

Chapter 14 – A Tube

Leaving the forest behind, as well as the circling CLC hovercar, we headed toward Purgatory at a stiff jog. Itsuki led the way, and we didn't talk, audibly or with divine sense. After crossing the field, we hopped the fence that marked the border of the estate, then went through several other estates. The next one over wasn't as well-maintained as the one we'd landed in. The hills were covered with overgrown weeds—albeit green ones—and scattered rocks. We were too far from the buildings to make them out clearly, but I wondered if the place was abandoned. The third estate had a pond, and the fourth didn't have any vegetation at all, but rather a tennis court, a jogging track, and a dirt course that appeared to be made for racing bikes or small cars.

The entire time, we moved closer and closer to Purgatory. It was strange, as the versions of Purgatory I'd witnessed up close were all dank no-man's-lands wreathed in fetid darkness. But the Purgatory of the Second Heaven was actually lit up.

After hopping a brick wall into yet another estate and finding ourselves behind a storage shed of some sort, Itsuki said, "You can drop the cloak."

I did. "What if they track us with dogs?"

"You could use your cultivator robe. They mask scent."

"They do?"

"You didn't know that?"

"Maybe I missed that part in the description." I hesitated. "I feel silly wearing the robe," I said. "It seems too much like a costume."

Itsuki rolled his eyes. "I guess it's a moot point, given that I don't have one. Besides, I picked up one of these." He pulled something out of his dimensional storage device that resembled a grenade. Pulling the pin out, he tossed it into the estate behind us. "They won't be able to follow us past this point. Well, not unless they're really thorough."

I felt a brief change in air pressure and heard a thump.

“I feel like it’s risky to assume they won’t be thorough.”

Itsuki frowned in thought. “Agreed. We really ought to confirm that we aren’t being followed. How about we find a place in Purgatory to hole up safely? Or maybe right outside Purgatory. If we don’t see any sign of pursuit by tonight, we’ll proceed.”

I considered the plan. “You think that’s enough time?”

“There’s no guarantee. But I can tell you one thing that *is* a guarantee. If Cross-Level Control is serious about finding us, they won’t wait for days.”

“Is it safe to proceed without the cloak?”

“Petty crime isn’t exactly a huge problem around here, so most people don’t go to the trouble of setting up surveillance on their properties. Especially this far from the city center. I think we’re fine. How are your energy levels?”

I double-checked. “I’m down to about half.”

“Then no cloak. But let’s put the respirators on just in case.”

Masked up, we proceeded, passing over walls and fences. We crossed a few roads as well. The complete lack of other people was unnerving. In fact, the closer we got to Purgatory, the more empty estates we found. At a certain point, we must have left a residential district, because we found ourselves in a cornfield.

“I thought corn came from factories,” I said.

Itsuki laughed. “Wang Fan, you really need to get it through your thick skull that the First and Second Heaven are different. Yeah, go higher in the Grand Kingdom, and most things are ‘grown’ in factories. But a corn ‘factory’ is basically just a bunch of indoor cornfields stacked on top of each other. Down here, there’s more open space, so you’re more likely to find old-fashioned things like outdoor farms and whatnot. Besides, this kind of food sells for triple or more the price of the factory-grown stuff. In other words, it’s profitable to grow it.”

After the cornfield was a field of vines that I soon realized contained watermelons. Then another cornfield. Then we reached a two-lane road where we saw our first vehicles other than the CLC patrol. Two freight trucks trundled along, carrying who-knew-what to who-knew-where.

When the trucks were out of sight, we crossed the road into a warehouse district.

It was only after the warehouses that we found ourselves at Purgatory proper. I realized now that there were lighting facilities built into the place, shining up to illuminate the parts of the Shield that sloped down to reach the ground here. There was no runoff water, and very little in the way of junk or trash, although it wasn't perfectly clean either. There were also occasional squat buildings built in seemingly random locations.

"What are those?" I asked.

"Access rooms," Itsuki replied. "And also our ticket down to the First Heaven."

"Another Shield climb?"

"Basically, yes. The areas where the Shield and Purgatory meet, forming the outer 'walls' of the Grand Kingdom, are the most remote and safest places. Like I said, when I was a kid, I snuck up to the Second Heaven."

I smiled as I thought of my adventure with Xiaoli, sneaking from the Third Heaven to the Ninth. Granted, we didn't go through Purgatory, but the general concept was similar.

Itsuki noticed my expression. "I take it you had your own taste of youthful fancy."

"Yeah."

