

## The Fall 804

### Chapter 804: Waking Up

The air screamed and the red dust swirled as the halberd pierced toward her. Her mind was still a mess, but the endless drills she had endured guided her movements. A brutal scream emerged from the depths of her soul as she swung her axe in an overhead arc to slam it out of the way.

At the same time, a burst of the sun's fury ripped straight past her from the totem behind her back, finishing off the orc who had lost his right arm already. Another wail meant [Apostle of Autumn] had finished yet another warrior, leaving the captain as the lone survivor. Going from three versus one to a one versus one in an instant had extinguished his desire to battle, and swirls of razor-sharp winds erupted around his body.

Emily recognized that skill all-too-well. After all, her enemies were the very party she had traveled with over the past six months. It was [Razorwake], Captain Krog's E-grade movement skill. Emily was inwardly hesitant about striking the back of a fleeing enemy, but the will of the Bloodwind World and the wounds across her body urged her on.

Roots sprung up from the ground as Emily activated [Spring's Embrace], and the roots locked the area in place, preventing Krog from flashing away. From there, she seamlessly closed the distance as Cosmic Energy coursed through her body, her fury conveyed through the Fragment of the Axe as she struck.

Krog understood the situation he was in, and he turned around with a ferocious glint in his eye. A crying mask appeared the moment Emily's tomahawk closed in on his body, but a flash erupted from Emily's fingers as one of her rings cracked. The defensive treasure that was meant to block Emily's strike instantly crumbled from the light, and her weapon dug deep into flesh.

A cascading torrent of blood drenched her even further, but she ignored the viscous liquid as it covered her. She delivered a second strike, this one digging even deeper. Krog feebly tried to counter, but a fiery lizard bit his muscular arm clean off, prompting this halberd to drop to the ground.

Krog stumbled to his knees as bubbles of blood formed around his lips. He was trying to say something, but Emily didn't want to hear it. With a flash of her axe, his throat was split wide open, and he toppled to the ground with a thump.

A huge surge of energy burrowed into her body, but she barely registered it. Not even the insidious energy that covered the Bloodwind World could prevent the wave of confusing emotions that had pushed to the surface now that the crisis was averted. She had been betrayed, with all six members of her adventurer party suddenly striking her out of nowhere.

It was clearly a premeditated attack, and not a single one of her companions had tried to warn her. It wasn't like she had joined a veteran party who had adventured on the Bloodwind World for decades either. Only Krog and Brudge knew each other from their homeworld, while the others were recruited at the same time as her.

Yet they had come to an accord to assassinate and rob a fellow member of the Big Axe Coliseum

She knew that she had been shielded from the true horrors of the Multiverse since Zac saved her life all those years ago, but she still couldn't believe it. She also knew that she would be the one lying on the

ground right now if not for Zac, her treasures split among the warriors whose corpses now littered the area around her.

A gentle nudge made her look over with confusion, and she weakly smiled when she saw how her conjured lizard had walked over to her side. It looked like it was trying to comfort her, even though it was just an energy construct without a real mind of its own. Was it some sort of self-defense mechanism from her subconscious?

“Thank you,” she sighed as she patted the lizard’s head, and the summon along with the large totem pole dissipated a moment later.

She suddenly felt so utterly alone, a stranger lost in a corner of the Gorehowl Forest. Yet her instincts kicked in, and she heard her master’s urgings in the back of her head. Not Warsong’s, but Zac’s. She moved the bodies together into a pile before she took out a black vial and started pouring its contents over the corpses.

Soon enough, only ash and a few treasures remained, and she stoically put the treasures into a spare Cosmos Sack one by one. When it was filled, she took out a talisman and placed it on the sack before throwing it into the air. Talisman activated, and a burst of chaotic energies was followed by a wave of spatial fluctuations.

The Cosmos Sack had been ripped apart, its contents lost in some unreachable corner of the Void. With the corpses destroyed as well, she used a cleansing Array to rid her of all the blood and grime before covering her in Fate-breaking dust. Finally finished with Zac’s danger-averting procedure, she flashed away through the forest, taking the long route back toward the teleporter in case of ambush.

She felt completely hollow as she rushed through the forest, entering some sort of fugue state as she simply moved by instinct. Only when approaching the teleporter five days later did she somewhat wake up, and she roused herself before stepping onto the array. With a flash she appeared outside the Big Axe Coliseum, the events of the past week somehow feeling like a dream.

A few confused looks were directed her way as she returned alone, but she ignored the warriors. She knew what they were thinking. Krog was only a late E-grade warrior with almost no chance of reaching the E-grade, but he had stayed in the coliseum for over 15 years. Quite a few at similar levels knew of him and his newly established party.

