

The Fall 805

Chapter 805: Ancient Dread

"Is it really here?" Galau muttered as he kept watch for those sinister insects that seemed to lord over this planet.

"That's what the captain said," Bubbur grunted, though he was clearly as confused as Galau was.

"What would the invaders want with an uninhabited place like this?" Galau frowned as he looked around. "The planet seems old enough, which means this area has to be pretty stable. But there are multiple nearby gates. It would be impossible to hold it for long."

"Not to mention these critters," another member of the expedition grunted. "Setting up a camp in this place would be suicide. There are simply too many, and they are freakishly perceptive. Just look how they attacked our ship. Those bastards would have to invest way too much in shielding to make it worth it. Even setting up camp on a random asteroid would be better."

"It only took us four jumps from the Leviathan to get here," Bubbur thoughtfully said. "Perhaps they're setting up an ambush?"

"They would have to be suicidal to attack the Leviathan with their current strength," Galau said with a shake of his head. "Their weapons are pretty terrifying, but by the time someone powerful enough makes it through, the Leviathan will be long gone from that position."

At least Galau prayed that was the case. They still hadn't found the Space Gate, but they knew it was out there. After all, they were here already.

At first, they were just rumors, unconfirmed sightings of a new group of spacefarers in this chaotic sector of space. Normally, that wasn't anything odd. Now and then, a new species or people appeared through a rift, their homeworlds suddenly connected to the Million Gates and the outer world. But these people were different.

For one, the faction was too diverse to be some isolated civilization that had grown inside a Mystic Realm. Secondly, their methods were too advanced. The Muscle Brigade was among the best-equipped and most ferocious squads in the area, yet every clash with the invaders had been a costly endeavor.

Even when the Muscle Brigade overwhelmed them in numbers and levels, the invaders exacted a high cost before succumbing. And they were true zealots. Even now, they didn't know where they came from or what their faction was called. They only knew what they could glean from the corpses.

Neither the researchers nor the thieves had managed to crack their weird spatial tools either. Finding news of this world was simply a stroke of luck. Greatest Peak managed to ambush kill a leader in one go, right when he was reading a star chart.

The only good news was that the Space Gate hadn't stabilized just yet, giving them a few more years to prepare themselves. Those squads who had arrived were just at the E-grade, with the occasional early Hegemon squeezing through. The Muscle Brigade had been commanded to hunt down any squad they could in hopes they could finally find the Space Gate, but it didn't look good.

Even with over a thousand similar squads having been sent into the Million Gates Territory by the recently formed alliance, they simply couldn't find it. Not even the sages of the Heliophos Clan could glean its location according to Average. According to them, the issue wasn't the chaotic territory.

The gate was shrouded, and not even their Monarchs could break it.

That could only mean one of two things. Either their enemies were extremely powerful, or the System was aiding the invasion. Perhaps it was both. In either case, it was bad news. Yet the Muscle Brigade pressed on, delving deeper and deeper in the seemingly endless expanse of the Million Gates territory. If they couldn't prevent the invasion, they could at least hamper their efforts.

These advance scouts were working toward something, gathering intelligence and setting up outposts. The more scouts they could kill and preparations they could ruin, the better their position would be when all hell broke loose. Perhaps they could even delay the invasion for a couple of years, which would allow for more fortresses to be built.

That's why they were on this cursed island infested by an endless number of insects, each one of which essentially carried a gastric bomb in their abdomen. Galau was scared enough that he was ready to strike at every shadow that moved, but he no longer felt discontent about joining these kinds of dangerous missions. He had even volunteered for this one, wanting to use his unique ocular skills to aid his companions.

What he was doing had value, and even someone like him could make a small difference in these critical times. He might have been discarded by his clan, but the Allbright Empire was still his home. The hundreds of trillions of lives didn't deserve to be swept up in this war. He had seen how sinister these people were.

Wherever they had encountered locals, not a single life was spared.

"If not ambush, infiltration, then?" Bubbur ventured as he scratched his beard.

"No point in guessing," Average said as he glanced back at the squad. "As long as we find what we're looking for, we're bound to find some answers."

Galau nodded in agreement as he glanced at his friend. It was true what they say; heroes rise in troubled times. Just a few short years had passed, yet the loudmouth young master had transformed into a capable leader that the Muscle Brigade willingly followed. Of course, his explosive growth in power had helped solidify his position among these meatheads.

After all, while this chaotic place had its dangers, it also held uncountable opportunities. They had lost more than half of their squad by now, but those that had survived had gone through a baptism of fire that no training regimen could compare to. Average, in particular, had essentially been reborn through the inheritances and troves he had survived.

Hopefully, they would get the chance to consolidate for a while longer. They had grown a lot, but they were ultimately just E-grade warriors. An errant clash between captains could crush their souls. Only when they became Hegemons would they be able to equip proper regalias, which would at least provide a semblance of safety in a large-scale war.

Hours passed as the squad crept closer, closing in on the camp they had spotted from orbit. Oddly enough, the incessant chirping from the native beasts grew more and more sparse as time went on. Did the invaders have some method to repel them? Finally, they were within a few kilometers of their target, at which point the jungle was eerily silent.

