

The Fall 1062

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'There's no Karmic link between my bodies?' Zac thought with surprise.

"How marvelous. I sensed something hidden within your body, but I didn't expect something like this," Sendor continued, seemingly talking to himself. "How did such a method elude my gaze? Why can't I figure it out even now?"

"Even you can't tell?" Zac said, the words coming out of his other self.

"I can tell neither is a clone. Both are real," Sendor said. "But there is not a shred of Karma connecting you. That should be impossible. New threads should form even if the process somehow severed your fate and split you in two. Both halves are indelible parts of yourself and your path, yet you might as well be strangers.

"That is doubly true if you're one entity sharing two bodies. Those at the peak might be able to hide the connection between their avatars through force. However, you're just a Hegemon, and you're inside my domain. It shouldn't be possible for you to hide any connection between your selves. So are you one or two?"

Zac didn't immediately answer. Instead, a scowl appeared on his face as he parsed what the Realm Spirit had just said. "Something inside my body? Did you know this would happen? Was my fate another interesting thing you wanted to observe?"

"Of course," Sendor said, clearly unfazed by the accusatory tone. "That is the trade. You get to enjoy the resources within my worlds and get assistance with your core formation. In return, I get to observe the process in search of answers."

Zac wanted to retort, but he knew the Realm Spirit had a point. The amount of resources he'd extracted from the Perennial Vastness over the years was shocking, and that didn't account for the unique opportunities like the Keys of Ascension and his Core Formation Setup. Looking back at the process, there was no way he would have succeeded with his core formation if he had tried it back in Zecia.

He even got his hands on an invaluable inheritance of the First People, and Sendor showed no indication of wanting it back. Of course, all that didn't mean the situation wouldn't leave a bad taste in his mouth.

"Still, you could have warned me," Zac muttered.

"And what would you have done?" Sendor smiled. "If I couldn't figure it out, how would you? My warning would just become an anchor holding you back. All things considered, things worked out quite nicely. "

Zac gave up and instead considered Sendor's other words. If Sendor truly wanted to get to the bottom of Zac's body, he would, one way or another. The System interfered during their previous encounter, but that was because Sendor was about to divulge some taboo secrets. The old Realm Spirit might even be able to help him figure out some aspects of his situation.

This might even be an opportunity to make some money.

"The answer to those questions doesn't seem to fall under the trade you mentioned," Zac eventually said. "I could tell you, but you'd need to provide something of sufficient value in return."

"Fine, brat. What do you want?" Sendor said with exasperation.

"Valsa brought a piece of her ancestor into this place..." Zac said. "And I'm soon heading into an even more dangerous place, where people like Valsa will be a dime a dozen. I want an edict to protect myself."

"No way," Sendor said. "Even if I wanted to, I couldn't. The System's full attention is on this trial. There'll be no bending rules or sneaking things inside."

Zac was more relieved than disappointed by the rejection. Getting an edict would have been nice, but it wasn't crucial as long as the others couldn't bring one inside.

"Still, those from the heartlands are bound to have powerful lifesaving means," Zac said.

"One mark," Sendor said. "A piece of my spirituality at the limits of what the System will allow. I warn you, though, it will have a consciousness of its own. I will not attack one of the connected brats and break my promise of neutrality. At most, I'll block their attacks or trap them while you run away."

"Fine, but one piece for each body. And one to Catheya and Ogras."

Sendor's face turned ugly, but he slowly relaxed his face. "Fine! Both your bodies, but not those two. It would go too far. Ask for something else."

Zac had expected as much and countered with his real desire. "Provide the two with some other opportunity, then. Something suitable for them. And after they've broken through, not before. Send them back a year before the inheritance."

Sendor looked like he was about to reject, but a smile suddenly spread across his face.

"You're asking me to remold their fate," Sendor said. "You should know, such a thing is not as simple as me throwing a couple of inheritances their way. I'll warn you because I like you; if you ask this of me, you'll sow Karma, and sating my curiosity isn't enough to resolve it. Forming Karma with someone at my level can have unexpected consequences."