We waited at the edge of Purgatory until night fell. There was absolutely no sign of any pursuit.

When the distant Heaven-Propping Pillar went dark, and the special illumination was dimmed, everything went very black. Some of the warehouses had lights, and there were streetlamps on the roads, but not enough to make walking safe this far away from them.

Night vision goggles in place, we crept into Purgatory, where Itsuki used divine sense to pick a lock and get into one of the access rooms.

Pausing at the stairs that led down, he said, "We've been going for a long time without rest. Let's get thirty minutes down, then sleep for a few hours."

"Lead the way."

The trip through the Primary Shield wasn't much different than our journey through the Secondary. The superior quality of the construction materials was the main disparity. And everything smelled new, even though I knew it wasn't.

Thirty minutes down, we found a place in a pipe network where we could safely hole up. I used the Igneus Mask technique to conceal our presence, tying an energy knot so it would remain in place until I dispelled it. To find us, someone would literally have to climb through a twisted network of pipes and stumble right onto us.

"Four hours," Itsuki said.

Giving him an 'okay' sign, I laid my head on the pillow I'd brought along and closed my eyes. Sleep took me instantly.

I had another nightmare about Hina. In this one, I was having lunch with her, chatting about pet frogs, when Johan Saito walked up behind her with a shotgun and blew her head off. As chunks of bone and brain matter dribbled down my face, Johan turned into my father and started lecturing me about proper police procedures.

I woke with a gasp, and it took me a while to remember where I was. After that, sleep eluded me, as I again found myself sinking into the quagmire of confusion about my sister's killer. What if Hina could have been redeemed? What if she wasn't really a bad person? Eventually, I had to force myself to stop thinking about it. Sitting up, I forced myself to meditate, using the opportunity to add energy back into my Thermal root.

Eventually, Itsuki's watch beeped. He silenced the alarm and sat up. "Wang Fan, you awake?" he whispered.

"Yeah."

"All right, let's get moving," Itsuki said.

We climbed down twenty minutes before reaching a dead end, forcing us to double back. "Apologies," Itsuki said. "To be honest, I tried to purchase a map, but they didn't have

any. And I didn't climb up this part of the Shield specifically. My adventure was several miles away."

"It's fine," I replied. As we retraced our steps, I said, "It's strange to be so close to the outside. To the Hellscape."

"The Hellscape doesn't exist, remember? As per Yu Yitai."

"Well, call it what you will, it's nowhere either of us wants to be. *The world outside is even more dangerous than it was when the Hellscape existed.* Yu Yitai's words."

"Right. *Vile entities roam the lands.* I guess we're lucky there aren't any ways in or out."

"How do you know there aren't?"

He paused at the top of a flight of stairs as I climbed up to join him. "Now that you mention it... I guess I can't be sure. I just remember being taught that."

The direction of the conversation had my brain shuffling puzzle pieces around, and as I stepped onto the landing next to Itsuki, I sensed several of them click together.

"Do you remember what your father said about that altar of his? That your grandfather sent members of your clan into the Hellscape to get it."

Itsuki's brow furrowed. "I do remember him saying that. It stuck out as odd to me, but I put it in the back of my mind given the circumstances and haven't thought about it again until just now."

"You said your great-grandfather was alive during the War of Tribulation, right? Which means your grandfather must have been born afterward."

"Yes, during the Dust Settles. If Yu Yitai is right, then the Hellscape actually did exist back then, and there was no Grand Kingdom. Even during the early years of the Climb, there were people going back and forth into the Hellscape. That must be when they went to get the sun altar."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

Two hours passed, and we'd been forced to double back twice and find new routes. It was around that time that the catwalk we were proceeding along ran into what appeared to

be an enormous metal tube running horizontally in front of us, at least ten feet from bottom to top.

“What is this thing?” Itsuki murmured, stepping forward to place his hand on the surface of it.

“Something unusual?” I asked, examining the thing. That was when I noticed the catwalk ended about a foot away from the tube and looked to have been hastily cut.

“Yeah, it shouldn’t be here,” Itsuki said. “Look at the surface of the metal. It’s rough, as opposed to all the other smooth pipes you see in the Primary and Secondary Shields.”

Glancing to the left, I saw that the catwalk wasn’t the only thing that had been hastily cut away. The metal tube actually pierced right through one of the massive girders, and the hole clearly hadn’t been precisely sliced as if with machinery. “Look at that.”

He followed my gaze. “Whatever this thing is, it isn’t part of the Shield. It’s something new. But what?”

