

The Fall 810

Chapter 810: Opportunity

Zac made his way toward the eye of the life-attuned zone, his heart filled with misgivings. The token Ubo showed had just been a projection, but according to the elemental, the real Perennial Vastness token was his as long as he met with the Lord. But since when did good things simply fall into one's lap? He was pretty lucky, but not that lucky.

Ubo was clearly just the messenger, but the elemental had thankfully confirmed that the so-called Lord wasn't the Orom itself.

But Ubo refused to elaborate any further, only urging him to not keep the Lord waiting. Zac had reluctantly agreed, and he left the mountain a minute later, his previous plans put on the backburner. After all, the Perennial Vastness Token was too good to pass up, and it might even be his ticket out this place.

At this point, Zac could only pray that this mysterious Lord who seemed to have anticipated his every move was friendly. Hopefully, he wouldn't demand something outlandish in exchange for the token, but Zac was prepared for the worst-case scenario. He was filled to the brim with Creation Energy, and his Void Energy had mostly been recovered by this point.

Between the two, he had a decent shot at even taking out Monarchs in this place.

But there were no guarantees. After all, there were just over 100 zones in the Orom World, and most of the warriors living at the heart of a zone were either High or Peak Monarch. Weirdly enough, Zac had absolutely no recollection of who this particular powerhouse was. Come to think of it, it was a bit odd he hadn't even considered the issue.

Zac's tree fortress was a day's way into the life-attuned zone from the small island, and if he kept going for five days or so he'd reach the heart of the zone. They were practically neighbors, but Zac had barely spared the powerhouse a thought. Had his mind been influenced to ignore the matter somehow?

The realization filled him with even greater trepidation, but there was no turning back now. It was hard to tell exactly how many of his secrets this Lord knew, and avoiding him might be even worse than just facing the issue head-on.

Two days passed as Zac got closer and closer to his destination, and he had already passed dozens of massive barriers shielding huge cultivation havens. These inner parts were exclusively controlled by Monarchs, and all their caves were fitted with massive gathering arrays. As a result, the environment between these massive bubbles was even worse than at his treehouse.

Of course, if a Hegemon dared set up camp this far into a zone, he'd quickly get kicked out if he didn't have enough strength to defend his claim. No one wanted to die, and any energy siphoned by a neighboring Gathering Array was an attempt on their lives as far as the cultivators were concerned.

Even then, Zac realized that the cultivation havens simply stopped as he got closer to the true center of the zone, and the environment was suddenly awash with life. The density was at least three times compared to his treehouse, and the attunements infused in the environment were equally impressive. Even the rustling of some leaves filled Zac with wonder and inspiration.

Oddly enough, Zac was also filled with a sense of familiarity, but he couldn't pinpoint the source of the impression. It was almost like something was calling to him, but the feeling was completely different from the far more palpable urge he got from the remnants. Was it the Lord? Did they actually know each other?

But that was extremely unlikely, unless they had met in the Orom World without Zac knowing.

Soon, the chaotic forests of unbridled life had been replaced by an orderly bamboo forest, where each pole reached for the sky. Each bamboo shoot was almost identical in size, but that didn't mean they weren't instilled with the exuberant energy of the environment. In fact, these trees seemed far more life-infused compared to the random plantlife behind him.

It almost felt like he would be able to squeeze out pure life from the shoots if he so desired, but he didn't dare doing anything of the sort. He was right in the core by now, and this forest was probably planted by the Lord himself. If he needed any further evidence this place was claimed, he could spot various red and golden ornaments hanging between the bamboo poles up in the sky, giving the forest almost a festive feel.

Zac's instincts told him that most of those things were Spiritual Tools and high-grade talismans, yet Zac was unable to discern as much as a ripple of energy coming from any of them. As for the markings on the ornaments, they reminded Zac of the Sanskrit engravings on Mount Everlasting Peace back on Earth. They seemed filled with meaning, but they didn't seem related to the common script that made up most arrays.

Zac stood rooted in place, hesitant about what to do from this point forward. There was no barrier or vast aura barring his entry, and he had been invited. But could he just barge in like this? This place didn't feel like somewhere he should intrude upon, especially not with all those unidentifiable talismans hanging above his head.

'Follow the path,' a voice suddenly echoed through Zac's mind, and Zac steeled his heart as he entered, following a small paved path that had seemingly appeared out of thin air.

The voice had filled him with an even greater sense of familiarity, but his brows furrowed with confusion as he walked down the forest path. Just who was it? He couldn't place it at all.

The forest was larger than Zac expected, and he walked for over three hours without reaching the end. By that point, he had passed hundreds of thousands of bamboo poles and ornaments, and he could barely fathom their collective value. By now, he had figured out their purpose at least; they were soul-nurturing talismans that filled him with vigor.