"Like what?"

"Who knows? I'm quite powerful, and my fate is like a bottomless ocean," Sendor grinned. "I'm like the Sangha; people just end up inside me and become my helpers. You've met a few of my disciples and refugees already. Seeing your penchant for trouble, I'd guess you'd end up in the second group."

Zac looked at the horned avatar for a few seconds. "I'll take my chances. Can you do it?"

"It's a small matter. I'll call in a few favors."

Zac nodded in thanks. This was the thing he was most worried about. In a perfect world, he would provide all the people back home with opportunities, but time was running out. The others were just too far behind to contend for the prizes of the Left Imperial Palace. They would, at most, be able to stumble onto some minor opportunities while staying out of harm's way.

Only Catheya and Ogras had the potential to accompany him into the inner parts of the trial, where he expected to encounter the real elites from the Multiverse Heartlands. If he could use this opportunity to help his girlfriend and best friend, why not? He could hold the fort back home while they advanced their cultivation.

There was certainly a self-serving component to this idea. He was outmatched and alone when it came to the trial. The Undead Empire had its own designs and couldn't be trusted, while Iz had responsibilities to her family. She would likely have helped him if it were some frontier trial, but this was an Eternal Heritage. He couldn't ask Iz to give up on that to help him hunt side treasures.

Left alone, Zac lacked the qualifications to fight for the best opportunities within the Left Imperial Palace. However, meeting Kruta and Esmeralda had already set a foundation for something promising. With two avatars and two more capable helpers on his side, he suddenly had a proper squad. They wouldn't be the strongest group around, but they had a shot at making a killing inside.

And the odds would only get better the more benefits Zac extracted from the Realm Spirit.

"Since it was a small matter, let's call it a freebie. Next, I want to bring the Core Formation setup back home. Also, a couple of Middle-stage D-grade Supr—" Zac said but was interrupted by a wave of Sendor's arm.

"I'll stop you right there," Sendor said. "I can't mess around with your fate too much. You are marked, and the System has its own thoughts. I can tell it's a bad idea to meddle with your cultivation, but I have a feeling a path will show itself to you soon enough."

Zac grimaced. The Realm Spirit might have been making excuses not to avoid spending money, but Zac felt he was telling the truth. If the Pathstrider title wasn't enough, he'd just gotten another title that felt like a target on his back. Meanwhile, war was brewing in Zecia. Zac wouldn't be surprised the System was prepared to send trouble his way, trouble with rewards so tantalizing he couldn't say no.

"Something else, then," Zac said, ignoring Sendor's raised brow. "I want an answer. About my ancestor."

"I really can't talk about that, for both our sakes. Didn't you see the System's reaction the last time? The Void Emperor and the Limitless Emperor set the stage for this era. It's dangerous to delve into those secrets with the era's ultimate direction still up in the air," Sendor muttered. "Besides, I've already helped you out plenty."

"Wh—" Zac said, but his eyes widened as a burst of images appeared in his mind.

Of the Ogre Autarch hiding in a dimensional pocket, looking at his breakthrough with greed in his eyes. Of Sendor capturing him and sending him into some vortex. He also noted that Lova was there, disapproving of Engo's plans but making no moves to stop him.

The scene filled him with a sense of defeat. It was a cruel world where everyone was looking out for themselves.

"Thank you," Zac said, his back slick with sweat from having been targeted by a Peak Autarch. "Still, keeping your people in line shouldn't be considered doing me a favor. I doubt the System would let your followers wantonly attack youngsters in a trial like this."

"Greedy brat," Sendor muttered before a mischievous smile spread across his face. "Fine, I'll disregard Engo's transgression. That doesn't change the fact my options are limited. Luckily, I came prepared with something else that might interest you."

"What's that?"

"I can tell you about the Kayar-Elu."