Seeing as no critters were nearby, they activated a cloaking array before taking out their enhanced binoculars. The invaders had set up camp at the edge of a vast chasm, one so large they had seen it from outer space. Galau had never seen anything like it before, and he even suspected that some supreme warrior had tried cutting the huge planet in two in some ancient era.

The scar reached almost halfway through the world, and just looking at it from space had filled Galau with dread.

“What are they doing?” Bubbur whispered as he looked over at Average. “Is it a trap?”

Galau frowned as well, feeling disconcerted by the scene. The invaders were right there in full display. A few were standing at the edge of the chasm, apparently looking out at the vast beyond. A few others were simply sitting a few meters away from the others, mindlessly staring at the sky. It was a far cry from the ruthless warriors they had clashed with before.

Average looked confused as well, and he didn’t say a word as he kept observing for a few more minutes. But there was simply no change. None of the invaders moved as much as an inch.

“Go!” Average eventually growled, and the squad rushed out like a rabid pack of wolves.

There was no need for words from that point on. Their group had been through over a hundred battles by now, and their cooperation was flawless. They soundlessly closed in on the distance, and a series of attacks rippled out with perfect timing. However, Galau couldn’t believe what he was seeing as one enemy after another was ripped apart, not even lifting a finger to defend themselves.

“Stop!” Average eventually shouted as he threw out two chains that grabbed the sole remaining invaders.

“I didn’t get any energy,” a warrior suddenly muttered, and Galau looked over with surprise as he stepped into the camp.

Some of them were already dead before?

“Uh, boss,” another warrior said as he walked out to the edge. “You need to see this.”

The others walked over as well, and they were shocked into silence by what they saw. An ancient fortress silently floated in the massive chasm, and it radiated a terrifying aura even if it was damaged by a huge scar. Had that thing just appeared? Because they should definitely have spotted that from orbit.

The construct was not as large as the war fortresses the alliance was frantically building, but its quality was vastly superior. The aura it emitted was more overwhelming than anything he had ever encountered, including the Monarch that met with the captain a year ago. Its towers and walls were covered in scripts that Galau didn’t recognize, and he didn’t recognize the design either.

This wasn’t something built by someone in the Zecia sector. They simply didn’t have the capability to build something like this. It didn’t match the invader’s heritages either, which begged the question; how

the hell did these invaders know where to find this thing? Where did it come from? And why were the invaders all dead or braindead? And who was powerful enough to damage this thing with a single attack?

A hum suddenly broke the silence as some runes lit up on one of the towers.

Something about the sound elicited a primal fear that threatened to break Galau's spirit, and he wasn't the only one. A few simply fell on their knees, while others desperately looked away. This was not something they could get involved with.

"Run!" someone shouted, but it was too late.

Unique advantages like Hidden Nodes, Constitutions, Specialty Cores, Attuned Souls, and other kinds of enhancements were restrained in the Orom World, but not sealed altogether. Even those with less unique Bloodlines than his could somewhat benefit from their abilities, and those with many such accrued advantages generally did better in the wilderness.

That was why he wanted to open another Hidden Node before entering the wilderness. Conversely, the Attribute Fruits in his Cosmos Sack would only provide some Contribution Points, but no real strength.

Zac could technically take the seed anywhere and at any time, but he had no idea how Draugr Bloodlines worked. They might have unique requirements like his Void Emperor Bloodline, so Zac had decided to visit to improve his odds of success. Eventually, he saw a towering peak through the miasmic haze, which meant he had reached his destination.

It was the Blackink Mountain, a unique cultivation resource a few days' travel from Samsara's Edge.

There were two spots in the death-attuned zones that held special opportunities, and one of them was the Blackink Mountain. The solitary peak was thousands of meters tall, and it held 242 empowered cultivation caves along with one mansion at the peak. The mansion was only accessible to Emerald Badges, and the eight peak-quality caves could only be booked by Jade Attendants and higher. But the rest was available for rent.

What made the Blackink Mountain different compared to the zones themselves was the amazing density of Miasma and Dao in the caves. Even the worst of the caves at the foot of the mountain far surpassed the density you could enjoy in the center of any zone. Of course, nothing good came for free, and you had to pay Purchase Points to rent these caves.

Zac soon arrived at the foot of the mountain, where a few dozen houses were erected. It wasn't a real settlement, but rather a place to wait in case the cave you wanted was occupied. Thankfully, few people were willing to pay for prolonged stays on this mountain, only splurging when they were ready to push for a breakthrough.

"Welcome," a bored-looking clerk said as Zac entered a small office. "Are you here to rent?"

"How is occupancy at the moment?" Zac asked. "I'm looking for a low-tier cave."

"You've come at the right time. Few caves are occupied at the moment, but that will likely change in a few months," the clerk said as he infused some energy into an array, which prompted almost one

hundred small crystals to rise from a nearby box. “These are all the low-tier caves. Let me know which one you’re interested in and I will check its availability.”

