

The Fall 723

Chapter 723: Into the Abyss

“Are we really doing this?” Kurtz frowned as he looked at the small crystal encased in layers of his Mental Energy. “We saw the fallout ourselves at the auction. He has the protection of a Monarch outside. Besides, you have heard the rumors. Something odd is going on this trial, and a character like this might be involved in the upheavals.”

“Our options are limited,” Havan sighed. “We have reached an impasse, treading water for three centuries. The offers from the established factions have already dried up. We can’t give up our freedom for a chance at Hegemony any longer even if we wanted.”

Kurtz and Fathela sighed as well. It was true. They had been so full of vigor two hundred years ago, waving off the invitations of clans and sects alike. They had reached the peak of E-grade in just 30 years and already gained renown in the circles of wandering cultivators, what need was there for them to sell their souls? For the next 50 years things were fine, and the trio of childhood friends kept making improvements to shore up their foundations even further.

Then their progress simply stopped.

How Kurtz wished he could go back in time and shake some sense into his younger self. There was no shame in joining an established force, to take part in the wisdom of the predecessors. Now they were impossibly stuck at the bottleneck, feeling their momentum drying up.

It wasn't inconceivable they'd find the opportunity to take the next step inside the Twilight Ascent, but it was ultimately a long shot. Even if they found the opportunity, it might not be enough for all three. But the opportunity in front of them was different.

“This Arcaz Black does definitely have a terrifying background... He spent over 50,000 D-grade Nexus Coins on that auction. Even if we just get that necklace and nothing else, we can reforge our fate by selling it to the Veilplume Monarch after things have died down,” Havan said. “I think we can get ten thousand D-grade Nexus Coins from her, more than enough for us to make an earnest attempt at Hegemony.”

“And who knows what else he has in his Spatial Ring,” Fathela added, indicating his stance on the matter. “And I don’t think this will kill our dream, but rather the opposite. We need power to get to that place.”

Kurtz took a deep breath, but he soon steeled his resolve. What Fathela said was true. Killing a noble Draugr might cause trouble, limiting their chances at making it to the Heartlands. But what about now? Not even the local tyrants were extending invitations at the moment, let alone any of the factions with their roots in the Undead Empire.

“Alright,” Kurtz eventually said as he took out three vials. “If we do this, we need to go all out.”

“You old goat, you still had these?” Havan blurted, but his eyes shone with delight. “With this, our chances are even greater.”

The three immediately turned thought to action and set out through the labyrinthian gullies and canyons of Hollowtongue Mountains. They knew the general direction of the target, but reaching him would still require some effort. As expected, it took almost four hours and a lot of doubling back to close in on him, and that was only because he hadn't moved since they set out.

The spot they had reached was a secluded valley, and it had been quite a chore to find a path leading inside. Their target sat on a rock five hundred meters away with a large coffin on his back and a brutal axe in his right hand. His long silver-grey hair swayed in the waters as he calmly looked at Kurtz and his companions' approach.

His features were pristine, and Kurtz could feel a palpable pressure on his soul from all this distance. This was a true pureblood, perhaps even someone from the original line from how the very core of his being felt subdued by his mere gaze. Arcaz Black was nothing like the diluted bloodlines of the local factions.

Kurtz soon enough snapped out of the reverie as he started to analyze the man as an enemy combatant. The choice of weapon seemed a bit odd to Kurtz, and not in line with what he expected from a Draugr noble. Perhaps if it was an Izh'Rak Reaver with their predilection toward physical carnage.

Besides, beastcrafted weaponry wasn't too popular among their kind since they always held a hint of life. It was possible to transform the Tool Spirits into deathly beast spirits, but the exorbitant cost didn't justify the benefit. Why all the hassle when you could create a natural death-attuned Tool Spirit by crafting using the right materials from the start? Was it perhaps a quirk of the obscenely wealthy?

A value of 500-750 soon appeared over the Draugr's head, which was a bit of a surprise. It was too low for a Dao Branch from what they had gathered, but too high for a Peak Fragment. Did he possess two Death-attuned fragments and was working on fusing them into a singular branch? That would mean he most likely had yet another Dao though since pure death needed to be mixed with something else.

