

The Fall 824

Chapter 824: Culmination

Leyara passed through the barrier shielding the outer hall, and she was immediately greeted by a vast silence. Her steps, her breath, the basic sound of existence was swallowed by the void, leaving only a blanket silence. It wasn't uncomfortable – rather the opposite. It felt like returning to the womb, and even her thoughts were being muted into a susurrus.

Her master would chide her for giving in to the nothingness, so Leyara soundlessly put her hands together in the Emptiness Mudra and channeled her cultivation technique. Her hazy cognition congealed, turning immovable, a polished stone sitting in the middle of a river. While she was part of the Void, she was distinct from it. Refined by it.

She walked inside, space and distance feeling indistinct because of the lack of sound to accompany her actions. She held onto her seal as she moved forward. Hundreds of inky black crystals floated in the air around her, each one silently humming in tune with the chamber. Today, a squall of Drikvirs had come over from the gardens, most likely attracted by the Void Priestess' Dao.

They were like silken bands of light, flickering in and out of this dimension as they danced around the Void Stones, their source lighting up the usually shrouded hall. A smile spread across Leyara's face as she saw the naughty little critters, but she didn't dare wave one over out of fear she'd lose her concentration.

She wasn't in any mood to face the Tranquil Wall and recite scriptures so soon after returning. So she turned her gaze away, heading toward the exit at the other end. There would be time to play with the animals that made the Void Monastery their home later.

Her master sat at the same place she did when Leyara left on her mission. The same place she had been sitting since long before Leyara's great-grandmother was born. Leyara could barely sense her master's presence even when standing right in front of her, she was so utterly in tune with the Void.

Perala Janodrok wore the same long white robes as always, its engraved hems spreading out like a lotus flower around her sitting position. Her features were made indistinct by the veil of darkness that shrouded her, but Leyara knew she was beautiful, extremely so. Why else would those old toads be so obsessed with her? There were more female Monarchs to court if you just wanted a diplomatic alliance.

Seeing her master's lonesome back as she gazed at the hovering scar in front of her made Leyara's heart clench with sorrow. How long would she sit here in solitude, missing out on the joys of life? To guard a promise so long forgotten? But Leyara hurriedly wiped away the sorrowful expression as her master turned to her direction, and a radiant smile bloomed on her face instead.

"You're back," Perala smiled, waving her disciple to come closer.

The universe came crashing back with Perala's voice, the white noise of reality suddenly so loud it was unbearable. But like a rising tide, the stillness returned the moment Perala was finished speaking. Her voice was the Void, and when it existed, the surrounding stillness could not. How would a river exist in the ocean?

"You have made progress in your comprehension."

Leyara opened her mouth with expectation, but only silence emerged from her throat, her words unable to take shape. Her face scrunched up with annoyance before she jumped into her master's embrace.

"It is still too early for you to break the void," Perala said with a shake of her head as she caressed Leyara's head, her smile slowly fading. "Work hard. We are entering a turbulent age."

'I think I'm getting closer,' Leyara answered in her mind. 'I felt something condense.'

"I'm sure," Perala nodded as Leyara sat down in front of her. "How was it?"

'Dalos performed the 81 rites, but there was no response. We traveled the planes for over a year, but there we were no clues to the disturbance. If the anomalies are related to the Void Star itself, it is hidden well. Or at least beyond our capabilities to understand,' Leyara conveyed with a shake of her head. 'The only sign of abnormalities was the unusual number of beasts.'

"Tides are forming?" Perala hummed, not looking too bothered.

Leyara shrugged in response, not too sure. The number of beasts was a bit more than usual, but it was yet not at the level of a tide. And even if one emerged, so what of it? They arrived every few centuries as the population strove to purify their bloodlines. It was a win-win situation, where the beasts rid themselves of weakness and the monastery's subordinate factions gained some wealth and experience.

"What about you? What did your heart say?" Perala asked.

Leyara hesitated for a while, not immediately answering. She had felt something, but she was afraid she had imagined it.

"Do not doubt your instincts, child. Your ability in this regard is unique, even surpassing what I am capable of," Perala said.

'It felt happy,' Leyara eventually said. 'Expectant.'

"Happy and expectant?" Perala slowly muttered, her eyes giving no clue what she was thinking. "I understand. How is your progress?"

'I managed to form my second Dao Branch during the mission,' Leyara grinned.

"Good child. Your comprehension has always been at the forefront in this sector," Perala smiled.

"Unfortunately, you are a bit inexperienced in other aspects, and I cannot help but worry. I have set up a training session for you. To shore up your foundations and prepare yourself. You need to reach Hegemony within 15 years."

'15 years?' Leyara repeated with confusion before her eyes widened in understanding. 'We're really joining?'

"In some matters, we cannot maintain neutrality. This is one of them," Perala nodded.

'Have they discovered something?' Leyara asked with a pang of worry.

"From the looks of it... Our enemies are walking the unorthodox path. Not one or two factions, but the whole army," Perala sighed. "The war will be brutal beyond compare."

‘A dark sector?!’ Leyara asked as she shuddered with horror.