Zac nodded in thanks and walked over to the gems. They weren’t Miasma Crystals, but rather small arrays from the looks of it. Zac infused a stream of mental energy into two crystals at random, and he was immediately met by two small ripples of energy. Zac’s nodded in understanding and nine streams poured out of his mind, each one moving from one crystal to another.

After months of training, he had mostly gotten used to his transformed soul. He had even gained another 800 points by simply stabilizing and strengthening his soul with the help of treasures. Altogether, he had already passed 15,000 Contribution Points without even trying, which was why he could afford a room at all.

“Is there anything amiss?” the clerk asked with confusion when Zac returned after just a few seconds.

“I’d like cave 183, please,” Zac said.

“Oh, alright,” the clerk said. “Cave #183 is luckily available, costing 1,000 Purchase Points per 12 hours. How long will you be staying?”

“One day is enough. I can extend the stay if need be, no?” Zac asked.

The crystals were a pretty interesting solution. The Blackink Mountain contained a tremendously complex array, and most of the caves actually held different Daos. Certainly, all of them contained the Dao of Death, but just a third of the chambers were Pure Death.

Other caves were filled with mixed-meaning paths, mostly those popular in the Undead Empire. Zac had even sensed a couple of crystals that held a Death-Conflict imprint. Ultimately, Zac had chosen one of the pure-meaning Caves. As to why Zac chose #183, he couldn’t exactly put his finger on it. While its imprint was extremely similar to over a dozen others, it simply felt more comfortable for some reason.

He figured it had the best match with his Draugr side.

“You can extend your stay without leaving as long as no customer outside has booked the same cave. Your token will inform you when your time is up,” the clerk nodded as he handed over a small plaque. “Your key. This will lead the way.”

Zac thanked the man and flashed away, making his way up the mountain following the signal in the key. It only took thirty minutes to reach his destination, an excavated cave whose entrance was covered in intricate runes. Zac couldn’t tell if the runes were part of an array, but they seemed like some sort of fusion between death and the patterns he had seen around the spatial gates the Orom used.

Their meaning was too esoteric for Zac to decipher though, no matter if he relied on [Primal Polyglot] or any of his accrued knowledge. There wasn’t any indication that a cultivation haven waited inside, so Zac curiously stepped through the threshold. The moment he entered the cave, a barrier activated behind him, quelling all sound and impressions from the outside. It once more felt like he had entered a sealed dimension, where there was only himself and the Dao.

Still, Zac was a bit confused as there weren't any particularly impressive levels of energy around him, so he walked deeper into the mountain. Soon enough, he reached a densely engraved door, and he opened it to reach the core of the cultivation cave.

A wall of pure death immediately slammed into him with such ferocity that he was pushed a few steps back, and Zac's eyes glazed over for a moment. Death. He had opened a door of no return, crossed the river of forgetfulness into an eternal domain of stillness. Death was always there, waiting, accepting all whether they wanted to or not. It was nothingness, it was release.

Zac shuddered as he regained his wits, but it was still with some trepidation he walked into the chamber. He had initially wondered if he was too cheap, not springing for 12 hours in one of the middle-grade rooms. Now, he rather wondered if he had overestimated himself by coming to the Blackink Mountain at all. This environment bordered on the edge of what was harmful rather than helpful.

Still, the price was paid and Zac refused to turn back now. It wasn't only a matter of cost either. He didn't want to lose the sense of momentum he had gained after witnessing so many valiant warriors showcasing their skills. He wanted to use that adrenaline rush and hunger for power to fuel his breakthrough. There was no time to find some other place to settle down.

So he let the gate close behind him, shrouding him in utter darkness. Zac was constantly beset by impressions as his body filled with Miasma, but while he welcomed the energy, he rejected the truths. Zac knew that he would probably be able to turn his Fragment of the Coffin into a Dao Branch if he stayed a week in this place.

However, such a breakthrough would be like the first ones he had back on Earth, where he was implanted with external concepts.

He didn't want a Dao Branch based on the Daos fed into the cave by some array. He wanted a Dao Branch that was his alone, a branch attuned with his combat style, his class, and his path. Since Zac still hadn't found all the answers he looked for in that regard, he couldn't let himself get influenced by the curated truths that hid in the mountain.

Instead, he took out the pitch-black box and picked up the small seed within. It was no larger than an almond, but it felt like he was holding a small planet in his hand. The inner chamber did not let in as much as a wisp of light, but the seed was somehow darker than black, which made it stand out in the dark.

Zac looked down at the Natural Treasure with wonder, but the feeling only lasted a moment before he swallowed it. The effect was immediate, and Zac felt like he had become a black hole with the small seed as the core. He didn't drag matter or energy into his body this time around though, but rather darkness.

It emerged from the ceiling, from the walls, from the floor beneath him. It flooded his body through every pore, frantically burrowing deeper. The gloom was growing deeper, turning it into an Abyss that he had only seen in the eyes of Be'Zi before. Zac tried to channel it, to guide the changes the [Seed of Eldritch Awakening] was eliciting.

But he was losing control. His body was no longer his own. It was becoming one with the Abyss. Even the shimmering cores in his Soul Aperture were drowned in pervasive dusk. The last thing he felt was a burning sensation through his veins before his consciousness faded.