

Chapter 12 – Climbing Down

Even schoolchildren knew that the first Shield ever made was originally just called *The Shield*. Later, when construction of another Shield started, they changed its name to the Primary Shield, with subsequent Shields being designated Secondary, Tertiary, Quaternary, and so on. Around 465 NE, construction started on the First Earth, and the naming system became much less flowery, with the Shields being labeled simply First, Second, Third, et cetera.

As Itsuki and I climbed into the depths of the Secondary Shield, the first thing I noticed was how much better shape it was in than the Third Shield. When Jakobe, Elena, and I had climbed the Third, everything smelled like old metal and mold. Although the massive support girders there were the same as here, the other construction materials in the Third relied heavily on corrugated metal and flimsy bars that appeared to be in danger of falling apart at any moment. And there had been water dripping everywhere, although that was a result of a leak above in the Fourth Earth.

The Secondary Shield was very, very different. There were no creaking ladders or flimsy walkways. Everything seemed well-maintained, with the scent of solvent, oil, and disinfectant mingling in the air. I didn't see a single indication that water ran anywhere but in the pipes. The lighting was more consistent as well. As we hurried down a spiral staircase, I said, "Are we even in the Grand Kingdom anymore?"

"What do you mean?" Itsuki asked.

"Just a joke. Everything here is clean. Well-maintained. Nothing is falling apart."

"Weren't you born in the Third Heaven? The place is pretty nice, to be honest."

"I guess I just got used to the Third Earth being so run-down."

"If you're surprised by this, wait till you get to the First Heaven."

"Is it really that much better?"

"In a word, yes."

There were a lot more cameras, and most of them seemed to be working. On numerous occasions, we used the mobile scrambler to get past them. Thankfully, the route we were following skirted guard stations, and the map noted the patrol routes frequented by the guards. As a result, we never ran into any living beings. Itsuki repeatedly urged me not to use my Thermal Ripple Cloak, to save energy. After about an hour of climbing mostly downward, we reached a landing with a bench table that I assumed was used by workers for lunch breaks.

“Let’s rest here for five minutes while I review the map,” Itsuki said.

Sitting, I pulled out some spicy tofu strips from my pack.

Itsuki spread the map out in front of him and traced his finger along it this way and that until he stopped at a certain point. “All right, we’re right here, and that means we’re basically at a fork in the road. If we go the long way, it’ll take two extra hours, but there’s less chance of running into CLC patrols. The short way is riskier. More patrols. More cameras. I vote for the long way.”

“Oh, we’re voting now? What happens if I vote against you?”

“We resolve it by sword duel,” he replied, his face as expressionless as polished bonemetal for a long moment before the corner of his mouth twitched up in a smile.

“Was that a joke? From Itsuki Saito?”

He chuckled, and I actually laughed. “Anyway, moot point,” I said, “as I also vote for the long way.”

After resting our legs for five minutes, we continued our journey down the “long way,” which initially involved a horizontal hike as opposed to any climbing. For the most part, we avoided the walkways, and instead picked our way along massive pipes and girders, through several fenced-off areas, and, at one point, out the drainage pipe of a massive, empty storage tank.

“There’s a big landing ahead where we start to go down,” Itsuki said. “From there, it’s only about thirty minutes to the spot we jump from.”

I let my mind wander as we traveled, and this time, I found myself thinking about the orgplants, the Heaven-Propping Pillar, and how the entire substructure of the Nine Heavens and Ten Earths was really an immense weapon.

I found it ironic that it all had to do with water. The path of Hydric cultivation had been cut off, making it impossible for cultivators to become immortals. And yet, the entire Grand Kingdom was plagued by a never-ending deluge of liquid. The Shields diverted the water, and while they hardly functioned in the Netherworlds and Dark Earths, the farther down one went, the better they did their job. In the Third Heaven, rainfall was scheduled with precision, and though it was common, I remembered clearly that, as a child, I only saw rain about half of the days of the year. What was more, it was usually scheduled at times that wouldn't cause problems for commuters. Or on weekends.

