

The Fall 799

Chapter 799: Depths of Death

Unsurprisingly, most of the 50 cultivators who were called first were high-grade attendants, with the majority sporting insignias wrought from white jade. Jade was the stage between Gold and Emerald, with bronze being the lowest tier.

Except for citizens such as himself, of course.

Zac knew that most of these cultivators were Monarchs, and he imprinted every single face to memory, making sure he wouldn't accidentally annoy one of these people in the future. However, as he memorized their appearances, he noticed something surprising.

"Why are there no Emerald badges here? There should be some in the area, right?" Zac asked a neighboring cultivator. "I figure those people would be the most motivated to find some items."

"Emerald Badges can teleport to a private town with the help of their tokens," the man sitting next to Zac explained with a face full of envy. "They don't need to make the trek to the cities. Besides, I hear the best items don't leave Liberty Point, making it pointless to head over here."

"Oh," Zac nodded understanding.

It looked like Murbot wasn't kidding around when talking about the benefits of becoming attendants. The best items weren't even released to the public cities. That wasn't the only benefit Emerald Badges had from what he'd learned over the past days. Emerald Badges could actually avoid up to five relegations.

It was a small concession by the Orom in hopes that they'd manage to break that final threshold and provide a huge burst of insights. Conversely, Jade Attendants got one freebie, while Gold Attendants and lower had to live in constant fear of relegation just like everyone else.

Thankfully, Zac's Luck pulled through, and he didn't have to wait more than a few hours before his talisman lit up. He immediately entered the Contribution Center and sunk his attention into the stock after nodding at the clerk.

Staggering volumes.

There was simply a shocking number of items added to the contribution store. The number of unique treasures had multiplied over one hundred times over, and the stock of base cultivation resources had skyrocketed by at least five hundred times. Some materials, like basic Cosmic Crystals, had their supply increased thousands of times over.

Zac couldn't even begin to estimate the value of all these items, and this was only what was available to common citizens such as himself. It was a testament to just how many resources the Orom World went through over 500 years. Even more shocking was the fact that over 95% of the resources the Orom snatched didn't even enter the Contribution Store.

Anything of middling or low quality was somehow ground down and distilled into the pure energies that went into running the Orom World and feeding the Orom and its handful of descendants.

It was also obvious that a frantic shopping spree was already taking place, seeing as the listed stock was continuously dwindling on all kinds of items. The scene filled Zac with some anxiety, and he quickly started scouring the list for anything that could either help with escaping or his cultivation.

Thankfully, the clerks hadn't been idle over the past two months, and every single item had been analyzed and categorized, making it easy to find useful items. Zac didn't find any items that would prove useful in a prison break, but he did spend a good chunk of his remaining Purchase Points on three sets of items.

The first purchase was two bottles of Pseudo D-grade Node-Breaking Pills that seemed to even exceed the [Aethergate Pills] he had bought in the Twilight Harbor. They were called [Stellar Enkindling Pills], and there were altogether ten pills inside each bottle. As long as his pill immunity didn't reduce their effect too much, these pills would be able to help him push through most of the High E-grade.

Since the pills were made for E-grade cultivators, the two sets of peak-quality pills only cost 80 Purchase Points, which was nothing compared to the items meant for Hegemons or Monarchs. They were also made for the living rather than Undead cultivators, which decreased the likelihood Zac would already have built up a natural immunity to the materials that went into the pills.

Secondly, Zac purchased a chunk of an interesting material he had never heard of before. It was called [Spiritual Ice], but it wasn't meant for his Soul Cultivation. Its only apparent use was to temporarily freeze and harden one's spiritual body. At the surface, it didn't seem very useful, especially since it apparently turned your mind extremely turbid. But it did have one interesting ability.

As it froze you, it also made your body and mind more durable, allowing you to lessen the impact of Node Bursting. Seeing as it didn't seem to clash with his other preparations, he figured that he might as well get it as he would soon start going for the nodes in his head. The more protections he could layer for that step of the way, the better.

The third item was an unnamed Peak E-grade Natural Treasure containing both Life and Death, quite possibly a treasure that some poor soul had found in the Twilight Ocean before being culled. It didn't have any direct uses listed, but Zac figured it might come in handy when forming his core in the future. Besides, with its wild and untamed energy and its unknown use, it only cost 120 Contribution Points, making it a steal.

There were hundreds of other items he really wanted in the store, many of which he had never heard of but possessed marvelous effects. There were unique treasures that could improve affinities, strengthen souls, awaken bloodlines, and form constitutions. There were even items that contained Dao Impartments. And that was just the tip of the iceberg.

