

The Fall 825

Chapter 825: Path of Oblivion

“Worthy of the Path of Oblivion? What does that mean?” Zac asked, but the only response he got was a deafening scream of danger and an alabaster fist ripping the air apart in its approach toward Zac’s left temple.

Just a fraction of a second later Zac heard the crashing sounds of stone tiles breaking, the sounds of Kaldor lunging toward him finally catching up. The fist seemed straightforward, but it exerted the pressure of a whole world collapsing in on him. Was it Kaldor’s technique, or was it the inherent power of a warrior with a perfected inner world? Zac couldn’t tell.

Zac’s instincts immediately kicked in, and he actually leaned into the punch as he pivoted, countering with an axe swing of his own as the chains on back his began their dance of death. But it almost felt like he had been transported back to his first day in the Orom World where Travo Raso put him in his place.

It was like his perfected movements were as clumsy as when he first arrived, and time slowed to a crawl as Zac saw the fist grow closer and closer. Zac believed he had timed it perfectly, and he had confirmed that Kaldor had restrained his aura down to 1,000 Attribute Points, yet his calculations were way off. His instincts told him that insisting on his current route would only end with his skull being cracked like an egg, when it should have led to an equal exchange of strikes that would have won him the bet.

He trusted his instincts.

Even if Death couldn’t be avoided forever, it could be delayed. He had been too impatient and geared up, hoping to end the fight in an instant in a surprise upset. Now, Zac had to make a small sacrifice to not be immediately taken out of commission. His muscles screamed in protest as he forcibly stopped his swing while changing his pivot to raise his arm to block.

A rapid clashing of chains pushed two of the links between Kaldor’s fist and Zac’s bicep as well, narrowly allowing him to divert the force even further. But suddenly, the sense of danger resurged with refound urgency. What should have been a light graze had somehow turned into a deadly assault, once more subverting Zac’s understanding.

Two chains slammed into the ground, pushing Zac backward over ten meters as he absorbed the force of Kaldor’s punch. A sheen of sweat lacquered his back, and he looked at the reaver standing in Zac’s previous position with surprise. Without any facial features, Zac couldn’t glean anything about Kaldor’s mood, giving Zac the impression he was fighting some sort of emotionless robot.

In a sense, it almost seemed like he was fighting a Technocrat for a moment there, considering he hadn’t sensed any emanations of Dao at all from that opening salvo. Kaldor had somehow tricked Zac’s mind twice without using any of his insights to empower his strikes.

“Not completely hopeless,” Kaldor grunted, his voice now muffled as though he was speaking into a can. “You want answers? Win the bet first.”

Zac wasted no more effort on talks or contemplation, and instead completely melded with his path. His new Dao Avatar radiated unquestionable finality as it released dense black tendrils of pure death. It no

longer looked like the dead tree with a hanging coffin. Zac now understood that imagery had been partly a crutch, where he based his understanding of death on his understanding of life.

But now that he had stepped onto the Path of Pure Death, the two conceptualizations had diverged further. Now, the Dao Avatar appeared in the form of an Iron Maiden, with some differences from the grotesque medieval torture device. Instead of spikes, the insides were lined with chains, judging by the endless rattling of links you could hear from within.

Also, instead of a tormented face at the top, there was just a pitch-black halo, like a black hole leading into the abyss. Just like the Kalpataru's vines rustle formed a song of unfettered life, the rustling chains of the Iron Maiden formed a tune of inescapable death. However, while their portents might seem dour, Zac felt a sense of comfort hearing them. It was stability, it was peace.

Just like the Branch of the Pale Seal had woken up, so had the miniature version of himself, the Dao Avatar for his Branch of the War Axe. No longer did it switch between his two races. It had solidly become Draugr as it wielded the axe of chains, giving off the aura of a grim reaper. Its strikes were death incarnate, repressing and unyielding.

The tendrils of death were immediately attracted by the display, forming a dour shroud that almost looked like the chains on the real Zac's back. As his avatar moved, so did Zac, the aura around him shifting into one of utter inexorability. There was nothing else on his mind any longer, only the battle.

Another snort echoed out from within Kaldor's skull as he shot forward, but Zac wouldn't allow himself to be ambushed again. The chains formed an outer perimeter as over a million deaths showed the way. The short breather had allowed Zac to figure out the truth. The situation had felt similar to when he first was bested by Travo Raso, but the circumstances weren't the same.

Instead of vastly surpassing Zac's skill level and fundamentals, the reaver was rather using extremely intricate footwork that messed with Zac's perception.

When it looked like Kaldor stepped to the right, he was actually moving left, and vice versa. The minute cues for momentum and intent that Zac's instincts based themselves on turned into traps. Nothing was as it seemed, where slowing down could mean speeding up, or some other action altogether.

It was an extremely refined method that required not only exquisite control over your body, but also a meticulous understanding of the mind. You needed to perfectly grasp what drove an opponent's actions to so perfectly trick the instincts that had been forged through thousands of battles. It was not something Zac could do at all, at least not against someone who had some experience with life-and-death struggles.