I'd heard rumors that it rained even less frequently in the Second Heaven, which suddenly led me to wonder about the First.

"Itsuki, how often does the Cursed rain fall in the First Heaven?"

"It doesn't," he answered.

"Wait, what? Never?"

"It rains, but the water doesn't come from the storm. It's purified water that gets pumped up and sent down to water the vegetation and clean the roads."

Why was I not surprised that the leaders of Sinotech kept their own home free of Cursed water? Why *wouldn't* they take as many steps as possible to live in ease, while also reducing their chances of contracting the Curse?

Thinking about the paths of cultivation and the elites' goal of forming eight diamonds, I suddenly realized there was something odd about the situation.

"Itsuki, do you know how many diamonds of energy Hei Luoxiang has?"

"Three, just like Yu Yitai."

I thought about it for a bit. "Why three? The Hydric path is the only one that can't be cultivated. Why wouldn't they add more diamonds of energy? If either Hei Luoxiang or Yu Yitai could get such an edge on the other, they would have a much better shot of seizing the upper hand. In fact, if there were multiple cultivators on one side or the other who had four or more diamonds, it would completely change the status quo."

He hooked his feet around a ladder and slid to the bottom. I followed.

“There’s obviously a lot that Yu Yitai hasn’t explained to you,” he said. “You don’t know about tribulations?”

“Like the War of Tribulation?”

“No, no. That war was named after *real* tribulations. I don’t know who originally called it the War of Tribulation, but it actually doesn’t have anything to do with how things work. Tribulations happen at certain cultivation milestones, specifically, the fourth diamond and the seventh. When you form them, the Universe itself tries to wipe you out of existence.”

“Are you serious?” I asked, following him along the base of one of the massive girders that formed the skeleton of the Shield.

“That’s what I read, at least. The truth is that nobody knows with absolute certainty what causes tribulations. One of the books I studied speculated that it relates to the natural laws of the Universe. But it mentioned that some ancient people believed there are higher beings that use them to prevent weaker entities from threatening them.”

“Interesting. What do these tribulations involve?”

“I have no idea what the seventh diamond tribulation involves. The only thing I know for sure is that when you form the fourth diamond, you get struck by lightning four times in a row. If you survive, then you live to be a four-diamond cultivator. But living through it isn’t a guarantee.”

In both Sinese and Japkor, the number four was unlucky because it was related to death. I wondered if there was a connection somehow.

“Are you saying that Hei Luoxiang and Yu Yitai don’t know how to survive the tribulations?”

“No. I’m saying that the destructive nature of the tribulation lightning could damage the structure of the Grand Kingdom. Depending on how the lightning struck, it could wreak enough havoc to collapse some or all of the structure.”

“Damn,” I murmured.

“I think all the high-level cultivators have resources pooled that they can use to form diamonds in all the paths of cultivation. I know my father was on his way to a full collection. That way, when the Curse is lifted, they can quickly rise through all the levels.”

“But what about Yu Yitai? He’s had the ability to go past the Curse Storm for years now. Why doesn’t he just go up there and break through?”

“I’ve thought about the same thing. My best guess is—” He stopped talking and raised his hand to signal to stop moving.

“THERE’S SOMEONE UP AHEAD,” he said to me via divine sense.

I took a step forward. “I CAN GO IN WITH A THERMAL RIPPLE CLOAK.”

He held an arm up to block my path. “WAIT.”

Edging forward, he leaned around the girder’s flange for a moment. “JUST SMUGGLERS. NO NEED TO WASTE ENERGY ON A SITUATION LIKE THIS.”

“WE STILL DON’T WANT TO BE IDENTIFIED.”

I saw Itsuki’s lip twitch as he said, “MIGHT AS WELL JUST WIPE THEM OUT. THEY’RE CRIMINALS, AFTER ALL.”

Criminals are criminals, son. There’s a reason why most of them get liquidated or put to sleep. That was what Dad had always said. But I wasn’t an executioner, and if Itsuki and I were going to really be friends, I had to get him to dial down his level of ruthlessness. However, instead of reprimanding him for resorting to violence so easily, I decided to appeal to his reason. “AND DO WHAT WITH THE BODIES? REMEMBER, WE WANT TO ATTRACT THE LEAST AMOUNT OF ATTENTION POSSIBLE.”