'Triple Fragments?' Fathela's voice echoed out in his mind, echoing his own guess.

It would put them at a small disadvantage, but three fragments were not necessarily that much stronger than their own dualities. They also had numbers and teamwork on their side. If they met a few years later, they might have delivered themselves for slaughter. But as long as the young master didn't possess a proper branch, Kurtz felt they still had a good chance to walk away victorious.

"Arcaz Black," Kurtz greeted as he scanned the secluded valley.

Judging from what they had learned about the Hollowtongue Mountains so far, there should only be one entrance and exit to a valley like this, unless there was some hidden passage that the Draugr Lordling had found. Arcaz Black was definitely not a fool though. Him coming here and not moving for six hours was definitely not him thinking he was in the clear.

It was an invitation.

Kurtz wasn't surprised, and neither were Havan or Fathela. It was extremely suspicious that the mark had lingered for a full week as it made its way through the mountains. There was no way they were the first party to follow the call. Even if Arcaz Black didn't notice anything amiss at first, he should have figured something out soon enough and removed the tracking brand.

“So it’s just the three of you?” the young Draugr said as his eyes moved back and forth between their squad.

Kurtz felt a shudder as those abyssal orbs. He felt a sense of primordial fear, but also a sense of longing. Those eyes were not only a gate to the endless abyss, they were also windows to the promised land. The world where Monarchy was just considered the middle-point of cultivation. Where nigh-eternal Autarchs erected divine domains for their followers to gain insights into the Dao.

Where the latent will of the Primo connected the mortal realms with the Heavens themselves.

“We apologize for the impudence,” Havan sighed as he took out [Trailblazer], the ancient Spirit Tool they had found in a Trove 200 years ago. “For our dreams, we must sin. Your death has the power to transform our fates.”

“Many have tried to steal my fate,” Arcaz grunted as he stood up, the collisions of the chains connected to his coffin echoing through the valley. “None have succeeded so far.”

There was nothing else to be said, and the three immediately made their move, centuries of fighting together allowing them to work in perfect harmony. Fathela became the eye of a poisonous storm as he activated his [Shroud of Azuza] while Havan’s sword domain spread to cover half the valley. As for Kurtz, he quickly conjured the four markers of [Mindworld], superimposing his restrictive domain on top of Havan’s offensive one.

However, Kurtz barely had time to realize something was wrong before Arcaz Black appeared right in front of him. Primal fear surged through his veins as a terrifyingly condensed aura was released from the Draugr Lord. But hundreds of near-death experiences had honed Kurtz’s reaction. The moment the young lord appeared, Kurtz was already phasing 300 meters away with [Voidgate].

Fathela and Havan didn’t run from their target though, but they rather pushed forward as Kurtz sent out eighteen array clones from his body, each of them indistinguishable from his real self on the surface. But the clones barely had the chance to move away from his position before a massive construction sprung up around them.

Gates, walls, and miasmic towers. There was even a restrictive rune above in the sky that made Kurtz sink toward the surface. This was a proper fortress, and Kurtz frowned as he looked around at the intricate detail of the skill. This was a true peak skill, not something that people in Twilight Harbor would have access to. It was a testament to the difference of heritage between them and this young lord.

‘Don’t panic, we knew about this skill from the beacon,’ Fathela’s voice exhorted through the mental link. ‘And it should still be unevolved from the looks of it.’

Kurtz agreed as he took in the skill. The restrictive rune that had appeared over their heads was exquisite, but it ultimately lacked the spirituality of an E-grade skill. It would probably be able to put even middle E-grade warriors under pressure, but it was just a minor inconvenience to them.

Four spectral chains shot out from the ramparts, but Kurtz simply had them disoriented and shuttling back and forth in search of the true target. In an instant he had managed to lure twelve of the chains, lessening the pressure of the two front-line fighters by a large degree.

However, he barely had time to set things up before a miasmic haze followed by a cascading wave of darkness spread out, filling the whole cage. Next, a Dao Field put them under far greater pressure than the restrictive rune above their head, and it was only partly countered by their own auras.

Had their guesses been wrong? The pressure they felt clearly surpassed that of a Peak Fragment, yet it wasn't at the level of a Dao Branch. A braided Domain? Was such a thing even possible?

