

The Fall 811

Chapter 811: Entangled

"No!" an exasperated scream echoed through the sealed chamber, prompting an avalanche of guards to come running.

"Mistress?!" the captain shouted with worry as she activated the dozens of arrays that sealed the whole planet, preventing even Autarchs from breaking in.

Space was seared she unleashed her domain through the surroundings, but her demeanor soon softened as she turned to the young mistress with confusion. "Is something amiss?"

"I'm sorry to startle you. The connection is getting bad again," Iz sighed as she waved her hand at the blurry screen in front of her. "No point in staying here now."

"Please, wait! The impartment is not yet complete!" the captain urged with horror, seeing that her ward was attempting to leave her cultivation session early again. "I will call for Lord Valderak. He will have answers."

"Alright," Iz muttered as she sunk further down into the shimmering liquid.

A few seconds later, scorching flames broke space apart as a densely inscribed golem stepped through the void.

"Uncle," Iz smiled from the pond.

"Little girl, what's wrong? I had almost fallen asleep when arrays suddenly covered the whole planet," the golem sighed.

"You guys keep overreacting every time I so much as yawn," Iz muttered with a roll of her eyes.

"Your grandfather worries," Valderak smiled before he turned to the flickering screen. "Oh, the Divine Mirror is blocked again?"

"It's those stupid remnants," Iz frowned as she rose from the pool again. "I already missed the last one. I'm going in person this time."

However, a gentle pressure stopped her from rising too far, and Iz once more sunk into the liquid as she glared at her uncle.

"There is only a finite amount of Everflame Bloom remaining since the birth of the era," Valderak said with a shake of his head. "Few can stomach its cost. More importantly, your grandfather once risked his life seizing it in the Endless Storm. You cannot discard it."

"I know, I'm sorry," Iz sighed. "I just... I've been sitting here for years, absorbing this thing. Now, Mr. Bug is about to do something stupid again, and I can't even watch it in the mirror. This isn't life. I want excitement like he has."

"That brat sure knows how to attract trouble," Valderak said with a bemused shake of his head. "I thought he was trapped inside that mutated Voidcatcher? Or did he escape?"

“He tried breaking out with those remnants, but it failed,” Iz giggled. “You should have seen his face. But now it looks like there is another set in that stupid fish.”

“His destiny has really become entangled with those things,” Valderak muttered. “No wonder, no wonder...”

“I can still see what’s going on, but the reception will only get worse as Chaos creates ripples across the river of time,” Iz complained. “I should have been there for the last one. I don’t want to miss it again.”

“How about this,” the golem eventually said after looking at the shimmering mirror for a few seconds. “The interference of Chaos is still weak. By the looks of it, we have time. We’ll ask Master to divine it for us. If you’ve finished absorbing the primal essence of the Everflame Bloom by the time the brat gets his hands on the next set, I’ll take you there in person.”

“And you won’t trick me into going to some trial or mystic realm this time?” Iz said with a raised brow.

“No tricks, I promise. So work hard on your cultivation,” Valderak grinned. “This is an opportunity every fire cultivator in the universe would dream of.”

“Alright,” Iz smiled as she sunk to the bottom of the pond, throwing a final look at the hazy image of the silly Draugr in the mirror. “I’m coming for you Mr. Bug.”

Having made his decision, Zac wasted no time.

“I want that splinter. I’ll take the challenge,” Zac said.

“Brat, I think I have an idea of what you’re planning to do with that thing, but you should know that it is as much a curse as an opportunity,” the Izh’Rak Reaver grunted. “Don’t sacrifice your future for some short-term benefits.”

“I’m aware,” Zac nodded. “I still want to give it a try.”

“Fine. The ignorant are truly fearless. Three years,” Kaldor snorted from within the mansion.

“About that... Would it be alright if I came here to ask for pointers?” Zac ventured, feeling he would be a fool not to try to seize this opportunity.