“WE HAVE DIMENSIONAL PENDANTS, BUT I GET YOUR POINT. FINE, LET’S JUST USE THE RESPIRATORS.”

He proceeded to pull a respirator mask out of his bag and put it on, covering his entire face with a reflective black visor. I strapped mine on as well. Combined with the black jumpsuits, we looked vaguely militaristic, but not enough so that anyone would confuse us for Black Corpses or Glorious Peacekeepers.

Itsuki waved his hand to summon a bonemetal sword, as well as a sheath that looked to be crafted from black leather. As he sheathed the sword and strapped it to his waist, I removed my HP9-9 shotgun from my dimensional pendant.

With a final flick of his fingers, Itsuki produced a handgun that he holstered at his right hip. “READY?”

“AFTER YOU.”

He stepped out into the open, and I followed onto a walkway of steel grating, beneath which was an expanse of darkness. Farther ahead was some sort of guard station or toolshed. Lounging in front of it were four individuals dressed in a mishmash of unusual clothing. One, a stick-thin man taller than me, had on a jumpsuit similar to ours. The second was a woman dressed like someone from the Eighth Earth, with a transparent jacket revealing two full sleeve tattoos. The other two were men, burly, with glossy white garments. Every member of the motley group had a prosthetic body part or two, and they were all armed.

“I’LL DO THE TALKING,” Itsuki said.

As we approached, the group noticed us and stirred into a state of readiness. The skinny man stepped forward, holding an oscihammer in one hand that he hefted up and down with the other hand. “Welcome to checkpoint PTP,” he said, while his three companions readied weapons of their own. I saw a knife, a bludgeon, and a suspicious bulge that was likely a handgun of some sort.

“I wasn’t aware of any checkpoints,” Itsuki said, his voice distorted from the mask’s speakers. He produced the map from his jumpsuit pocket and said, “I bought this from—”

“Don’t matter who ya bought it from, prinker. PTP means Pay To Pass, so pony up the cash.”

Itsuki slowly put the map back in the pocket, then lowered his hand to rest on the hilt of his sword.

“Did you just call me prinker?” he asked.

“Yeah, I did. Now like I said, if you wanna get past, you gotta pay up. Hard cash. 5K. You rate that, *prinker*?”

“I *rate* that you’re ripping me off.”

“If you don’t like it, climb back up.” Letting the oscihammer drop to his side, he flicked it on, causing a faint humming to fill the air. Meanwhile, the men in white rose to their feet, hands resting meaningfully on firearms.

I was getting lost in the language, which I assumed was Greater Heavens slang of some sort. Regardless of the meaning, the man’s tone made it obvious what was going on. And the way I saw Itsuki’s fingers tightening on his sword made it clear what he was considering.

“COME ON, ITSUKI. WE CAN AFFORD THE CASH, LET’S JUST PAY.”

“HE DIRECTLY INSULTED ME. AND IT’S NOT ABOUT THE MONEY, IT’S ABOUT THE PRINCIPLE. I SHOULD WIPE ALL FOUR OF THESE ASSHOLES OUT OF EXISTENCE.”

“THAT’S NOT THE MISSION.” I stepped forward, past Itsuki.

“We don’t want any problems, friend,” I said. “I have five thousand right here.” I pulled the backpack around to my front, unzipped it, and pulled out five rolls of bills. It would reduce my stockpile by a third, but Yu Yitai had made it clear we didn’t need to worry about money.

I tossed him the rolls of money, and he grabbed them out of the air.

“Smart man,” he said, “unlike your prinker friend.”

I could see Itsuki tense next to me.

“Enough language, Tingfeng,” the woman said. “They paid the toll. Let them pass without any more jibber-jabber.”

“LET’S GO,” I said to Itsuki, gently grabbing his arm and pulling him forward. Keeping my divine sense locked onto the group in case they tried to make a move on us from behind, I guided Itsuki past them.