked in his human form just fine, but he quickly realized the effect was better when he was drenched in death.

Therefore, he had spent most of his time in his Draugr form lately to get the most out of the items.

This was something Zac had decided on since long ago; he would have to use his Specialty Core in this place. No matter if it was to break the prison seal on his left arm or for escaping, Zac knew he would need to use everything in his arsenal. Furthermore, people were restrained in this place, to the point they shouldn't be able to glean anything from him even if the array in his body wasn't active.

The good news was that the prison seal didn't seem to notice anything amiss when transforming, and neither the Orom itself nor one of its Attendants came running to inquire what the hell was going on. The bad news was that changing race and inner energy didn't break or weaken the Prison Array.

He was just as sealed in his Draugr form as his living one.

At least, the situation allowed him to freely cultivate his soul over the past month. It might have taken longer than expected to fully infuse the medicinal efficacy into his soul, but the effect was stellar. Altogether, his Soul Core had grown in size by over 10%. More importantly, Zac felt it had reached some sort of limit, prompting the leftover energy of the first treasure to eventually be absorbed by [Spiritual Void].

The cleansing treasure also managed to expunge impurities he didn't even know he had, just like when he had taken that lava bath. A lot came from eating all that grass down in the Twilight Chasm, but he also sensed hidden energy from all kinds of encounters, from Aia Ouro's soul attack to tribulation lightning.

As proof of his progress, he had gained 68 Contribution Points during his cultivation session, just from his soul becoming stronger. He felt ready to take that next step anytime, but one thing held him back. Soon, two months would have passed since being trapped in the Orom World, and it was about time for the new stock to appear.

It was a huge event where people had saved their Purchase Points for centuries in hopes of finding something that would help them break through their bottleneck. It was like Black Friday in space, where everyone would rush to purchase items before they were snatched by someone else. The competition for items that suited him wouldn't be in very high demand, but there were still some cultivators at the E-grade and early Hegemons to compete with.

Furthermore, there were the second-string cultivators who would also get a chance if he waited too long.

Zac had planned to make this trip after undergoing his second reincarnation and use his newly-collected contribution points, but how could he possibly take that step with the whispers of treasures causing his mind to stray every five minutes? So now that he had completely absorbed the soul treasures, he'd decided to make the trek back to Samsara's Edge and check out the wares.

The trip was uneventful, but the same couldn't be said for the settlement when he finally reached it after a couple of days. Samsara's Edge was slightly larger compared to Freedom's End, yet it didn't feel empty at all. There was an unprecedented hustle and bustle, with constant foot traffic up and down the streets.

Unsurprisingly, the people were mostly a mix of undead and cultivators emitting vibrant auras, though Zac was surprised to see that there were quite a few monks among the living who didn't exactly emit the aura of a life cultivator. Had the Orom snatched up cultivators from some clash between the Buddhist Sangha and the Undead empire a few thousand years ago?

It was the first time Zac had seen so many Buddhist cultivators in one place. The Buddhists had a small presence in the Zecia sector, but he hadn't run into a single one during his travels. Just like Catheya said, the Buddhists generally cultivated in seclusion, which made their methods unique in a sense.

Most cultivators were forced to continuously seek out lucky encounters to progress on their paths, but numerous Monks never left their temples. Zac had no idea how something like that was possible, but he suspected there had to be some drawbacks to such a method. All cultivation had to adhere to the Law of Balance, and if they could continuously progress without outside help, there had to be something they were forced to give up in turn.

Suddenly, a monk turned around, clearly having sensed that Zac was staring at him.

"Amitabha, Benefactor," the monk smiled as he slowly walked over. "Is there something amiss?"

"Uh," Zac coughed. "No, I was just thinking about something."

"Benefactor is unfamiliar to me," the monk smiled. "Is benefactor perhaps a new arrival? If benefactor has any advice, this poor monk will be happy to listen. Lasting peace and the holy life are discovered through new friendships."

"I'm not experienced enough to dish out advice. It's just... I was once a progenitor," Zac slowly said, figuring he might as well ask something that had confused him for a while. "From a Sector without a strong Buddhist presence. Yet there were monks looking just like you, long before we were integrated."

"So it was like that," the monk nodded. "All is one, one is all. The hymns of the Akaniṣṭha are the hymns of the Cosmos. Anyone can listen in and gain enlightenment."

"They're a poison of the heart, a plague on the Multiverse," a snort emerged from behind, and Zac looked over with surprise.