Kenzie sat in silence, surrounded by eight gleaming runes. The arrays looked simple, but they were just the tip of an iceberg of vast networks the size of small countries. Every hour, they used enough resources to bankrupt Earth. Each rune flickered with lights and impressions with such speed Kenzie couldn't keep up, but she wasn't meant to.

Jeeves was fast at work, using the distilled truths of the purification arrays to further modify her four Dao Branches. Kenzie only needed to incorporate the changes into her understanding. She still felt some reluctance and alienation when sensing the refined Dao fluctuations from four of the arrays, but she knew that she didn't have much choice.

A low rumble, audible only to herself and Jeeves, indicated the seclusion was nearing an end. Three months wasn't long, but it was a distinct improvement compared to when three of her Dao Branches were still purely within the Peak of the Grand Element. Back then, she could only cultivate for a couple of weeks before the System caught her scent.

Kenzie hadn't expected that cultivating a peak fully integrated into the System by one of the Apostates would have such a troublesome consequence. It acted like a homing signal for the System, a signal that had only grown more powerful as her Daos and Jeeves evolved. Jeeves could still avoid the System gaze, but it would just be a matter of time before they were caught.

Even Leandra seemed surprised by the situation, even if she hadn't let anything on. Like Kenzie, Leandra had likely thought the System would look the other way after the initial punishment that eradicated their clan. However, the System grew less willing to accept her existence for every step she took. Reaching Hegemony had been the tipping point, where it actively started to hunt her down.

As such, a plan was set in motion. If the Elemental Daos were the reason she was being exposed, then the Elemental Daos needed to change. And with Kenzie's accidental inclusion of wind as an element, Leandra came up with a solution that wouldn't require her to reset her cultivation. Such an undertaking would be incredibly difficult, even with Jeeves aiding her. Kenzie even feared Leandra would cut her losses and extract Jeeves if things reached that point.

The solution could be found in the sibling Peaks of Heaven and Earth. The almost forgotten Earthly Peak was one of the rarest cultivation directions, not just because it had yet to fully reform. It was difficult to understand, and its strengths were not readily apparent. It was sometimes called the Inverse Peak due to its ability to transform other Daos, and it was a dominant force in the lower planes.

Many believed that the incomplete dimensions of the lower planes were required to prop up the prime realities, but they didn't see much other use for the Earthly Peak. Even the summoners and mages using the hidden planes to power their skills or call upon familiars generally cultivated the matching Dao of

the plane they connected with. In contrast, the Heavenly Peak had quite a few followers, thanks to it encompassing the Daos of Wind and Lightning.

The System didn't share the cultivation world's indifference to the Earthly Peak. The Heavenly Peak represented the System more than any other, evidenced by its purpose and the Tribulation Lightning. Even the Apostate of Order only helped streamline its methods. Since the Peaks of the Heavens and Earth could be considered part of the same coin, the Heavens couldn't reach perfection before the Earth was restored.

As such, it was another broken peak, one that the System was most interested in mending. Innumerable years of effort had yielded results, and the peaks were nearing completion well ahead of schedule. But it still wasn't quite there. By incorporating these two peaks into her cultivation, Kenzie would weaken the link from the Elemental Peak and make the System think twice about striking her down.

After all, she had a small chance to succeed where the Apostate of Mercy failed.

Gust, already being part of the Heavenly Peak, would borrow from the Earthly Peak. Today, her wind-attuned Dao Branch had become the Branch of the Inverse Wind—Heavens taking on the aspects of the Earth. To balance it out, her Earth-based Dao had been pushed from an Elemental Peak to enter the Earthly Peak while taking on an aspect of the Heavens, becoming the Branch of the Seal Mountain.

The next step was to connect the two remaining Elemental Daos. The Branch of the Inferno was now the Branch of the Reformatory River, a combination of Fire and Earth. Finally, she'd infused the truths of Lightning into her water-attuned Dao, forming the Branch of the Tribulatory Sea.

