

The Fall 713

Chapter 713: Young Monsters

“So it’s a monthly ladder,” Catheya muttered, but Zac barely heard her as he read through the list. “I wonder if there are any benefits in being on it.”

“What the hell,” Zac eventually blurted, far more interested in the top names than anything else. “How do those two have so many points?”

Every single person on the ladder was a real terror, but how could two people have over 800,000 Contribution Points? Even if they immediately formed a Middle-Stage Dao Branch after entering, they’d still need to accumulate another 300,000 points from somewhere. Just how many people had these two killed?

Or did they actually have one middle stage Dao Branch already, and evolved a second one? That way they’d have 750,000 Contribution points in total. Still, there was a long way between 750,000 and 932,032 points, which made Zac wonder just what kind of being she was. He did recognize four names in the top ten from his missives or through their surnames, but a full six of them were completely unknown.

That by itself indicated that this trial was uncommon. One or two supreme elites might appear from the outside for a Twilight Ascent, but six? Furthermore, one of the four names he recognized was Ykrodas Havarok, who obviously was an outsider as well.

The general power was beyond Zac’s expectations. Eighty people in the top 100 had over 250,000 Contribution Points, which meant that there might actually be eighty of them with middle-stage Dao Branches. That might not sound like a lot, but it was extremely hard to reach that point from what Zac had gathered.

It put extreme requirements on affinity in general, but more important was the time it took. Forming a Dao Branch by itself was extremely challenging, and many required thousands of years to reach that point. Even among those who had the talent to accomplish something like that, most simply stopped at an Early Branch or even Peak Dao Fragment before evolving.

Spending centuries on one’s Dao in the E-grade was only something you did if you were completely out of options, since doing so would rob you of your momentum. Zac doubted someone like a Havarok princeling would harm his future like that. This Ykrodas might be Zac’s age or even younger, which made his accomplishments even scarier.

Furthermore, the people on the list were just those who had formed multiple Life- or death-aspected Dao Branches. There were probably a large number of cultivators who were just as powerful as these rankers, who followed different paths. Some of the rankers might also hold secondary Daos like he and Catheya.

He had felt pretty confident after seeing his Contribution approach 50,000 the other day, but seeing this list was a harsh wake-up call. Even Yanub Mettleleaf should be pretty far off from being able to enter this group.

“Uona...” Catheya slowly said.

"Do you know that person?" Zac asked.

"Not really. But she should be part of the Eternal Clan judging by her surname," Catheya sighed. "And I think Aia Ouro is a pureblood Eidolon."

"Can you tell me about the Eternal Clan without breaking apart?" Zac asked curiously.

"Sure," Catheya shrugged. "Their situation is a bit special. You could say they form an independent enclave of the empire with their own territories and laws, and they're not really protected by the commands."

"And the Primo simply accepts an independent force like that?" Zac asked.

"Apart from the Primo, the Eternal Clan has the strongest cultivator. That affords them some special benefits," Catheya explained. "What do you want to know?"

"Are they really vampires?" Zac asked curiously.

"Vampires?"

"Bloodsuckers," clarified. "The Nosferatu."

"Noz'Feratu? I think that's one of their older branches," Catheya nodded with some confusion. "And yes, 'bloodsuckers' is an apt description. They are pretty unique in that way. Drinking the blood of Cultivators is a form of cultivation for them. They can absorb some of their essences, making high-quality blood something like a mix of a Dao Treasure and Miasma Crystals."

"A bloodline talent?" Zac asked

"Apparently not," Catheya said with a shake of her head. "They sometimes enlist elites to bolster their ranks, and they gain this ability as well. Many have tried to figure out how it works, but no one has succeeded. The method is tightly controlled by their Clan. One thing is for sure, it's a sinister method. Those who get drained essentially get crippled even if they survive."

"Isn't that an unorthodox path?" Zac asked hesitantly. "Robbing the cultivation of others."

"It doesn't look that way. The System doesn't seem to mind, but that might be thanks to the Blood Progenitor rather than whether it's unorthodox or not. It makes them an enemy of all living factions though, as they see Dreamers as food. That's how they came to us. They were being pushed pretty hard in the early days of the System, by a coalition led by the Buddhist Sangha and sought refuge with us," Catheya explained.

"The Buddhist Sangha?" Zac asked curiously.

"Nine Mountains, Eight Temples, Four Oceans, and One Paradise," Catheya said, some dread evident in her eyes. "The Buddhist Sangha is one of the true peak factions in the Multiverse, eclipsing even the Undead Empire."

"What?!" Zac exclaimed with shock. "Why haven't I heard of them then?"

“They live far from the frontier, and they mostly keep to themselves,” Catheya said. “They cultivate the heart more than anything else, and they seldom leave their temples. But when they get angry, they really hold a grudge. Two of their Temples are still fighting with the Eternal Clan to this day.”