Why was she returning from a hunt alone?

The stares almost felt like daggers, and she hurried into the coliseum, heading to the inner sanctums. She flashed her token to the Pseudo D-grade warrior who guarded a specific corridor, and he nodded before activating a teleporter for her.

A moment later, she found herself standing at the top of a balcony that overlooked the whole coliseum. This place was one of the hidden mountain peaks behind the coliseum, and it belonged to one of the leaders of the Big Axe Coliseum. It belonged to Warsong, the fourth elder.

“You’re back,” the scarred man nodded as she looked at Emily’s ragged appearance. “How was it?”

“The others attacked me,” she said, her voice shaky as she finally allowed herself to remember the betrayal. “We adventured together for months, yet they tried to kill me!”

"Indeed," Warsong nodded. "Do you know why?"

"Because of my treasures," Emily spat, but she suddenly looked at her master with shock. "You knew they would target me?"

"I assumed as much, so I followed you," Warsong nodded.

"You didn't step forward and stop them?" Emily stuttered with wide eyes. "Am I really your disciple?"

"If you were killed by that kind of rabble even with all the precious items you've been flaunting, then you weren't qualified to be my disciple," Warsong shrugged. "Instead, this turned into a decent learning experience for you. You say that you want to understand war, that you want to reach the peak, yet your hands are almost untainted of blood."

An aura reeking of blood flooded the balcony the next moment, a killing intent endlessly more powerful than the pervasive atmosphere of the Bloodwind Planet. It no longer felt like she was looking at a man. It felt like she was looking at a primordial beast, the two axes hanging from his belt razor-sharp fangs bared at her.

"Why should I help you?"

"I—" Emily weakly said, her anger quelled by the ruthless gaze of her master. "I'm sorry."

"You used three peak-quality E-grade items to kill those people. One restriction talisman, one offensive talisman, and the defense-breaking ring at the end. By their quality, I would say you spent roughly 12,000 E-grade Nexus Coins to kill a couple of warriors whose total wealth barely surpassed 1,000 E-grade nexus Coins. And you actually destroyed the items rather than rightfully claim them. If you were a wandering cultivator like most warriors in this place, you'd be long dead."

Emily looked down at the ground as she took in the admonishment, knowing he was speaking the truth. The items Zac had prepared were the only reason she was alive. This wasn't even the first time she had relied on them.

"You have an Epic class, a set of powerful skills, and extremely developed Daos for your age. You should have been able to kill those six without breaking a sweat and without using a single supportive item," Warsong continued. "This will keep happening unless you smarten up. I am guessing that is why your backer sent you here."

"That's..."

"No need to repeat that story about finding a trove," Warsong snorted. "I don't care which faction you're from. I took you in because I saw your potential and I found your path interesting. But I will not come to your aid like some elder of your family. And judging by the fact that you were sent here of all places, neither will they until you've become worthy of nurturing further."

Emily wanted to retort, to counter or swear like she did when teased by Zac. But she couldn't as much as make a peep. The aura of her master was too powerful, quelling any resistance.

"Well, you're still young, and you have a lot of room for improvement," Warsong eventually sighed before restraining his aura. "If you want it, I have an opportunity for you. But I'll only provide it if you agree with my rules."

“What is it?” Emily asked with a breathless voice, feeling like a mountain had finally been lifted from her shoulders.

“A pocket dimension has been discovered not too far from here. It has been claimed by the Ruthless heavens, and only those at the E-grade can enter,” Warsong said as he looked down at the gladiator stages far below.

“A Mystic Realm?” Emily said as she finally looked up, her messy mind suddenly cleared by a wave of desire.

Desire to become stronger. Desire to shed the weakness she had seen in herself.

“Most of these pockets will become Open Realms after the initial event and turned into something like a training ground or herbal garden depending on the environment. Because of its location, it will be jointly controlled by the coliseum, the Supreme Sword Palace, and four other factions,” Warsong explained. “We’re mostly on good terms, but competition is heavenly law.”

“Depending on the results of the trial, each faction will get different a different share of ownership. We will all send a series of peak warriors to open the realm and a few seedlings with potential. It will become a small-scale war for ownership and opportunities,” Warsong said. “You’re too weak to be a warrior, but you have the foundation to be a seedling.”

“And you’ll give me a spot? Even if I messed up?” Emily hesitantly asked.

“As I said, on one condition,” Warsong slowly said as his eyes bore into hers. “I will give you one of the spots, but only if you leave your treasures behind. You only get one life-saving item and your equipment. If you want more talismans and defensive treasures, snatch them from the bodies of your fallen enemies.”