Not only that, but Zac had realized that the whole bamboo forest was just one gargantuan array, where each bamboo shoot and ornament acted as a flag. The arrangement was terrifyingly complex, and he couldn't even begin to comprehend its purpose. But finally, the scenery shifted as he reached a small temple complex next to a babbling brook.

Zac had suspected as much from the various clues, but this confirmed it. The 'Lord' was a monk of the Buddhist Sangha.

The temple was much smaller than the one on Mount Everlasting Peace, with two small bell towers at the front, followed by a main hall where Zac vaguely could make out the statue of some deity. Further in the back, Zac could spot two mirrored buildings as well, and Zac guessed they were either for meditation or living.

At first glance, it felt simple, to the point it might as well have been a random temple situated somewhere in the mountains in east Asia. But there was something grand hiding within the simplicity. For example, Zac didn't dare enter the temple in front of him. Just looking in its direction made his soul shudder.

It felt like a true deity hid within that statue, and Zac's instincts told him that encroaching on its territory would have disastrous consequences. Even if he didn't die, he was afraid that his Dao Heart would be damaged. He once more remembered the warning of that necromancer when he just arrived, of how Buddhists were natural pathbreakers. Looking at that temple, he finally understood what he meant.

He turned away from the temple and instead started walking toward a small platform by the water. It had actually taken him a few times, but Zac had finally noticed there was someone sitting on top of it. However, the bald man was so in tune with the surroundings that Zac's eyes didn't even register he was there.

In fact, Zac guessed that he was only able to spot him because the man wanted him to. As he walked over, he got a better look at the man, which only increased his confusion. He was some sort of humanoid, but he was more akin to a dwarf than a human. Zac guessed he would barely reach his chest when standing up, yet the monk probably weighed more than he did.

When you added his lack of hair, he gave off an almost cherubic impression. The monk had three marks on his forehead that emitted a mysterious aura, but Zac's eyes were still drawn to a token fastened to his sloppy kasaya. An emerald badge. As Zac closed in the monk opened his eyes, showcasing two silver irises, and he smiled in Zac's direction.

But why did his gaze look so shifty?

He had the temple, the clothes, and the spiritual forest, yet Zac felt like the fat little man in front of him was one of those fake monks scamming travelers in tourist hotspots. And his first words only strengthened that feeling.

"Amitabha. Welcome, benefactor. Karma pulls us together, we are connected. Benefactor, you carry great destiny on your self," the monk smiled as he walked down from the precept platform. "But with great fate comes dangerous tribulations. How about making a small offering to this poor temple and receiving its blessings in return?"

Zac blankly looked at the smiling monk in front of him, barely believing what he was hearing. This monk was probably a peak Monarch and an Emerald Badge, yet he was trying to solicit an E-grade cultivator for resources?

"I would, but I am afraid I would be punished for sharing resources," Zac said with feigned disappointment as he showcased the prison brand on his hand.

“How can the Orom’s Law measure to Buddha’s love?” the monk admonished with a sad look. “But this poor monk hears the willingness in your voice and senses the benevolence in your heart, and will therefore gratefully accept this offering. Come, let me show benefactor around.”

Zac was confused at first, but he almost swore when he saw that the monk was holding one of the Spatial Rings Zac had hidden within his sleeves. That particular one held a good chunk of low-grade materials along with a pile of Cultivation Methods he had planned on selling through Calrin.

“That’s...” Zac exclaimed, but the monk simply walked away, chanting ‘Amitabha’.

Zac didn’t have the slightest idea how the hell the thieving monk snatched one of his Spatial Rings, but he breathed out in relief when the rings that held the real treasures were still on his person. His instincts told him to just suck up the loss and leave, but he eventually took a calming breath before reluctantly following the monk.

He still hadn’t accomplished any of his goals of coming here, so he couldn’t just leave.

“Ubo said that your eminence wanted to meet with me?” Zac eventually said as the monk seemed content with just taking a stroll. “About the token...”

“This poor monk has stayed here so long, alas. But he has heard many tales of wonder. A previous visitor described the marvelous wines cultivators enjoy. It piqued this poor monk’s interest,” the fat little monk interjected before giving Zac a pointed look. “Benefactor just arrived at this world, no? Perhaps, benefactor can expand this poor monk’s understanding.”

Zac mutely handed over one of his vats of liquor and then added two more as the monk’s expression showed clear signs of dissatisfaction. He didn’t even bother asking why a monk wanted alcohol. The bald little bastard had already robbed him, so what if he also partook in meat and liquor?

“Amitabha. To understand all creation one must partake in all creation,” the monk said with a self-suffering look as he took a deep swig from one of the vats.