Commander Kaldor was one of the most powerful warriors he had ever encountered, most likely even eclipsing Yrial. Even some offhanded guidance from this man would be worth its weight in gold.

“What? You want me to help you defeat me? When has there ever been such a good thing?” Kaldor laughed. “Prove yourself before you ask me for any pointers. Now get out of here.”

A wave of extremely condensed Dao rippled out from the mansion the next moment, and Zac felt like he was looking into the maw of some primordial beast. He hurriedly scurried out of the way, exiting through the gate which closed behind him. Zac shook his head and started walking away, but he stopped when he sensed a small item flying toward him.

Zac caught the small token, at which point Kaldor’s voice echoed out in his mind. “Go to Pavina. Learn to walk before you can run.”

A smile of anticipation spread across Zac's face as he looked at the token in his hand. As far as he knew, the Silver Attendant Pavina hadn't appeared in the Coliseum since Zac saw her fight over a year ago. Even then, her dominating display of pure Death still lingered in the back of his mind, and it had been a major source of inspiration as he worked on his skill quest and his Inexorable Stance in the wilderness.

In fact, his death-based fighting stance was a lot more mature compared to his living side by now. He had already delved into the suffocating inexorability of death during the Twilight Ascent, and over the past year, he had infused a lot of lethality into the stance as well. If he hadn't spent the last four months working on his Evolutionary Stance while collecting treasures, his human side would have been left far behind already.

By the looks of it, that imbalance would only get worse over the next three years. Unfortunately, there was nothing to do about it. After all, failing in the duel against Kaldor didn't only mean not getting his hand on the remnant. It meant death unless he managed to flee somehow. After all, Zac's instincts told him that Kaldor wasn't joking around when he said he said that failure would result in death.

But Zac wasn't planning on escaping in either case. He had already passed the second band of the wilderness with his less refined stance. If he pushed himself, he would already be able to make some headway into the third band in his undead form. Now, he simply needed to build on that foundation and conquer the next two bands.

Kaldor had given him three years to prepare, but Zac wanted to conquer the fourth band in two. That way, he had some leeway and time to polish his stance even further. After all, Kaldor only gave him a 50-50 shot even if he passed the fourth band. Obviously, Zac didn't want to risk his life unless he absolutely had to.

Before heading to the Wilderness to continue grinding, Zac knew could use some advice. Luckily, Kaldor had provided just the thing. Zac immediately set course Pavina's Cultivation Cave, following the directions inside the token. There was clearly a connection between the two undead powerhouses, considering Pavina's residence was only half a day's journey away from Kaldor's castle.

Furthermore, Pavina's mansion looked almost identical.

The gates swung open as he got closer, and Zac once more took off the mask he generally wore in his Draugr form before he walked inside. He figured Pavina already knew about his race, or would know soon enough. A minute later, he stood in a hazy hall littered with discarded weapons, burning incense sticks, and large tapestries that looked like banners that had been through a few wars.

It almost seemed like the mansion had barely survived a brutal siege, with both walls and pillars covered in scars. However, while the interiors were nowhere near as orderly as the beautiful cave of Uvo, the life elemental, Zac felt there was more at play in this place than met the eye. There was truth hidden in the disorder, and every single scar on the walls was instilled with meaning.

In the midst of it all, the Silver Attendant Revenant sat on a prayer mat with a large unfurled scroll in her hands. She curiously looked at Zac as he walked over, giving special attention to his abyssal eyes. Even if there was no killing intent or malice in her stare, Zac suddenly felt like he was trapped in a world of endless death.

The pressure was suffocating, forcing Zac to take a steadying breath as he stopped in place. It felt like he had been sent to the deepest recesses of hell, but the feeling thankfully only lasted a moment before Pavina relented. Even then, Zac was shaken, feeling like he had been exposed to something far greater than a Dao Domain.

“Sorry, I am still getting used to the power of my inner world,” Pavina said with a small smile as the pressure disappeared. “You are the one who dared enter a life-death duel with Master?”

