

The Fall 809

Chapter 809: Hubris

Zac looked down at his hands with incredulity and despair as the last embers of Oblivion dissipated in front of him. Soon, just a depression in reality remained, and a moment later there was nothing. The searing pain that ran from his head down his arms was nothing compared to the agony of defeat.

He had failed.

Sixteen months. He had saved up Oblivion Energy for sixteen months, yet that wasn't enough. The full-powered Annihilation Sphere had only managed to tear a hole in space no larger than a hand, and it had closed so quickly that the deadly ball of destruction didn't have time to provide access. Even if he had been gutsy enough to push through the small rip with [Abyssal Phase], he would have been torn apart before even entering it.

His thoughts had ground to a halt as his emotions ran amok, but he soon pushed down the burgeoning panic as he disappeared, transformed into an abyssal wraith. The surroundings of the death-attuned zone turned into a blur, and he crossed tens of thousands of meters in an instant. Still, that wasn't enough, and he kept going, thankful he had plotted an escape path in case of failure.

Zac couldn't be certain, but unleashing a three-meter tall ball of utter destruction was bound to raise some eyebrows in case anyone saw or sensed it. He wanted to be far, far away by the time anyone came to investigate. He only deactivated his skill five minutes later, at which point he had used up more than half of his Void Energy.

He returned into his corporeal form in the crown of a tree with extremely dense foliage, and he soon jumped down with a prayer mat under his arm like he had been sitting in the tree cultivating. He had passed through a good chunk of a zone in a short few minutes, something that would normally have taken him days.

It should be impossible to connect him to the now-distant event unless the Orom itself was investigating. Zac kept going for another few hours until he reached his cultivation cave where he secluded himself, his eyes and ears peeled for any response. Hours turned to days as his nerves kept fraying, but no Emerald Attendant came to take him in. Neither did his prisoner brand act up, and Zac finally let himself relax after a week had passed.

However, while it didn't look like he was in trouble at the moment, Zac found himself gazing out from the window he had carved inside the dead tree, his mind bereft of purpose and direction. This was supposed to be it. He had spent the last four months squeezing everything he could from this place, from gathering all kinds of treasures to furiously sparring with all kinds of elders.

It was to the point that he had raised some eyebrows and started some rumors, and he had almost been drowned in piles of fate tokens. He had known that his actions were a bit suspicious, but he couldn't help himself with so many treasures available all around him. Now, it was all for nothing, and he found himself stuck in this place after acting so mysterious. It felt like a thousand eyes were trained on the tree he hid inside.

He had already spent eighteen months in the Orom World, far longer than what he had expected or planned. Yet he didn't find himself any closer to escaping now than he did when he just arrived. If anything, he felt further away from returning to Earth than ever, as one escape plan after another had fallen through. Now, he wasn't even certain what to do. His bloodline wasn't enough, and not even the remnants could pave the way to freedom.

Should he try getting relegated and hope there were some weaknesses to exploit over there? No, those people were even more tightly controlled than the cultivators of Orom World. He would only be sending himself there to suffer. Zac desperately searched for solutions, but he hadn't managed to come up with anything over the last week, let alone now. He was stuck.

Despair threatened to swallow Zac whole as he imagined himself forced into desperate cultivation, struggling to keep up with his odd constitution until he finally succumbed as so many had before him. Until now, he had somewhat considered himself above those around him, gifted with supreme fate. This might have been a prison for others, but for him, it was just an opportunity.

The hubris.

No! Zac shook his head as his abyssal eyes regained their clarity. He refused to give up. If the force of the Annihilation Sphere had been too weak, then he simply needed to boost it. If he increased the output tenfold, the spatial tear should be bigger and more stable. He simply needed to strengthen his soul and his Dao to make it happen.

It might take a while to push his Fragment of the Coffin to become a Branch of Death, but he was confident he could accomplish that in this place, even without compromising his path. If that wasn't enough, he would push his Branch of Death and the Branch of the War Axe to the middle stage, turning the Daos into even more powerful vessels to form the Annihilation Spheres.

Perhaps he could improve the process of forming the outburst, focusing its power with the help of his empowered soul. Until now, he had always just pushed two streams of Dao into the pathways on his shoulders, but there was perhaps more he could do. For example, what if he created specific braids to empower the streams? Perhaps even Dao Arrays?

The more Zac thought about it, the more his hope was rekindled. Perhaps there were some treasures or methods that would allow the incorporeal form of [Abyssal Phase] to survive inside the annihilation sphere long enough to escape. This wasn't the end; it was just the beginning.

If eighteen months wasn't enough to escape, he'd cultivate for three years. If that failed, then ten. He wouldn't stop pushing himself in his pursuit of freedom until the Orom ripped him apart. Even then, he'd at least try to go out with a bang, damaging the big bastard or killing its descendants. Perhaps he could detonate the remnants in his head, creating one final blast of chaos upon his demise.