Zac hesitated to ask again, fearing that the monk would just counter with more demands, but a flash of light suddenly flew in his direction. He hurriedly snatched it, and his eyes widened when he saw it was the Perennial Vastness Token.

“Benefactor has grown a lot since we last met. Hopefully, this thing will help down the road,” the monk smiled as he kept walking.

“We’ve met before?” Zac asked with confusion, still unable to make sense of the familiar feeling. He almost believed it was some illusion skill the monk used to scam people.

“As this poor monk said, we are connected,” the monk smiled. “Our roads have intersected before. Twice, in fact.”

“What?” Zac blurted, but the brook and the bamboo were suddenly gone.

A small cherry tree swayed in the wind, and a unique creature sat in silent meditation. He had no legs, but wings and two unusually long arms. A moment later, the scene shifted again, and Zac saw a fat little youth putting a whole mountain into his inner world.

“Lord 84th? The Lotus Emperor?” Zac exclaimed, and he felt some sort of blockage snapping in his mind, and he could suddenly connect two and two again.

So it was another avatar. Zac should’ve guessed the moment he saw the fat little man. However, something must’ve blocked his thoughts, just like Lord 84th had somehow removed one of his futures back on Earth.

“It is surprising. In this vast universe, benefactor has not only met my 84th incarnation, but also formed a Karmic Cycle with one of my still-sleeping avatars,” the Buddhist smiled. “Truly a blessing.”

“May I ask who your esteemed self are?” Zac queried.

“This poor monk managed to awaken third by a stroke of luck. My Dharmic name is Three Virtues,” the monk smiled as they passed by one of the inner structures, and Zac couldn’t believe his eyes when he spotted two blindingly gorgeous women sitting inside chatting.

The monk actually had girlfriends staying at the temple? Zac felt his understanding of Buddhism had reached new highs, or new lows depending on how you looked at it, after this one short visit. But that shock was nothing compared to what he saw in the opposite building.

It hovered inside some sort of glass cage, and an outer seal of Buddhist runes stopped any aura from leaking. But it was no mistaking it. There was a Shard of Creation in this temple.

“That’s!” Zac exclaimed, but he quickly tried to make his face impassive.

“Benefactor likes this thing?” Three Virtues smiled as he glanced at the shard, but he soon shook his head. “Benefactor should be careful. There is an undying will hidden inside, a will that not even this poor monk’s sutras can cleanse.”

Zac looked at the sealed Shard of Creation for a few more moments, and he was slowly starting to form a hypothesis. There was no way the monk just happened to lead him past this thing on accident.

“This thing is a blight on your fine temple,” Zac slowly said. “I am willing to take it off your hands.”

“That would surely be an act of great benevolence,” Three Virtues nodded as it was a matter of course. “Alas, there is a problem.”

“What’s the matter?” Zac said, inwardly groaning as he saw that shady look in the monk’s eyes again.

“Have benefactor heard of Battalion Leader Kaldor?”

Two weeks later, Zac crept closer to the heart of the dead zone, once more relying on his Draugr persona. In his hands was the roughly crafted invitation token that shifty Monk imparted with him before throwing him out of the bamboo forest. The invitation token to the overlord of the Pure Death-zone.

According to Three Virtues, he was more than happy to get rid of the Shard of Creation. In fact, he had only reluctantly gotten it from the Emerald Badge Contribution Store to balance out the Splinter of Oblivion that this Kaldor bought a while back.

As to why Three Virtues felt Zac was the man for the job to snatch that thing, Zac had a pretty good idea. The monk hadn't said it outright, but he definitely knew about Zac's two races somehow. Three Virtues had strongly indicated that while Battalion Leader Kadlor held no love for the living, he had left some invitation tokens for promising undead warriors to find.

And one of those tokens had somehow entered the hands of Three Virtues.

Zac didn't know if the monk could sense the remnants in his mind as well, but it was certainly possible. But Zac was convinced that the monk wanted Zac to collect a pair. As to what the monk was planning, Zac didn't know. Did he know that two remnants would lead to the formation of a Glimpse of Chaos? Did he want to use Zac to escape?

Thankfully, the monk had already provided Zac with one escape route from the Orom World with the Perennial Vastness Token, and his instincts told him that the monk's schemes weren't directed at himself. Truthfully, Zac didn't believe for a second he'd survive an attempt on his life from the monk, so there was no point for Three Virtues to scheme against him. The strength of an Emerald Badge peak Monarch was far beyond what he had expected.

Zac knew he was being led by the nose as he got closer to the large fortress in the distance, but being forced to play a part in someone's scheme didn't necessarily mean your fate was out of your hands. There were risks, but there were also ample rewards to be had. His goal was to find five sets of remnants, and a third set had presented itself just after he'd evolved his soul?