But Zac was like a beggar that stared through the window to some luxury store, the wares inside far beyond what his wallet could handle. Altogether, he had spent just over 250 contribution points, leaving him with a total of 468 Purchase Points. The more marvelous treasures that he had spotted cost over ten thousand contribution points, and there were even some that cost over one hundred thousand.

Did that mean the items the Emerald Attendants kept for themselves were priced in the millions?

Having completed his goal, Zac left the Contribution Store and set course for his private island in a hurry. He didn't bother buying any crystals, herbs, or Cultivation Methods put for sale, considering he had more than enough of those kinds of things in his Spatial Rings.

He had already been eager to return to his cultivation before, but now there was an additional reason for him.

Most of the treasures were out of his reach, but he had set his sights on one particular supreme-grade treasure that he might be able to snag. There was a death-attuned item with a similar purpose as the [Eye of Har'Theriam]. Unfortunately, it cost over 6,000 Contribution points, far beyond what he could afford at the moment.

Zac wasn't sure whether there were any undead E-grade cultivators apart from him who were able to make use of that thing, but if it were, then it had suddenly turned into a race for Purchase Points. If not for the fact that the items he purchased were cheap and of extremely limited quantities, he wouldn't even have bought them.

But Zac hoped the items would allow him to gain a couple of levels in one go, recouping the cost of the pills and then some.

Having talked with the older captives for a few days had helped him gain a better understanding of what to expect in terms of Contribution Points. A general rule of thumb in this place was that you'd get Contribution Points equivalent to the number of raw attribute points your breakthrough provided.

So, if you formed a Dao Seed, you'd get 15 Contribution Points, whereas forming a Dao Branch might grant you something like 2,500. However, that was just a general rule, and the Orom could award anything from half of the points to three times the points dependent on how useful the brands deemed the insights.

Thankfully, breakthroughs that provided no attributes could still provide points, sometimes even more generously than Daos. Soul Cultivation was such a topic, and the Orom seemed very interested in that aspect of cultivation, to the point that Mentalists often were among the most long-lived people in this place.

The points Zac got before were just a small incentive to keep pursuing the path, but a big payoff was hopefully waiting for him after his reincarnation. Even if he couldn't afford the treasure that could find and open Hidden Nodes right away, he would hopefully be able to use his sales quota to convert some of his less useful treasures to Purchase Points. Unfortunately, it turned out that each attendant rank and grade had sales quotas of their brought-in treasures.

It was a small safeguard to prevent wealthy, but otherwise unimpressive, prisoners from converting mountains of common cultivation resources into enough Purchase Points to snatch a bunch of extremely valuable treasures. Some things were hard to find even for the Orom, and it wanted the best treasures to go to the most talented cultivators, just like how a sect worked.

Besides, the conversion rate was just atrocious. He had seen just how stingy the arrays were when he offered up dozens of Cosmos Sacks.

So making actual breakthroughs was his only way to get it, and he was determined to buy it before anyone else. Since opening his [Quantum Gate], Zac had made it a primary goal to try and open up new nodes on his Draugr side. Considering they were considered a divine race among the undead, their Hidden Nodes shouldn't be anything to scoff at.

Even if he had teased Catheya a bit about her nose, it was a pretty amazing ability. Not only had it exposed his true nature in the Tower of Eternity when everyone else was none the wiser, but it proved extremely useful when out exploring. While a treasure nose was useful, Zac hoped he would be able to get a node that improved his combat strength, either in defense or offense. After all, out of the four nodes he had opened so far, only [Spiritual Void] could help him in battle.

The surroundings turned to a blur as Zac rushed back to his island. Soon enough, he reached the lake that had turned into his temporary home, and he passed through the barriers to reach the island. The ambient energy had turned even denser since he left, a result of the arrays still building up the environment by siphoning energy from the surrounding waters.

Zac rested for a couple of hours to stabilize his mind before he took out the first of the Array Disks. It was time.

The hours passed as one revolution replaced another, and he found himself steeped deeper and deeper into a deathly abyss. Each revolution was imbued with the Fragment of the Coffin, and each revolution increased the ferocity of the black ocean in his mind. Eventually, Zac finished the seventh cycle, and his face was pallid as he was covered in death-suffused sweat from the pain in his mind.

Even back in the Twilight Chasm, his soul had reached the level of strength needed to empower six revolutions with his Daos without harming himself. Back then, he would have managed to empower the seventh cycle too if he really pushed himself, yet he found himself struggling at this same level almost a year later.

On the surface, it looked like he had barely improved, but Zac knew that the situation wasn't as simple as that. Since finishing his eight-month cultivation session in the Twilight Chasm, his two soul oceans had undergone a drastic change. First, they were transformed and empowered in the valley when he was steeped in life and death. The concepts stored within the oceans had more than doubled, which also meant the storms they kicked up during cultivation had doubled in ferocity.