For now, Zac figured he'd avoid using his Draugr side for a while just in case, and he transformed back into his human form before emerging from the cultivation tree he had used as one of his home bases over the past year. He didn't dismantle the arrays that shielded it, but he did take out a warning array before leaving.

It was a simple array that would transmit a signal to a daughter-array in his Cosmos Sack in case anyone forced its way into the tree. From there, Zac walked toward the side of the living, passing through the

forest that had almost become as familiar to him as the forest of Port Atwood. In total, he had spent roughly two-thirds of his waking time in the wilderness, constantly pushing himself to improve his combat stances.

However, he had never stayed more than a month in the wilderness each time, sometimes just a week or two. In-between, he had traveled across the Orom World, sparring against dozens of different Hegemons or being imparted some general knowledge. Finally, he had set up two rudimentary cultivation caves, one for each persona, where he digested the insights before heading out again.

There were only so many hours available each day, and every aspect became more and more demanding as he progressed further. Zac had figured that he could evolve his Daos and work on his soul anywhere, and his limited time in the Orom World would be best spent by utilizing the old monsters and improving his cultivation stances.

He had at least made some small inroads into forming the Thousand Lights Avatar in-between battles in the wilderness. He estimated that his spiritual body had become around 10% more congealed down to his throat, which was a step in the right direction. It was less than 1% toward forming a proper avatar, but it was something.

Zac kept going for two days until he reached his second cultivation cave in the neighboring life-attuned zone. This one was in a tree as well, but rather in the crown of a majestic oak that towered above most of the trees in the life-infused forest. Sitting in its crown and gazing upon the surroundings had helped him gain some insights into the Dao of Life.

The scenery had played a big role when upgrading [Hatchetman's Spirit] into [Ancestral Woods] as well, though he had drawn inspiration from multiple sources. The teleportation was a mix of his omnipresence of [Pillar of Desolation] and the lanky swordsman in the Battle of Fates, who could move through the sword pillars he had erected.

Unfortunately, the high-grade skill-upgrading chamber along with years of accumulation hadn't been enough to form another ultimate pathbound skill, [Ancestral Woods] was above-average even among peak-quality domain skills. The result was no doubt better than what he would have accomplished with just a [Fractal Framework Array].

For example, he had managed to completely transform the defensive properties of the skill. Before, the skill had conjured a divine tree with defensive charges, but those had never really come into play. They weren't powerful enough to help if his constitution proved insufficient. Furthermore, he was already getting [Empyrean Aegis] as soon as he got his life-attuned Dao Branch.

So instead, Zac had taken inspiration from [Undying Legion] when making the adjustments. Now, the trees could soak up some of the damage he received, apart from providing the omniscience, attribute buffs, and teleportation. It had become like a skill with over a hundred small charges, where each teleportation expended one charge.

It was altogether superior to the previous version, with the exception that the trees had become semi-corporeal now. Attacks infused with either Dao Branches or enough energy could damage the trees, though it would take some effort to rip them all apart. That was doubly true considering [Adamance of

Eoz] transferred over to his human side through [Quantum Gate], even if the node didn't appear in his status screen.

Zac spent the next few days in his tree crown regrouping himself and planning his next move. Until now, he had focused mostly on his techniques, but if he wanted to strengthen the effect of his Annihilation Sphere, he would have to put more effort into his Daos and his soul.

Should he set up his cultivation cave on the island again, this time springing for a more permanent setup to work on his soul? His Soul Aperture had completely stabilized after the evolution by now, and he could start practicing the third layer of [Nine Reincarnations Manual] at any time. Problem was, he only had 200 Purchase Points to his name after his pre-escape shopping spree.

He had lots of ideas, but he felt he could use some guidance. He infused some energy into his Cosmos Sack, where over two hundred tokens floated in the void. He was the most familiar with Travo Raso, but the old man had entered seclusion to prepare for the 3-year reshuffle of new arrivals. Eventually, his eyes turned to a glistening token; the one belonging to the unique lifeform Ubo.

Zac had tried visiting the elemental once before, but Ubo was still out from its cultivation cave at the time. But that was months ago, and Zac figured he could give it a try. The elemental lived in the same life-attuned zone as Zac had set up his cave in, though on the opposite side. Considering he was also a Monarch, who better than Ubo to ask for some pointers?

There was also Heda, but Zac was still a bit leery about the cultivator locked in a perpetual battle for her soul with some terrifying parasitic plant life. So Zac made his way toward the mountain that Ubo had made its home. Ten days later he arrived, and he once more gazed with marvel at the golden mountain.

It was teeming with life, even emitting a weak halo as though it was a holy mountain from legend. But even though it was drenched in powerful energies, there wasn't actually a single plant growing on its slopes. Perhaps that was why Ubo had occupied this spot in the first place; its flavor of life matched Ubo's origin.

The whole mountain was covered in a shimmering barrier as well, and Zac infused some energy into the invitation token to notify the elemental of his arrival.

"So you're here, youngster. Come in," a voice emerged from within the mountain after a moment, and the barrier flickered to provide passage.