“Two out of eight temples are as powerful as the Eternal Clan? And they have a bunch of other things as well?” Zac asked with some shock.

“They’re a scary bunch,” Catheya nodded.

Zac wondered if that’s where Abbot Everlasting Peace had been taken by 84th Fatty. Perhaps his original form was part of one of those Buddhist factions on the other side of the Multiverse. It also made him think of himself, and his Fragment of the Bodhi. The Buddhist lands would probably be a pretty amazing place to look for opportunities for his nature-aspected half. His class was even named after Arcadia.

But for now, learning about the Eternal Clan was more pressing if there was a bunch of bloodsuckers stalking the Twilight Ocean, with one of them being absurdly powerful.

“The Eternal Clan don’t eat the undead?” Zac asked.

“They can,” Catheya grimaced. “But our ichor apparently tastes beyond appalling. Like rotten food for the living. They wouldn’t dare drink our blood in either case. It’s one of the core agreements for them to join our side. Anyway, you need to watch out for those people, not just Uona. I think they might be a bit like you.”

“Like me?” Zac asked with confusion.

“You’re both living and dead. They are the opposite in a sense; they’re not dead, but they are not technically living either. They have fused Miasma and their Blood Power into something unique,” Catheya said, making Zac’s eyes widen a bit. “I don’t think they’re as suppressed as others inside this place thanks to that.”

“What cheat-like existences,” Zac muttered with disgust.

“Like you’re one to talk,” Catheya snorted. “Well, there is some balance to it. Their numbers are thankfully pretty low all things considered.”

Zac wasn’t surprised considering there seemed to be a direct correlation between inborn power and the ability to pass that power on to the next generation.

“What about the other races? I haven’t even seen any Reavers in Twilight Harbor I think? At least no pureblood ones,” Zac asked next. “The closest is the Venarun clan.”

“You really don’t know anything about your heritage?” Catheya asked suspiciously. “The more I learn about you the weirder you get. I can’t divulge much about the Empire, but you could say that the four races were put in charge of four cardinal directions. The Reavers are focusing on other fronts while this Sector and Zecia are technically part of the Draugr Domains, though that’s naturally contested by the living. However, smaller clans sometimes send delegates to the frontier sectors to make some money.”

Zac understood. It looked like the closest Undead Kingdom was ruled by Draugr, allowing Catheya’s clan to move freely. Meanwhile, the Eidolon had to go through the Karabas Clan while some Reaver faction had secret deals with Venarun Clan.

Catheya wouldn't be able to divulge much else about the empire, so Zac focused his attention on something else. "What do you think about what Yod said? Are we really destroying this realm?"

"I haven't heard of any such plans, but it's not impossible," Catheya eventually admitted. "This Mystic realm is really odd, and the controlling factions may have set their sights on it. Whatever is creating the Twilight Energy has to be something pretty unique."

"Then shouldn't we stop the mission?" Zac eventually said. "I don't want to be responsible for something like destroying the harbor."

"We're just a small cog in the machine," Catheya said. "I bet there are hundreds of squads like us if what Yod said was true. We're just slightly influencing a few nodes. People have done much crazier things in the Twilight Ocean over the past eons without causing a stir. Besides, it's not like we can stop. I have my contract, and so do you."

Zac grimaced with annoyance, but he slowly nodded in agreement. It was true, with him and Catheya reuniting, he was still technically on the job. There was also the egg in his Spatial Ring that needed to be delivered no matter what. Only now, it felt even more likely he was carrying some sort of bomb.

"It might be an exaggeration though. I doubt master would send me inside if what Yod said was completely true. Also, destroying the Mystic Realm would cut off one of the most important revenue streams of my clan," Catheya comforted. "Now, please let me rest up for a while. I have a hard time rebuffing the Twilight Energy with this pollen inside me."

"Alright," Zac agreed as he took out a Supreme Nexus Crystal and started absorbing the energy.

It took almost a full Day for Catheya to recover to the point that she could move again, and that was with Zac regularly flushing her body with his Fragment of the Coffin. Even then, it was just dealing with the restrictive properties of the Vigorbloom Lilacs. She was still heavily impacted by the atmosphere itself.

Apart from occasionally helping Catheya recover, he mostly focused on his own cultivation. Now that he had already been exposed, he might as well make use of the time to catch up, and he constantly sat with Supreme Nexus Crystals in his hands to fill up the empty Nodes in his body. Yod's death had set the foundation for one level, and the day of resting filled it out completely and then some.

Catheya occasionally looked up with a weird expression, still clearly having some trouble reconciling the fact that a supposed Draugr was now happily sitting in the middle of dense life-attuned energies and absorbing Cosmic Energy.

Apart from the cultivation, he had made an interesting discovery about himself; he looked better than before. He guessed it was a direct result of his Draugr race evolution since this was the first time he'd switched races or deactivating [Million Faces] since then. It was a welcome addition for sure, but he was more interested in other benefits the Draugr evolution provided.