No wonder the System had ignored him when Zac had pleaded with it to take him out so he could continue his mission.

"One of the new brats?" a rough voice echoed out from within the fortress when Zac got closer, and Zac groaned as his vision swam.

It felt like he was drowned in a sea of blood, and deafening screams of rage and suffering threatened to drive him mad. But Zac soon stabilized his mind and kept walking, guessing this was some sort of test. It was killing intent so condensed it had essentially turned into a mental attack, but his resilience against killing intent was far beyond normal by this point.

"Oh, not bad," a snort echoed from within as the gates swung open. "I don't hold much love for people wasting time on cultivating the soul, but you have a decent smell of carnage on you. Seems you've even killed some of those ghost bastards and a pureblood bloodsucker? Pretty gutsy. Is that why you're hiding in here even if you're a pureblood Draugr?"

Zac froze for a moment, but he wryly smiled as he took off his mask, exposing a back-up face to his Arcaz Black persona. He should've guessed he wouldn't be able to hide his heritage to someone who was a match to that monk. Zac walked into the fortress, but the large field inside was empty.

He turned toward the castle next, but a barrier stopped him from going any further. So he could only stop in his tracks, waiting for the boss to come out.

"So you're the little bastard who caused such a ruckus in my zone a while back? Did you know I had to take the blame for that one? Bastard, costing me 50,000 Points," the voice swore, and Zac stumbled backward as another wave of killing intent almost knocked him out.

The aura that had descended on the square could only be forged through innumerable life-and-death battles. Neither the Ogre in the Big Axe Coliseum nor Greatest could even come close to the aura of supremacy that flooded the castle. The Havarok Autarch's killing intent might've been stronger, but it had been less condensed.

This was something else entirely.

Yet Zac stood his ground, feeling he'd be in more trouble if he fled. Thankfully, he was right, and the pressure subsided soon enough.

"So, I can guess why you're here. The stench of that cursed little thing is still all over you. Is that why you've nurtured your soul? You want to cram your head full of these things?" the man said, and Zac sensed that Kaldor's tone had changed from anger to curiosity.

"Something like that," Zac muttered, feeling that being straightforward with this Battalion Leader was his best goal. "It should make me stronger. At worst, I'll become a lunatic, and I'll be someone else's problem by then."

"Hah!" a laugh echoed out through the square. "Fair enough. Well, seeing as we're the only two purebloods in this place, I guess I can help out a bit."

"Lord is a Draugr as well?" Zac exclaimed with some excitement, hoping he could gain some insights into his Hidden Nodes.

"Bah, who's one of you?" a snort came back, instantly dashing those hopes. "I can give you that thing. After all, I am a bit curious about what would happen. But I refuse to help someone useless, so you'd have to accomplish something to prove yourself."

Zac inwardly prayed it wasn't to take the Shard of Creation from the Monk. He wasn't in any mood to deal with a catch-22 between two old monsters playing some game.

"A duel. No skills and no using that cursed energy. Within three years, land a single hit on me, no matter how weak. I will not use my Warbones, and I will restrain my Daos to peak Dao Fragments. Succeed, and I will give you that little splinter. Fail, and I will kill you," Kaldor said. "Do you dare to take up the challenge?"

Zac didn't immediately say yes. By the looks of it, this Kaldor was actually an Izh'Rak Reaver, and a pureblood at that. Zac still didn't know much about them, except the fact that they were natural-born killing machines. They had extremely powerful constitutions and natural affinities for combat.

Even if Kaldor restrained his combat style to the level of Peak Dao Fragment, it would probably be perfectly integrated. With his huge amount of experience, it would be an extremely tough battle. Zac couldn't ambush him with Void Energy either. That might work on Peak Hegemons and perhaps even Early Monarchs, but Zac held no such delusions after feeling the killing intent of Kaldor.

To get the splinter, he would have to win fair and square. But first, Zac needed to know more.

"How strong do I need to be to succeed?" Zac asked.

"If you manage to pass the fourth band in the wilderness, I'd say you have a fifty-fifty shot," Kaldor said.

Zac slowly nodded. He had two choices now, one easy and one dangerous. He could either lay low until he reached Peak E-grade in this place before setting off with the Perennial Vastness token. Or he could gamble his life to seize the third set of remnants. It took him one year to pass the first two bands. Could he pass two more in three years?

Possibly, as long as he made some meaningful breakthroughs.

He had almost managed to tear apart space with a single Annihilation Sphere a month ago. With chaos coursing through his body, escaping and destroying the brand on his hand would be a cinch. His gaze turned to the ring on his finger, where the Perennial Vastness token rested. But his Abyssal eyes soon turned back toward the castle where the Izh'Rak Reaver was secluded, his heart beating with conviction.

Was it even a choice?