Next, the oceans were infused by the remnants. The shard had stayed for months in his soul aperture, but the real transformation of the oceans took place when he formed the glimpse of chaos. Torrential amounts of Oblivion and Creation had been squeezed out of the remnants and dragged through the oceans before they entered the pathways on his shoulders.

The two oceans had even been marked by Chaos when he circulated those two slivers of Chaos through his body. Perhaps, that had been the biggest factor behind the shocking and unpredictable storms that were kicked up now every time he cultivated.

At the same time, his soul had gained a lot of power after the chasm as well. Surviving all kinds of trials and tribulations could strengthen one's soul just like it led to breakthroughs in one's Dao. And Zac wasn't lacking in tribulations, no matter if looking to the mysterious light that infused his soul, the actual

Tribulation Lightning, the storm of Oblivion that forcibly empowered his soul, or the benefits of forcibly sealing a Shard of Creation for months.

Along with the marvelous treasures left by Aia Ouro, his mental strength was many times greater compared to when leaving the Twilight Chasm. Without that, he probably wouldn't even have managed to last five Dao-empowered cycles with how his oceans looked. If anything, seven revolutions right now most likely eclipsed the difficulty of performing nine Dao-empowered revolutions with normal soul seas.

That brought a question of its own. Was he ready to undergo a reincarnation or not? His Soul Core had pretty much reached sublimation for what the method allowed. He could sense that the benefits were minuscule compared to the difficulty of finishing a revolution. But at the same time, he worried that the powerful oceans would increase the difficulty of his breakthrough, which spoke for empowering his soul even further.

These thoughts had plagued Zac over the past month as he slowly digested the two Soul Treasures, but he didn't want to wait any longer. The faces full of desperation and hope in Samsara's Edge urged him on, reminding him of what was at stake. This was ultimately a prison, one that he needed to get out of. He couldn't get complacent and let his momentum stall, or he'd never seize the opportunity to escape this place.

This was the one.

He had a better understanding of the process, and he had a broader knowledge of the soul in general. He had dozens of Spatial rings containing innumerable treasures that he could take out if necessary. He even had Cosmos Crystals attuned to life and death that could unleash an unprecedented storm of energy if need be.

The cost of a single one of those crystals could bankrupt a hundred E-grade elites, yet he had more than a hundred of each kind. He lacked for nothing, and only the fear of crushing his soul once more held him back. But no longer.

Zac forcibly shook his mind awake before it was claimed by the deathly chill. Shortly after, an imposing will pushed down on the deathly ocean as he contained some of the chaos brought from the seventh infusion. The next moment, his Dao Avatar on top of the Soul Core turned into its Draugr form before spewing out a storm of deathly Dao as Zac opened the gates to [Spiritual Void].

The stored-up Dao joined the faltering stream from the hanging coffin before they dragged the already deathly Mental Energy into the Array Disk for an eighth revolution. As he was drained, Zac rapidly lost control over the churning waters in the pitch-black ocean, but he could only grit his teeth and withstand the waves crashing into his Soul Core.

The minutes passed, until finally, a storm of even stronger death poured back from the array, pouring into the ocean. A deep rumble that echoed through his Soul Aperture made Zac's nose bleed, but he kept going, using the same solution as he had during the first Reincarnation. Two months had passed since getting trapped, which was enough to stockpile quite a bit of Oblivion Energy.

He forcibly squeezed the entrenched energies from his soul, pouring them into the array disk along with the last scraps he could squeeze from the hanging coffin. Zac hurriedly crushed a few Soul Crystals as

well, but the energy that entered his mind was like a few drops of rain in a parched desert. With a puff, it was gone, only providing some minimal relief as Zac started the ninth revolution.

Zac didn't know if a second had passed or a century. Time had no meaning to Death, and his consciousness had come as close as humanly possible without crossing that threshold. He had no wants, no desires. He had melded with the nothingness, a small spot of darkness in the raging sea of the Abyss.

He was Death.

A small ripple suddenly broke the illusion, and Zac found his utterly drained soul flicker awake as the final cycle was completed. His energy came crashing back like an icy river, pushing the deathly darkness of the ocean to perfection. The rumble was even greater this time around, and it almost felt like the Heavens had been summoned to his Soul Aperture as dark clouds formed over the raging sea.

However, these clouds were pitch-black, mirroring the waters below. They were vapors of pure death. And their mere aura caused small cracks to spread across Zac's Soul Aperture. Zac found himself slipping into that soothing darkness again as the storm in his mind reached cataclysmic proportions, and he hurriedly sent a mental command into his Specialty core.

He had pushed the [Nine Reincarnations Manual] beyond its limits in its descent into Death, and it was time to form the counterpoint to his reincarnation.