Emily’s eyes widened in shock as she thought back to how many times the mountain of treasures had saved her the fifteen months she had spent on the Bloodwind Planet. She knew herself well. There obviously wouldn’t be any monsters like Zac in a small-scale trial like this, but there would be peak E-grade warriors.

She was still only level 103, unable to deal with those who had accumulated a foundation at the peak of the grade, even with her Epic class and other advantages. If she brought all the items Zac had left for her through Vilari, she would be almost unkillable and able to dominate the whole trial with treasures alone.

But without them... She would be under constant threat of death.

“I’ve told you already. War is coming, a war far more brutal than anything you will experience in some small trial. You need to make a choice. Hide behind your heritage, or enter the path of a true warrior for a shot at controlling your destiny.”

“I’ll do it,” Emily said with clenched fists, a gleam of determination shimmering in her eyes.

“Good,” Warsong nodded. “Thankfully, you have some time remaining. Rest up. In two days, I’m sending you to the Twinruin Gorge. Your blades have finally tasted some blood, but not enough.”

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Zac was still a bit shook as he made his way through the deathly forest neighboring Samsara's Edge, once more donning the mask hiding his Draugr heritage. He had already come to terms with the fact that his strength was right at the bottom rung in this place, but watching a dozen matches in the arena had still been an eye-opening experience.

The way the Hegemons fought was beyond ferocious, and they managed to squeeze more power out of the small number of attribute points they had than Zac thought possible. Their bodies were a blur as they clashed over and over on the arena, fluently swapping between skills and pure technique in a desperate struggle to create openings.

Not a single second was wasted, not a single movement superfluous. They became avatars of their paths as they clashed, putting it all on the line. Zac had somewhat felt that he would be able to at least put up a decent fight as long as he could use an axe, but from what he saw, he was far from reaching that point. Even the weakest combatants he had observed over the last day would have easily have dismantled his stances before taking him out.

The stronger ones would simply have crushed him.

This was especially obvious in the two battles between Silver Attendants. Even now, Zac didn't quite understand how they accomplished some of the strikes they unleashed. Pavina, for example, had pushed death to a level Zac had never seen before. However, she wasn't like Zac, a spider who gradually trapped and whittled down his victims.

She was a grim reaper, whose strikes and technique presented another facet of inexorability. Zac almost felt like his own Inexorable Stance was a joke compared to the lethality that the Revenant exhibited, but he pulled himself together, knowing that he was still finding his way.

Still, while the fights had shocked him, they were also exhilarating. Even if only Pavina had a path close to his own, it was still extremely illuminating to see how the different warriors incorporated their Daos and skills into a fluid combat system. He was simply lacking proper foundations, with no masters to teach him and no elders in his force to show him the way.

There were Yrial, but he was ultimately just a ghost. The duration the ghost could guide Zac was extremely limited and highly dependent on his mood. It was nothing compared to growing up in a sect, or with elders who could knock away at least some of the roadblocks on the road of cultivation. Zac had initially planned on taking a trip into the wilderness after visiting the Arena, but he had ultimately decided against it.

First of all, he had found out that even the weakest of the beasts in the Wilderness had twice the amount of attribute points compared to the prisoners. It was the Orom making up for quality with quantity. The beasts it reared were ultimately just in the E-grade, and it would be useless for a Hegemon to fight on even grounds with something like this.

If there wasn't a handicap, there was no point. Zac was pretty confident in taking out beasts at twice his attribute pool, but he knew those kinds of fights weren't his strong suit. If anything, he was usually the one who bullied the enemy with his massive attribute pool rather than the other way around.

Thankfully, he heard that the attribute configuration would change to match his own allocation. For example, roughly 30% of his attribute points were Strength when not restrained, so his Strength would

rise to almost 2000 in the arena or the Wilderness. Conversely, most of his other attributes would be lowered, except for Vitality and Endurance.

Only Luck was untouched, probably because the Orom was unable to mess with something like that.

Even then, Zac was a bit hesitant about entering the wilderness at that moment. His life wasn't in danger thanks to his bloodline, but he still didn't want to risk getting exposed just to save his life from a beast tide. Besides, he had pretty much given up on finding an easily exploitable weakness in the Orom's spatial seal by this point. He didn't believe he would suddenly be able to pass through the walls in the wilderness.

That meant he would have to wait for his Oblivion Energy to gather up. Four months had passed since evolving his soul already, but Zac could sense that he wasn't even half-full by how much purified Oblivion Energy he could store. Since he couldn't influence that process, he might as well spend the time focusing on consolidating his gains and powering up.

His first target had been tantalizing him for months already and it was finally time to see if his investment was worthwhile. It was the [Seed of Eldritch Awakening] that might open another Hidden Node.