It would have been downright impossible for anyone else to make such a drastic shift after already having entered Hegemony. It wasn't just a matter of affinities; every aspect of her cultivation was being rewritten in a way that shouldn't be possible. Skills, Classes, Constitution, Soul, Cosmic Core; everything needed to be updated to accommodate her new direction.

Only Jeeves was able to accomplish something like that. And even he needed a lot of help.

Kenzie still didn't know how Leandra had managed to convince the Heavenly Palace of the Six Profundity Empire to gift them such a large section of the Immemorial Realm. Her identity as a Core Disciple of the Hidden Sect was certainly not enough for such treatment, and neither was Leandra's status as a Formation Guest Lecturer. The generosity felt like a dagger against her back more than anything else.

What could she do but accept? She wasn't willing to be struck down by the Heavens. Today, the whole region had been turned into her private cultivation environment, a luxury that only the Sage and a few of the Palace's Autarchs could enjoy. Kenzie could only hold on and desperately study to ensure she understood the details of her transformation and her new Daos. She hadn't left her seclusion for a decade, not even when Jeeves was forced to power down.

Part of the reason was that the price of ignorance had been engraved into her bones. She wouldn't forget the painful lesson from when she was brought away from Earth. The other reason was fear. Fear that she would one day be considered redundant, that Jeeves alone was enough for Leandra to accomplish her goals. If that day ever came, she needed to be ready. She needed full control over every aspect of her cultivation, if only to ensure she could hold it hostage.

Days passed as one tendril of unblemished Dao after another was extracted from the arrays. They were then split up, often into elements so small Kenzie could barely sense them, before they were implanted with expert precision by the AI. Some entered her core, others her cells, pathways, or even her soul. The pattern appeared without rhyme or reason, but Kenzie knew Jeeves followed a meticulously laid-out plan.

A sudden rumble forced the process to a halt, and Kenzie opened her eyes with a sigh of relief. She didn't bother trying to contact Jeeves—it would take a few days before the AI activated again after the warning. A moment of respite where she could try to catch up to her untiring companion.

"Three months... Still acceptable," a quiet voice echoed through the chamber, giving Kenzie a start. It had been quite a while since Leandra spoke to her in person.

It had only taken six months for the harmonious façade to show cracks. Kenzie simply wasn't able to keep up the charade. Zac's despairing face popped up in her mind every time she smiled at Leandra, and Kenzie died a little inside every time. Furthermore, she suspected that Leandra actually knew that Jeeves had shared the events yet seemed unbothered by that fact.

Leandra still assisted her cultivation with wholehearted dedication, but their relationship had cooled beyond that. Their dynamic was more like that of a teacher and disciple than of mother and daughter, and neither tried to change that. If anything, it felt like too much. Kenzie hated the fact that she was still fully reliant on Leandra.

After reforming her constitution and resuming her cultivation, she'd hoped she would have found an opportunity to break free. But as the years passed, Leandra only became more integral to her progress. Without Leandra's computers, Jeeves wouldn't be able to calculate the path forward. Without Leandra's connections, the transformation would have forever remained a theory.

Even more, Kenzie hated that she still didn't dare voice her misgivings. She'd written hundreds of speeches in her mind, scathing denouncements, yet they remained unspoken. Every time she looked into Leandra's eerily calm eyes, the words died in her throat. Because within those eyes was the unshakable conviction of a fanatic who'd do anything to achieve her goals.

Kenzie hesitated a moment before stepping out of her chamber, finding Leandra sitting at a table in the garden.

"The first branch will soon return to Late Mastery," Leandra commented, getting a terse nod in return.

"It works, but the effect is limited," Kenzie said. "Sooner or later, the interference of the Broken Peaks won't be enough. You might have to seal me."

"You're correct, but we have yet to reach that point. You should be able to form Earthly Daos and reach the peak of D-grade with the current measures," Leandra said, her eyes shifting to the shimmering sky. "And as luck would have it, I've found a permanent solution."

Kenzie slowly nodded, feeling confused rather than relieved. Not being under constant threat of annihilation would be nice, but what was that flicker of emotion in Leandra's eyes just now?