It wasn't an undead cultivator as Zac had expected by the voice's cadence, but rather a dour-looking human who emitted a strong aura of decay. "The Buddhist Sangha is corruption. It is the death of self.

The more they ensnare with their gospel, the stronger their mountains grow. And with the things they control..."

"Amitabha, Buddha's love reaches all," the monk only smiled. "But a heart needs to be open to receive the love."

"You are one of the new E-grade brats, right?" the Necromancer said, ignoring the monk and instead turning his gaze on Zac. "Be careful of spending too much time around monks. They are natural pathbreakers, destroying everything to fuel their own enlightenment. If you're not careful, you'll turn into an empty vessel, endlessly reciting sutras to empower their Śakra. If they are left unchecked, one day the Immortal Buddha will open his eyes, and that is when we all fall."

After that, the dour man grunted with disgust and walked away, heading for what looked like a temporarily set-up restaurant.

"Benefactor must excuse my old friend," the monk said with a smile. "We were brought here at the same time, and we carry a shared fate."

"That's fine," Zac said. "It was just a stray thought I had upon seeing your familiar clothing."

"Then, I hope benefactor finds what you're looking for," the monk nodded. "And remember; while one's flesh can be fettered, the mind will always be free. It is never too late to turn back from the sea of bitterness. We always welcome discussion into the path."

Zac nodded, and he watched the monk slowly walk away as well as his thoughts swirled. He remembered Catheya having mentioned a bunch of Mountains and Temples, with the One Paradise standing at the top. Then this monk had in turn mentioned Akaniṣṭha, which he believed was one of the divine realms of Buddhism.

Did that place contain something that could send out the Dao of Buddha or whatever to all corners of the Multiverse, to the point that monks would start sprouting up even on unintegrated worlds? What had that kind of power? Was it the result of some supreme being at the peak of the A-grade practicing their Dao?

Or perhaps one of those Eternal Heritages that Qi'Sar mentioned? Considering the Buddhist Sangha was one of the most powerful factions in the multiverse, it stood to reason that those people controlled at least one such heritage.

Even more worrying were the warnings of the necromancer. By his words, the Buddhist Sangha sounded pretty dangerous, no matter if you talked about forced conversion or the Buddha himself. However, Zac wouldn't take something like that at face value, especially not from someone who clearly had a grudge with the monks.

Still, the warning made him a bit leery about the smiling monks around him as he headed toward the exchange.

There was a large gathering already waiting outside, but it didn't look like the new stock had arrived just yet. In fact, the doors to the Contribution Store were closed, something that wasn't ever supposed to happen. Zac also spotted a couple of clerks standing by the entrance, and he walked over after some

thought. The moment Zac walked up to the closest one, she wordlessly handed him a talisman with a bow.

“What’s this?” Zac asked as he accepted the item.

“With the high foot traffic around these times, the Orom has long instituted a queue system to avoid any issues. When the talisman lights up, you have ten minutes to enter the Contribution Store. After that, you have up to 30 minutes to peruse and purchase the new items. No one else is allowed to enter over the next two weeks,” the clerk explained.

“So all these people will be before me?” Zac grimaced.

“No, it is random. Though higher-ranked citizens do have an advantage,” the attendant smiled. “But perhaps your Luck will pull through.”

“Alright, thank you,” Zac nodded and walked away.

He didn’t have much else to do, so he simply made the rounds through Samsara’s Edge, listening to the discussions and looking at what kind of cultivators had chosen paths related to life or death.

Zac was also surprised to find himself at the center of some attention, even among undead cultivators. It wasn’t anything bad though. It was mostly people throwing out an olive branch with some diffuse promise about exchanging pointers. Zac didn’t understand it at first, but soon enough a peak-stage Hegemon explained it.

There was definitely some truth to Murbot’s explanation about the E-grade cultivators that the Orom passed through its filter. There were multiple examples of young elites crashing through the grades in the Orom World, their terrifying momentum generating a positive cycle where they got access to better and better cultivation resources and cultivation grounds.

However, there was one more reason the E-grade cultivators got some attention. Members of the younger generation were the most likely people to get picked up by someone on the outside. It wasn’t a surprise, considering that any E-grade cultivator a Primordial Beast found interesting was more likely to come from some powerful faction with Autarchs.

Of course, most E-grade cultivators didn’t belong to either of those two groups, but they had good odds of becoming high-level attendants as well. In either case, there was no harm in doing some networking, considering it could help them out down the road.