“It might be a false alarm. We will find out more over the coming years,” Perala said. “What will be, will be. Go find Mravla, she will impart you with the art of command over the next year.”

Leyara slowly nodded with a frown as she stood up, any thought of playing around in the gardens forgotten as she hurried toward Mravla’s Cloister. The situation didn’t sound so grave from the rumors she had heard. Just some scuffles in the lawless sector. But for her master to act, the situation must be extremely serious, and she wasn’t strong enough to protect anything as she was.

Perala saw her disciple exit the suppressive buffer before turning back toward the hovering scar.

“First the Space Gate, now you. Is it connected?” Perala sighed as she grasped the ancient token hanging around her neck. “Million Gates... Is it really there?”

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The bristled lizard released one last sorrowful wail as it helplessly watched the axe descend, but its lamentations were cut short as Zac’s strike cut through its thick skull and extinguished its soul with one practiced motion. A small sputter of energy entered his body as the local tyrant of the Fifth Band fell, leaving Zac panting and ravenously hungry after fighting for over an hour to take down this stubborn animal.

Still, the hunger barely registered as he eagerly opened his Quest Screen.

[Desperation’s End (Class): Extinguish one million souls. Reward: Desperation’s End Skill
(1,000,000/1,000,000) COMPLETE]

It had taken more than four years, most of which had been spent ceaselessly fighting in the Wilderness, but he had finally made it. One million souls had been extinguished, turning Zac into what could best be described as a walking calamity to the beasts that made this place their home.

Luckily, even the beasts in the First Band qualified for the quest, allowing him to progress tens of thousands of kills a day toward the end as he acquainted himself with his latest Dao Branch. Over four months had passed since he returned to the wilderness, and he started right at the beginning this time. For over twenty-two hours a day he had fought, in an almost macabre dance with death.

Zac had spent one month in the first band, getting used to his new Dao Branch. After that, he had pushed forward, never stopping until he reached the middle reaches of the Fifth Band. He knew that he couldn’t go much further though. Having a powerful technique wasn’t enough. Those who got this far generally had Late Dao Branches or higher.

Some had even reached the next stage of the ladder, completely eclipsing his own accomplishments. Technique wasn’t enough, you needed a more powerful base to use it with, just like Pavina had said. You might be able to walk the whole wilderness if you mastered the Conception Stage of technique, but only with the caveat that you were also a Monarch.

Improving his technique had almost allowed Zac to make the impossible possible in the Wilderness, but it could only take him so far. Besides, Zac knew that its benefits were amplified here in the wilderness

where he was only fighting Middle E-grade beasts. He would find more of a challenge than just an attribute disadvantage if he entered the lawless sector of the Fifth Band, but he didn't dare.

Even if sparring against those powerhouses who walked the path of slaughter would be far more efficient, he didn't dare do so right now. The deadline of his duel was getting close, and he couldn't allow himself to be maimed by someone and saddled with hard-to-cleanse invasive Daos.

It was time to head back.

Leaving wasn't just a matter of ability. There wasn't much of a purpose in going all-out and forcing his way deeper into the Wilderness. While the animals here were extremely powerful, it was only in comparison to his limited state. Without the prison brand and Zac avoiding using his bloodline, he would be able to kill thousands of lizards like this without breaking a sweat.

Zac wasn't really putting it all on the line in this place, and so he wasn't actually finding any new truths in the heat of battle. Most of his gains here were ultimately based on his desperate struggles in the Twilight Ocean. The Orom World had given him an opportunity to better understand what he had learned and experienced since the integration, and then turn it into something useful.

But he had squeezed his accumulated inspiration to the limit already, and he could go no further down his road this way. The Orom World had reached its limits on what it could provide. It was really time to leave. Not just the wilderness, but the Orom World itself.

Zac started making his way toward the closest teleportation exit as he pondered on his path. He had far surpassed the bare minimum Kaldor mentioned, but that didn't mean he could expect an easy fight. He opened his Dao Screen to look at his Daos, hoping the lines of text would lead to some new epiphany.

[Branch of the Pale Seal (Early): All attributes +50, Strength +300, Endurance +2250, Vitality +800, Intelligence +50, Wisdom +250. Effectiveness of Endurance +25%]

Zac had been just as befuddled when he saw his newest Dao Branch as when he formed the Branch of the Kalpataru. Thankfully, he had eventually figured out the origin of the name. The Seven Seals might not be commonly known, but the representation of the first four was famous even in popular culture – the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.

As for the Pale Seal, it had to be referring to the fourth of the Seven Seals.

The fourth seal was aptly the one that released Death who would plague the earth with war and famine. At first, Zac had been a bit confused since the imagery seemed a bit at odds with his Dao, but he eventually understood that there were two parts to the simile. The first component was naturally Death, the thing hidden inside the seal.

Secondly, it was the Seal itself, just like how his Fragment of the Coffin had worked; hardness containing rot. The seal was clearly sturdy beyond compare since it was able to restrain death itself until it was released. This restraining power was central to his path and his technique. Finally, the Dao pointed toward the next stage of this peak – the seventh seal. When the seventh seal broke, even the Heavens would be silenced as the end of days arrived; the Apocalypse.