The Dao Field put them under pressure, but the pervasive darkness was even more troublesome; it was a corrosive shroud just like Fathela's [Shroud of Azuza], and a constant strain to deal with. He kept the shroud at bay through activating [Soulwall], prompting a barrier wrought from Miasma and Mental energy to appear around him. The drain he felt from keeping the skill active was pretty high, but definitely manageable.

An eruption of force caused the ground to shake, and Kurtz could see that Havan had launched his opening salvo. He and the Draugr Lord stood locked in place as the aquamarine edge from Havan's [Swordwail] was locked in place by a massive jagged edge. The lordling actually used a skill like [Gorehew]?

It far differed in quality from the other exquisite skills Kurtz had seen so far. It really looked like the Trial had arrived a bit early for the young Lord. Some of his skills were clearly still unevolved, so he must have chosen to buy some temporary skills from a local repository instead of rushing his cultivation.

Fathela was already shooting forward, a lance of putrefaction gathering on his hand. Kurtz focused his mind as he activated [Mindworld], trying to drag the young Draugr into a realm of delusions. However, it felt like his mental energy was dropped into a vast ocean when he tried to find the man's consciousness.

Was this some odd mental skill? No! It had to be some unique soul tempering method. Kurtz infused more energy into the skill, digging deeper toward the recesses of the man's mind. But he soon found himself at an impasse. The weird ocean had already robbed his skill of most of his momentum, and then he finally reached a vast net. It felt like the fractal net stretched from horizon to horizon, vast and free of blemish.

Peak tier E-grade Mental Defense.

'His mental resilience is too great,' Kurtz swore through their mental link. 'I won't be able to force him into my mind world in short order.'

'Switch to harassment if mind-bending fails,' Havan said as he applied more pressure.

Fathela reacted instantaneously as well, changing his goal from killing to maiming. It was lucky as well as it looked like the Draugr was completely impervious to the illusions he was assailed with. Two chains pierced toward Fathela with pinpoint precision as the Draugr suddenly exploded with power, shrugging off Havan with pure force alone.

Kurtz was shocked by the display of force since he knew that Havan's effective Strength was over 17,000 if including his Cultivation Manual. Just how strong was Arcaz Black to completely overpower him like that?

Kurtz was about to help out, but his defensive barriers were suddenly covered in blue flames, and he felt a great sense of danger that forced him to quickly swap position with an array clone. It was just in time

as well as a wraith had appeared from the darkness, cutting straight through the substitute with a ruthless swing.

He didn't even have a chance to restart his attempt to assist his companions before the chains all shot toward him with unerring accuracy, completely ignoring the clones. Suddenly, a lance of poison appeared out of a black shroud, and Kurtz instinctively activated his life-saving talisman.

The lance was clearly Fathela's [Misery's Edge], one of his strongest skills. Why was Fathela attacking him? Had he made a deal with the Draugr somehow? Kurtz's thoughts were thrown into disarray, but the spear full of pestilence dissipated before it could even reach the thick barrier.

'He displaced my skills somehow!' Fathela exclaimed in Kurtz's mind, and he slowly nodded in understanding.

Meanwhile, Havan was taking the brunt of the damage as Arcaz black was completely brutalizing him with his axe. He only used two of his chains for support, leaving others to constantly harass Fathela, who also had been forced to take out over ten wraiths that kept popping up to attack Kurtz's clones.

Three gristly wounds were already covering Havan's body, yet Kurtz found himself unable to provide any real help. Any time he tried to form a sigil in his mind, something was interrupting him. It felt like he was being suffocated by the chains around him, even if he hadn't even been caught.

'He's too powerful, drink the elixir!' Havan exclaimed as he threw out a handful of ancient talismans, causing a massive eruption of rapidly spreading ice.

Havan scrambled to create some distance while he downed his vial, and both Kurtz and Fathela quickly followed suit.

It was a concoction made by the Technocrat Thaumaturges, and therefore considered banned contraband. But this was no time to worry about such things. Kurtz felt his body burn as his mind exploded with power. He would be bedridden for a month after this, but it was worth it as long as they managed to take this guy out.