Zac wasn’t the greatest conversationalist, but he managed to get to know quite a few hegemon over the next few days, and his vision was greatly broadened. It turned out that most people staying in the surroundings didn’t cultivate pure life or death like he was, but they rather swapped between sectors in hopes of sparking new insights.

A few didn’t cultivate life or death at all, but rather absorbed themselves in a foreign Dao for a while in hopes of finding some inspiration, just like the Orom was doing by the looks of it. Zac passively stored away any information he could glean from the discussions, until one day he stumbled onto something extremely important to him.

"I'm sorry, did you say Six Profundity Empire?" Zac suddenly exclaimed as he looked at the Revenant in front of him with shock.

"That's right, why?" she asked, clearly a bit surprised at Zac's strong reaction. "Why, are you from there? Don't worry, past grudges don't matter in this place."

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I just heard it's an impressive empire. My ancestor visited it once."

"Oh?" Lorna exclaimed, her eyes widening a bit. "Your ancestor was an explorer?"

Zac knew what she was driving at. She surreptitiously tried to inquire whether his "ancestor" was someone capable of travel between empires, which would make them a powerful Monarch at the least, possibly even an Autarch.

"Something like that," Zac smiled. "Could you tell me more?"

"Well, the Six Profundity Empire is a decent strength A-grade force of Daoist Origins. It is not quite at the level of the Undead Empire, but it does have some connections to the Buddhist Sangha, while also being a core member of the Star Alliance," Lorna explained. "Our contact with them is mostly on the battlefield."

"Where is this empire located?" Zac asked, elated to finally find some clues to Kenzie's whereabouts. "And what's the Star Alliance?"

"The Six Profundity Empire claims a stretch of the Cosmic River and its surrounding areas. The Star Alliance is a group of empires that have banded together to protect their interests against larger enemies," Lorna said. "The Undead Empire doesn't have any direct contact with them, but some sects of theirs occasionally join in on crusades against us when they are looking for some bloodshed to temper themselves."

Zac asked a few follow-up questions until he believed he had a decent understanding of where that huge empire was located. It was hard to get a proper grasp of locations in the multiverse, considering it was mostly specks of activity surrounded with vast chasms of nothingness. But hearing Lorna explain it, it didn't seem completely impossible for him to reach that place.

He could set course for some sector controlled by Buddhist Sangha, and find his way from there. Or, he could head in the general direction of this 'Cosmic River' Lorna mentioned, which was like a streak of unusually fertile cultivation grounds that stretched for an insanely great distance.

Worlds inside this river would all have greater energy densities than normal, and the Dao was pretty clear as well. Apparently, there were even some sections of the river that had turned into impossibly large formations that prevented even Autarchs from forcing their way inside, making it amazing cultivation grounds shielded from the outside world.

If he didn't want to go through the Buddhist Sangha, he could instead cross the Undead Empire in his Draugr form. If members from the Six Profundity Empires sometimes joined the Buddhist Sangha in their crusade against the empire, they should be somewhat closely situated to the warfront that the Eternal Clan was responsible for.

Of course, either of those options was absolutely impossible in his current state, not counting being held prisoner at the moment. Even if he managed to escape, there was still no way for him to make his way there. He would have to either find a series of wormholes, or somehow get teleportation tokens high grade enough to teleport through the whole multiverse.

But those things were beyond rare.

He had hoped to get his hands on a few Teleportation Tokens in this place, but it looked bleak. Tokens had a maximum radius, and most of them only worked within a single sector. The better ones, like the one he got for Twilight Harbor or the one that would take him to the Yr'Vanadium sector of the Radiant Temple, could pass through a couple of sectors. But that was it.

The distance between Zecia and the Six Profundity Empire was most likely tens of thousands of times greater compared to the one between Zecia and the Twilight Harbor, and he might even die of old age during transit if he didn't use a higher-tier teleportation array. As to how Leandra was planning on traversing such a shocking distance, he guessed peak Technocrats had their own methods not bound by the rules of the System.

Zac eventually nodded in thanks and accepted a sealed message from the Revenant to her clan before moving on. She was a member of the Undead Empire, and if given the chance, he'd send word of her situation to her descendants. A while later, Zac simply sat down and started meditating while waiting for the treasures to arrive.

Finally, after three days of meditation, Samsara's End was lit up with activity as the first batch of cultivators were called to the Contribution Hall.