Tapping into his Gravitational root, he lightened his body and jumped up to land atop the tube, then knelt and rapped on it lightly with his knuckles. It made virtually no noise.

Meanwhile, I scanned the thing with my divine sense. “I can’t even see it with divine sense. There must be spell formations in it that prevent that.” I tried harder to send my divine sense inside it, but failed. “I don’t think you could find it unless you stumbled right across it. It’s protected in the same way the Naturalism Sect protects their safe houses.”

“Who the hell would create something like this? And here, of all places?”

Using the power of my own Gravitational root, I floated up to stand next to Itsuki. “Maybe it’s some sort of smuggler route.”

“There’s no way,” he said. “For one thing, it’s going east and west, without the slightest incline. Wouldn’t a smuggler route be going up and down? At least a bit? Besides, who would do the spell formation work for them? It’s no small task to hide something this big. And that’s not to mention that it would get spotted by maintenance crews. It would take *a lot* of bribe money to keep word of this thing from spreading.”

We looked at the tube beneath our feet for a long moment. “If you think it’s worth exploring, how about we split up? Just for a few minutes. See if it goes far.”

He rubbed his jaw as he thought. "Fine. I'll go this way, you head the other way. Don't go too far, and we regroup in five or six minutes."

I turned and headed down the pipe in the direction of the enormous girder. Thankfully, the tube cut through the girder near a section of smaller reinforcement girders that I was able to navigate with relative ease to reach the other side. There, the tube went straight out into the darkness of the Shield, beyond the areas where the lit pathways would illuminate it. It passed mostly through open air, although it did cut through another catwalk. After going down it for about three minutes, I saw something that broke the smooth surface of the top of the tube, right in a location where it passed next to a platform. Hurrying forward, I realized there was a hatch in the tube. It was crudely constructed, looking like little more than a circular metal slab.

At least, that was my first impression. Squatting to examine it more closely, I saw that the hinges were cleverly constructed in a way that protected the moving mechanisms inside. In other words, it wouldn't be easy to break it. And while the tube in general seemed to be made from iron or some similar metal, the hatch was constructed from bonemetal. There was no locking mechanism, seeming to indicate it was designed to be opened from the inside.

I sent divine sense in to inspect it, but as expected, there was a spell formation protecting it. This one was different from the general formations that kept the tube from being discovered. I wasn't an expert in formations, but based on what I'd seen, my guess was that it was a defensive formation designed to prevent entry.

"Very interesting," I murmured. Turning around, I hurried back, crossing around the huge girder, and returning to the spot we'd parted from. Itsuki was already there.

"I didn't find anything," he said.

"I did. Come with me."

Back at the hatch, Itsuki knelt, examined it, then scanned it with divine sense.

As he did, I said, "I don't think there's any way we're getting past that formation. Whoever made it knew what they were doing."

"Normally speaking, I'd agree. Except I have this."

A fist-sized shell appeared in his hand, the color of alabaster and inscribed with golden lines of magical symbols.

"The Shell of the Hešeri," I said.

“Ironically, it was promised to me by my father, but it was Yu Yitai who gave it to me. Stand back.”

Gripping the shell, Itsuki poured Solar energy into it, until it glowed so brightly I averted my eyes. A faint whining sound rolled out that vibrated all the way down into the pit of my stomach. Then, despite my eyes being closed, I sensed the light fading.

I opened my eyes and looked down to see Itsuki gripping the side of the hatch. Without the spell formation to protect it, it was a simple matter to disengage the locking mechanism with divine sense.

“That’s all it took?” I asked.

The hatch opened.

“That’s all it took,” he said. “You can use the shell a few different ways. The easiest option would be to just destroy the formation. But by focusing the power, you can essentially cut through it. We have about two minutes before the formation stitches itself back together. Now, what are you more interested in, seeing where this tube comes from? Or seeing where it goes? For me, it’s the latter.”

I looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“Have you been keeping track of our bearing?”

“More or less.” Pointing back toward the catwalk we’d been walking, I said, “There isn’t much more of the Grand Kingdom that way.”

“Exactly. So why is there a tunnel going in that direction?”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Yes. Could it be possible that this thing leads out of the Grand Kingdom?”

The mere thought of it caused my stomach to roil with dread. I was now one of the most powerful cultivators in the Nine Heavens and Ten Earths, and yet the idea of leaving humanity’s home seemed too big of a concept to even contemplate. Even Yu Yitai had said the outside was too dangerous. If Itsuki and I stepped out there, what would happen?