Unfortunately, it looked like the only other thing he gained from his odd situation was the additional layer of protection to his skin, rather than the improved pathways or energy reserves. Still, it was better than nothing, and it indicated that he might be able to find some synergy if he managed to train some constitution on his human side.

The two eventually got ready to leave, and Zac turned to his employer for directions.

"So, do you have any idea of how to get out of here?" Zac said. "I'm guessing you don't want to stay in this environment longer than necessary."

"Well, we were dragged further down than we were supposed to go, but it shouldn't be an issue," Catheya said as she took out a small astrolabe. "This thing should help us find the node, and from there we just need to keep going up."

"Alright," Zac nodded as he got up to his feet.

"Are you unable to change back into your undead form?" Catheya asked as she started walking in pace with Zac.

"Why would I change now just to get assaulted by the surroundings like you?" Zac asked.

"So you actually are affected by the environment," Catheya muttered.

"Are you trying to figure out my weaknesses?" Zac asked with a pointed glance.

"No, I was just happy to hear the Heavens have eyes after all. Things started to feel a bit unfair," Catheya muttered. "There are so many interesting places in the multiverse, and you can visit them all while I am relegated to a small corner."

"A small corner that's big enough to traverse for hundreds of thousands of years," Zac countered, but he understood her point.

The Undead Empire was one of the largest factions of the Multiverse from what he had gathered, but it was only so big compared to the endlessness of the Multiverse itself. There were probably numerous sections and dimensions where they had no presence at all, and going there as an undead was dangerous.

The astrolabe Catheya had prepared provided them with a general direction, but getting there was easier said than done with the unpredictable tunnels. One time they found themselves in a vast underwater lake, where Zac had to fight off a bunch of underwater dinosaurs, and they almost stumbled into the living pulse a few times as well. The two kept going for another four hours, at which point Catheya finally stopped.

"I think it's just ahead," she said. "But there's trouble. I can smell the lingering scent of the living. We might be too late."

"Are they still here?" Zac asked.

"It doesn't seem like it, but it's impossible to tell for sure with all the interference in the atmosphere," Catheya said. "But I bet they moved on after installing some measure to block ours. Of course, the visitors may be normal trial takers as well, people who have entered the caverns in look for valuables."

"So, what's the plan?" Zac asked as he tried to sense whether any people

"I should be able to quickly notice if the arrays work or not," Catheya slowly said. "If it's been blocked, we simply move on. We're not some deathsworn, no need to force it."

“Good,” Zac said as he took out [Verun’s Bite] and slowly approached the mouth of the tunnel.

The insides were massive, with a ceiling height of over a hundred meters. The cave was the largest one they had entered yet, and it almost looked like they entered a forest with how lush the precipitation was. There were clear signs of a large number of plants having been harvested as well, proving Catheya’s guess to be right. Thankfully, Zac couldn’t spot any people staying behind.

Catheya soon crept up next to him, holding a Miasma Crystal in her hand to somewhat combat the extremely dense energies inside the cave. This was similar to the area around the mothertree. Something was clearly generating life force here as well, but space was enclosed, trapping most of it inside.

Zac sensed a few weak fluctuations from Catheya, and she slowly nodded in confirmation that she couldn’t find anyone. The two wordlessly entered the forest and proceeded with hurried steps until they reached the core.

There, a large boulder sat slightly embedded into the ground. It was roughly fifteen meters tall and almost thirty meters wide. That by itself wasn’t too interesting, but it was covered in esoteric patterns that gave Zac the hint of life. It wasn’t something that cultivators had added though, but rather something natural like the patterns on the Stele of Conflict he had witnessed in his tower climb.

Another point was that the stone didn’t seem to be the same material as the endless tunnels they had walked through until now. The stone in front of them was a unique deep yellow bordering on orange, while the stones in the tunnels were more of a garden-variety bedrock.

Had someone placed it here?

Zac tried to put it into his Cosmos Sack, but it didn’t budge. He tried to push it a bit next, but the only thing that happened was Catheya smacking his hand with an exasperated ‘tsk’ before she started probing the stone. Several ice crystals flew around it as she made similar seals like when she worked the spike they used to kill the mothertree.

“It’s changed,” Catheya sighed. “I’m not sure what’s been done, but my preparations won’t work any longer.”

“I could just break the stone?” Zac ventured, glancing at the ‘10,000’ hovering above it.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” a laugh reached them from behind, prompting both Zac and Catheya to swirl around in shock.

They suddenly found themselves in front of a group of six cultivators, not one of them looking weak. They were living cultivators of human heritage, though they didn’t look exactly like any of the humans on Earth. Their hair was dark with a slight purplish tint, as were their irises. Their skin was olive, though it was a bit hard to tell with the extensive tattoos that covered their faces and arms.

“Havarok! Run!” Catheya whispered with urgency, and Zac wholly agreed.