Zac wasn’t surprised to hear Pavina was Kaldor’s disciple. Master-disciple relationships were quite rare in this place because of the direct competition, but they weren’t unheard of. However, Zac was more shocked by the other piece of information she divulged.

“You’ve become a Monarch?” Zac exclaimed with shock, remembering that Pavina was just a peak Hegemon back when she fought in the arena.

Normally, an ascension into monarchy would be a grand event, especially for someone like Pavina who likely walked the boundless path of Pure Death. Boundless cultivators were beset by the Grand Minor Tribulation.

The name was a bit odd, but taking that step would summon the most powerful of the minor tribulations. There were two weaker stages as well, one upon reaching E-grade and one when becoming a Hegemon. By the point Zac became an E-grade cultivator, he was still cultivating the Heavenly Path without any real sense of direction, but he would have to withstand the old Heaven’s punishment upon trying to form his core.

Even cultivators walking Heaven’s Path would cause quite a scene when forming their inner world. It was an event somewhat similar to the Dao Apparitions in the Tower Of Eternity, where their understanding of the Dao was put on display. Unfortunately, the Orom teleported people away when they broke through as a security measure, placing them in some different compartment of its body.

It robbed spectators of their chance to glean some truths into the Dao, but the Orom prioritized its safety over providing opportunities to its prisoners.

“It was long overdue,” Pavina shrugged with a casual expression, but Zac saw a small smirk on her face before she returned to her neutral expression.

“Still, it’s an amazing accomplishment,” Zac said, pushing down any sense of shame to properly butter up this recently ascended Monarch. “It’s one thing to do it in the empire where our people have all the facilities available. But to accomplish it in the Orom World takes another level of talent.”

“It’s nothing much, just passable,” Pavina said with a studiously impassive face, but Zac noticed that the basic mat set out for him had been replaced by a much higher-quality one in an instant.

Zac wanted to roll his eyes upon confirming this seemingly cold master really had unleashed a bit of her newfound power to show off her breakthrough. But Zac also remembered how the Revenant warrior had manhandled that other Silver Attendant on the arena. He had put up a valiant struggle, but Pavina had been in the driver’s seat from beginning to end, not taking a single hit.

She had stood out among Hegemons, even in this place.

“What do you seek from me, child?” Pavina asked as Zac sat down.

“Some advice, I guess,” Zac said as he organized his thoughts. He had clearly contacted her already, so he simply decided to jump straight into it. “Commander Kaldor said I need to conquer the fourth band to have a decent chance of surviving his challenge. I think it’s doable, but I want to avoid any pitfalls as I train over the next years.”

“Well, let’s see what we’re working with first,” Pavina said as she stood up.

Zac got right back on his feet with some surprise, mentally preparing himself for a tough challenge.

“With or without weapons?” Zac asked.

“I have heard of you,” Pavina slowly said. “You are making rapid progress from what I am told, but you are not yet at a stage where you can showcase your prowess without your weapons of choice.”

Zac simply nodded and took out one of his training axes, wasting no time as he rushed forward. He swung his axe in a ruthless underhand arc as the chains of his coffin aimed to pincer and restrict Pavina’s movements. However, it was like Zac was trying to trap a cloud as she effortlessly weaved through the restrictions Zac set up as her finger moved toward his forehead.

Once more the feeling of inescapable death threatened to overwhelm him, and two chains slammed into the ground, pushing him back dozens of meters to avoid the strike. That simple movement had been too terrifying, making Zac move away on instinct. Pavina was a Silver Attendant, but he could sense that she didn’t even use the equivalent of 1,000 Attribute points when countering his opening salvo, and neither did she use the power of her inner world.

It was pure suppression through technique.

Still, the first swing had only been an attempt to get a sense of her strength, so Zac wasn’t deterred as he shot forward again. He was trying to perfect the Inexorable Stance, so he had to be unstoppable, intractable. An army of death that would never stop, that would inevitably quench all hope and life.