Oblivion.

The gain in attributes mirrored his Branch of the Kalpataru perfectly, which wasn't much of a surprise considering the two were one half of a whole. The difference was that his Life-attuned branch focused on Vitality and provided Dexterity to represent the changing nature in Evolutionary Stance, while the Branch of the Pale Seal provided Strength and focused Endurance.

This time, he had lost a bit of Intelligence to reach this balanced state, but it wasn't like Zac was using that attribute too much anyway.

Zac appeared in Samsara's Edge two days later, and he immediately set course for Kaldor's castle. Everything that needed to be dealt with had been accomplished. His impurities had been purified, his Daos and Techniques were stable. Entering seclusion for the last three months wouldn't bring any benefit.

It would only rob him of his momentum, so Zac chose to strike while the iron was hot. He would be lying if he said he wasn't afraid, but there was also a part of him that was burning with excitement. The opportunity to duel with a master at the precipice of confirming his Dao, to experience the vantage of a peak expert from an A-grade faction.

That kind of opportunity simply didn't exist in the Zecia Sector.

So it was with a somewhat tumultuous heart he stepped through the gates of the Izh'Rak Reaver's castle.

"You're early," Kaldor's voice immediately echoed out through the castle, and Zac could actually hear an unmistakable tinge of excitement to match his own.

"It was time," Zac said with a serious expression.

"Interesting, interesting," a gruff laugh echoed out as the gates slowly opened.

Out from the darkness, Kaldor walked, and it felt like the whole Orom World trembled from his mere presence. The prison brand was obviously unable to restrain the grandeur of this warrior's path, and Zac felt like he had been punched in his gut by the unmasked aggression. This was a true warrior, one born through battle and hardships, there were no two ways about it.

Kaldor stood around two meters tall, just like Zac, but Zac knew that Kaldor's real height should be between three and five meters. He was simply restrained by the spatial manipulations of the Orom. Come to think of it, Three Virtues was the only one whose size was different from the norm. Why hadn't Zac reflected on that before? Was it yet another mental manipulation from the monk's side?

Zac shook his head, returning his focus to his adversary. His build was slim, almost looking emaciated, but it emitted a supremely brutal pressure. Greatest's blood-drenched aura was just a shadow of what Zac felt right now, and Zac's own killing intent was nothing but a drop in the ocean. Kaldor's build might be scrawny for a human, but Kaldor definitely didn't look human.

After all, he was a skeleton.

Or rather, Kaldor looked like he wore full-body bone armor beneath a tattered vest and loose-fitting pants. However, those bones weren't a Spirit Tool or forged equipment. They were Kaldor's true

exoskeleton, a unique feature of the reavers. Not a single inch of his flesh was exposed, not even his eyes. Not that Izh'Rak Reavers had eyes in the same sense as humans did.

It was rather three gemlike bones embedded in his skull, one in the middle of his forehead and two almost at the edges of his face, forming a wide triangle that provided surround-vision from what he'd heard. In addition, there were just two small holes for a nose and a thin unmoving line for a mouth.

This odd appearance only scratched the surface of the reavers. For example, while reavers had flesh, they didn't have organs. They had muscle and sinew. Supremely condensed muscles that turned them into unstoppable forces of nature.

They didn't even have brains as their consciousness was spread through their bones rather than in their head. Thousands upon thousands of small runes covered Kaldor's skull and arms, and Zac knew that the same was true for his whole body. It wasn't something Kaldor had done himself, but rather a natural progression of their bodies.

You could say that the warlike Reavers were all body cultivators, but they cultivated their bones rather than their flesh. They needed no Spirit Tools or defensive equipment. They were the equipment. Their bones surpassed almost anything at their grade in durability thanks to their unique body tempering arts, making them extremely difficult to kill.

The bones also gained various abilities as their ranks grew. At D-grade, for example, they finally awakened their Warbones, which Kaldor thankfully wouldn't use in this duel. It was an inherent transformation ability that was a mix of skills like [Vanguard of Undeath] and the activation of War Regalia, the energy-consuming equipment only Hegemons and higher could use.

Durable, powerful, and bloodthirsty. The war-hungry armies of the Izh'Reavers were the scourge of the neighboring empires of the Undead Empire.

In a sense, the Izh'Rak Reavers seemed to be more in line with Zac's own build than Draugr were, but he was still thankful that he had been implanted with Draugr genes than reaver genes. He felt that the difference between a being that was something like a mix of insect and skeleton and a human was too great a bridge to pass.

Zac tried to figure out what kind of technique Kaldor used, but his lazy stance gave no indication of what to expect. This was the one thing Pavina had refused to help with, and no one else seemed to know either. Or perhaps they feared to spread Kaldor's secrets, considering he held the right to kill people in the Orom World.

"Well then," Kaldor said as his mouth and nose disappeared, leaving a smooth surface without any weakness. "Show me why you're worthy of the Path of Oblivion."