However, just as their auras grew, so did the Draugr. Not only in aura, but even his physique. A shield had appeared in his free hand as a thick black armor covered his five-meter body. He looked like a true juggernaut, and Kurtz suddenly felt his perception bend a bit as the dark knight crushed the restrictive ice.

Three of his doppelgangers were suddenly ripped apart, but Kurtz didn't care as his mind was filled with bloodlust.

The world turned fuzzy as an eruption of mental energy pushed both chains and wraiths away. Kurtz savored the feeling of power as the [Whisperer of the Depths] was finally allowed to be activated, and a twenty-meter avatar appeared behind his back. Each of his twenty hands formed a sigil of purgation, and the intricate fractal in the sky soon broke apart and was replaced by the Sigil of the Depths.

Fathela grew to his ultimate form as well, a five-meter reaper whose dripping toxins were so powerful that space itself corroded, while Havan looked like an apostle of a Sword Saint as four black wings appeared on his back. The Draugr Lord had firmly taken command of the tempo since the beginning, but

he finally found himself greatly restrained by the supremely powerful suppression of [Whisperer of the Depths].

He had been pushed down to his knees as his hand moved toward his head, no doubt assailed by an endless number of illusions. But the Draugr displayed a shocking resilience as he started to push back himself back to his feet, and Kurtz felt his grip steadily weakening. Just how strong was this man's willpower?

'He... Breaking through,' Kurtz exhorted through the mental link, his mind sluggish from the taboo brew.

Thankfully, both Fathela and Havan understood his meaning, and the whole valley shook as they unleashed their power to the fullest, taking advantage of the rapidly closing window of opportunity. The two shot toward Arcaz in a deathly pincer attack, but a sense of wrongness filled Kurtz's heart as he suddenly sensed a terrifying aura erupt from the Draugr's body.

It was death beyond death, destruction of utmost finality, a phenomenon that had no place appearing in an E-grade trial. Cracks appeared on the helmet of the hulking Draugr as waves of primal destruction emanated from his body. The courage gained from the berserking concoction was instantly quenched, but they all knew they couldn't stop at this juncture.

This was the key to Hegemony, the final crossroads that would decide their fate. Ascension or death.

Pestilence converged with Judgement, and it looked like the Draugr feared Pestilence the most. Every single chain moved to bind the incoming reaper, but Kurtz knew such a measure wouldn't hold Fathela for long in his current state. However, his eyes widened in horror as the Draugr narrowly avoided the spear of poison as he slammed a small sphere into Fathela's chest.

A series of barriers appeared behind the Draugr at the same time as the chains moved to intercept, but Havan destroyed them all to deliver an attack filled with all the force he could muster. Kurtz saw how the terrifying sword radiance created a rift in space itself, but his eyes were trained on Fathela, or rather the large space of nothingness where his chest should be.

He was gone, irrevocably so. Kurtz could sense the destruction of a soul all the way from here, and even his own mind had been damaged from gazing upon that thing. Even odder, he felt his memories fragment and fall apart, and he felt them slip through his fingers to never be seen again.

One of them had fallen, and they hadn't managed to accomplish the task. Havan's attack was powerful enough to slay a half-step Hegemon, but that didn't help when the strike actually missed. The Draugr had managed to delay the strike just long enough with his barriers to move out of the way, his right leg dodging the strike with only a centimeter to spare.

Havan reacted instantaneously though and stabbed [Trailblazer] into the Draugr's chest with a lightning-quick jab. That should have been the end, but Kurtz felt like he had gone mad as he suddenly saw the sword embedded in the Draugr's body turn into black ichor. A Spirit Tool had simply disappeared, or been turned into something else?

How was that possible?

Kurtz couldn't comprehend what was going on, and Havan looked even more shellshocked after having his old companion disappear like that. The waters churned, and Kurtz was beset with grief upon realizing

that he was the last one still standing of his squad. He turned to run, but he wasn't surprised to find the young lord suddenly appearing right in front of him.

There hadn't even been the slightest energy fluctuation when the Draugr teleported, but Kurtz didn't care about that mystery. The Draugr lordling clearly had an array of terrifying means that some frontier cultivators couldn't comprehend. They should have known better, but greed makes fools out of men.

Kurtz smiled with a mix of desolation and release as the darkness welcomed him.