Zac curiously entered, and he soon found himself in the heart of the mountain. He had thought that his cultivation cave back home on Earth was impressive enough, but he couldn't help but gawk as he looked around. Ubo had essentially hollowed out the whole mountain, and over a hundred golden pillars rose over a thousand meters into the air, each one of them covered in esoteric engravings.

There were simply arrays everywhere, and Zac was almost blinded by the thousands of Divine Crystals that illuminated the place. There was even plenty of natural sunlight in the cave as well, thanks to strategically placed vents in the ceiling. The area was as large as a whole village, and it contained even contained a lake where Zac spotted thousands of golden carps swimming.

There were also dozens of buildings and side-caves whose purpose Zac couldn't pinpoint because of obscuring arrays blurring them out.

In the center of it all was a massive altar reaching over fifty meters into the air, and the energies that swirled around it was almost a match to the cave he had hired to open his Hidden Node. And even if Zac wasn't an expert, he could tell that most of the arrays surrounding the altar weren't even activated, which meant that Ubo probably could boost the environment even further.

Seeing this place made him embarrassed just thinking of his dinky little cave back home, or even worse the crude camps he had set up here in the Orom World. Then again, he had visited quite a few cultivation caves by now, and this one was definitely more intricate than anything else he had come across.

Some warriors were even worse than he was, where they had simply just found a spot that they liked and thrown out a mat.

"Not bad, huh?" Ubo laughed, its voice reverberating through the cave.

Zac looked around with confusion until he spotted the mysterious stone on top of the altar. It was just sitting on top of an embroidered pillow, but a moment later it rose into the air as the shimmering body of Ubo congealed.

"It's eye-opening," Zac agreed as he looked at the meticulously designed cave. "There are truths hidden in this arrangement."

"There are truths hidden in everything," Ubo countered. "But you are correct. Every item and building in this cave are part of a formation I created to imprint my path on my surroundings. This way, I am never led astray while meditating. I'm not as powerful as those at the peak in this cave, those who are able to subvert the will of the Orom World and rebuff the subliminal messages."

The next moment, Ubo appeared at the foot of the altar, and it conjured a table along with some spiritual fruits.

"If my memory serves, roughly two years have passed since your arrival," Ubo said after the two sat down. "Do you feel confident about the three-year shake-up?"

"It should be fine," Zac slowly said. "I read you need 15,000 points on average to pass at the E-grade. I've already passed that, and I still have time to make more progress."

"Not bad," Ubo nodded. "But don't get complacent. You should have read some of the records."

"It's hard to believe," Zac muttered with a shake of his head. "How could someone at the E-grade gather more than 100,000 Contribution Points in three years?"

The current record at the E-grade was set two million years ago, where a woman called Jala Evermyre gained 118,235 Contribution Points before the 3-year deadline. Even forming a Dao Branch was only worth a couple of thousand Contribution Points. To pass 100,000 in three years, she must have not only gained multiple advanced-stage Dao breakthroughs, but also practiced some other highly valued methods like soul cultivation or bloodline evolutions.

Even then, Zac's performance wasn't anything to scoff at. He had already gained over 35,000 Contribution Points since arriving in the Orom World, making him pretty much safe from the 3-year culling. And that was without even aiming to maximize his Contribution Points. He was confident that he

would be able to gain quite a bit more over the next year as well, as long as he didn't get stuck on some bottleneck.

"Well, that particular lady only stayed for four years before leaving. The Orom World also entered a 20-year weakened state around the same time, so most assume someone in her family took issue with their descendant being caught," Ubo snorted. "So what brings you here today?"

"I encountered a bit of a setback recently," Zac sighed. "I figured I would stretch my legs and clear my head for a bit."

"Setbacks are part of cultivation. I once fell into a spatial crack that threw me into a corrupted inheritance trial. Took me 800 years to break out," Ubo laughed. "Setbacks can be as valuable as epiphanies, provided you make the most of it. Tell me, what are you planning on doing next?"

Zac felt that the atmosphere had shifted a bit, like there was some sort of hidden implication to the elemental's question.

"Well, I'll keep training and then try again," Zac eventually said after a while. "I don't like to back down after having decided on something."

"Ha!" Ubo laughed. "I guess the Lord was right."

"What?" Zac blurted with a sinking feeling in his chest.

Had someone exposed him, connecting his two identities and his escape attempt? Zac immediately got ready to fight or escape, but what was the point even if he managed to kill the elemental in front of him? There was still this anonymous Lord who could turn him in at any time. Or was the Lord the Orom?

Zac frantically tried to figure out what to do, but his mind froze when he saw a familiar object appear above Ubo's hand.

"The Lord contacted me half a year ago. He told me that you would visit me soon," the elemental explained. "It was he who instructed me to ask you about your plans, and present this thing in case your answer was to his satisfaction."

Zac barely heard the elemental's words, his eyes glued to the token hovering in the air.

"Perennial Vastness..."