The air screamed as he rushed forward, once more unleashing a barrage of strikes at the stationary revenant. The swings of his axe aimed to kill, while his chains aimed to maim. All strikes were designed to force a response that would open up weaknesses or prevent Pavina from attacking, allowing him to control the momentum until he could launch a killing blow.

It was just a duel, but Zac didn’t hold anything back, confident that the Monarch in front of him wouldn’t succumb to his attacks. Zac wanted to showcase all he had to get the most incisive advice. But he had to admit there was also a part of him that wanted to prove himself, to trip up this powerful warrior who walked a similar path as he did.

However, no matter what he tried, he kept finding himself at a disadvantage. Her movements were minute but sublime, and Zac hadn’t even managed to push her off from her prayer mat even after a full minute of trying everything in his repertoire. She simply avoided his attacks with pinpoint precision or deflected them with flicks of her hands that almost felt lazy.

The chains that were supposed to bind and restrict her somehow became fetters that kept getting in the way of Zac's swings. Zac furiously pushed forward, but he couldn't help but feel like a marionette that played out a stage fight that was directed by Pavina rather than himself.

"That's enough," Pavina eventually said as she suddenly took a step forward, her left hand redirecting Zac's axe as her right stabbed right for his throat.

She stopped her attack right before her nails broke the skin, but Zac's hair still stood on end as he jumped backward. Throughout the fight, she had never used her superior attribute pool, and neither had she used the two spikes that seemed to be her weapon of choice. She hadn't utilized any of her Daos either, though every movement of hers was obviously in tune with the Dao and the truths of the cosmos.

And Pavina was just the disciple. He still had to fight her master, who no doubt was many times more skilled than she was. He still had a long way to go.

"What are your Daos?" Pavina asked as the two sat down on the mats again.

Zac hesitated a second before he decided to answer truthfully, considering his Daos weren't some big secret. "Early Branch of the War Axe and Peak Fragment of the Coffin."

"Pure death through coffin. Death and conflict, restriction and destruction. Nothing groundbreaking, but an interesting application," Pavina nodded as she looked at him with a mix of curiosity and confusion. "It is a solid path, but why is your implementation so chaotic? Your bloodline is as pure as they come, yet you seem to have no Heritage to fall back on? What are your elders planning, having you derive everything on your own?"

"It's a bit complicated, but I don't have any masters or elders. I was born outside the Empire, and I kind of got trapped here before getting the chance to visit," Zac explained. "As you can tell, I've mostly cultivated on my own with the occasional feedback from outsiders."

"Huh, you're not an imperial?" Pavina said with interest. "Well, I've heard that the empire occasionally stumbles on small tribes who were lost during the great migration."

"Do you have any instructions for me?" Zac said, eager to turn the discussion away from his unorthodox background.

"At first I was worried I'd ruin some old ancestor's plan by meddling with your training, infusing my understanding into your path," Pavina slowly said. "But if what you say is true, then I think I can help clear some things up. Master told me to help as much as I can."

"He did?" Zac said with surprise, remembering all-too-well how he was essentially thrown out of Kaldor's castle.

"Don't let his demeanor fool you," Pavina smiled. "Lord Kaldor has worked hard for millennia, teaching and helping the undead warriors in this place. Many even believe he can leave any time he wants but chooses to suppress his cultivation for our sake."

Zac was surprised to hear that the brusque Izh'Rak Reaver spent so much effort on the undead cultivators who were caught by the Orom.

“So what should I do?” Zac asked eagerly, not wanting to waste the opportunity that Kaldor had presented him. “I only have so much time, and progress will get harder and harder. Should I evolve my Dao Fragment before anything else?”

“Not unless you need the Contribution Points to survive the first shuffle,” Pavina countered. “A breakthrough now would hurt you more than it would help.”

“What?” Zac blurted. “Since when is evolving your Dao a bad thing?”