But ultimately it didn't matter. It was just another attempt to escape the inevitable.

There was no worth in analyzing the disconnect between the Izh'Rak Reaver's gruff and straightforward persona with this kind of refined fighting style. He might be trying to teach through battle, or it might be a natural expression of someone so far ahead on the road of cultivation. Zac only needed to focus on his own path – to restrain, to whittle down, to deliver death.

The sound of rattling links echoed through the courtyard as the four chains spun their web of death, their undulations restricting Kaldor's options to advance. It wouldn't help even if Kaldor's techniques

made him unpredictable, as long as Zac controlled all the avenues to choose from. However, a Monarch was not so easily contained, and Kaldor chose the most straightforward solution; to break the pattern and force open a path.

Kaldor shifted his position, placing him in a precarious position right among the chains, but Zac didn't have time to seize any advantage before the reaver unleashed an extremely precise combination of a punch and roundhouse kick. A shockwave rocked the surroundings as the chains became entangled in an unproductive mess.

Zac knew his patterns weren't airtight, but it had to have taken a terrifying ability to so utterly expose the weaknesses. However, just as Kaldor dealt with the chains, a gleaming edge was almost upon his head. It was Zac who made his move while Kaldor had his hands full, and his axehead radiated a deathly luster as it closed in on its target.

A thin forearm appeared out of nowhere as Kaldor twisted his torso, using his other leg as a pivot. Zac's axe slammed into Kaldor's arm, and a painful rebound shocked his own wrist while not as much as a mark was left behind on Kaldor's bones. No one said anything after the exchange; they both knew this didn't count as a hit.

Kaldor had been fully prepared to block the strike, and he used his forearm as a shield in place of an actual weapon. Even if the reaver hadn't said it outright, Zac knew he had to land a true hit that the Monarch couldn't avoid. After the initial exchange, Zac knew things wouldn't be over so easily.

Zac was still a bit surprised to see that his Branch-infused swing didn't as much as push the reaver off-balance, even if he was bent at a ninety degrees angle and used only one leg for balance. The other leg was still in the middle of the previous kick, but Zac felt a pang of danger as the kick somehow gained momentum by transferring the force of Zac's strike.

Death didn't back down or cower, so force met with force as Zac stayed true to his path. The chains had already untangled thanks to Zac buying some time, and they resumed harassing the reaver while Zac kept up his pressure. Kaldor wasn't giving an inch either, and it felt like he had three heads and six arms, continuously parrying swings or disrupting the chain formations.

It was an odd feeling, where Kaldor was simultaneously stronger and weaker compared to Pavina. He was stronger in his understanding of rhythm, of making the most of simple timing. His control was appallingly accurate, where Kaldor kept forcing advantages by manipulating Zac's trajectories and strikes by almost unnoticeable degrees.

These small differences only cost Zac fractions of seconds, but they gave Kaldor the breathing room he needed to shift the rhythm and avoid being put on a defensive. However, his techniques were inferior to Pavina's due to restricting himself to concepts limited at the level of Fragments. After having battled Pavina so many times, Zac felt the attacks were almost simplistic after gaining some understanding of what Kaldor was doing.

This was the key to victory, and Zac took full advantage, using both his Dao Branches in his strikes and as a basis for his Inexorable Stance. Every attack he performed contained the inevitable nature of death, every movement was like another layer of choking constriction that would eventually claim its prize.

Kaldor had already turned into an alabaster blur as he fended off chains and swings from every direction, but Zac could tell that death was slowly creeping closer. In the beginning, Kaldor's unpredictable nature repeatedly disrupted Zac's rhythm, but the reaver was increasingly moving in accordance with Zac's own Dao.

Zac's axe descended, and Kaldor once more avoided the strike with a hair's breadth, no longer able to afford himself inches of leeway. Still, their battle had become akin to a chess game nearing its end. Even if there were still a few hundred moves that needed to be performed, the game should end in Zac's favor unless he committed a blunder.

Fetters clanked, and the hollow calls of sharp metal colliding with bone formed a song of cessation as the two combatants moved toward the inevitable. Still, Zac didn't dare let down his guard at all, and he entered a transcendent state where he was one with his path, not letting any emotions or distractions lead him astray.

Kaldor was aware of the conundrum, but no matter how he fought, he couldn't break free, restrained by not only Zac's technique but more so by the rules of engagement. Zac had already reached the level required to contend in this duel when he defeated Olgoth. Since then, he had made some massive improvements, turning a life-and-death struggle into a passable trial just like he had planned.

However, Zac suddenly got a sinking feeling as the refined technique of Kaldor got more rugged, more brutal, and a dense red haze seeped out from his body; congealed killing intent. Luckily, Kaldor's time was running out, and Zac's work was reaching fruition. The reaver had been pushed off-balance by a powerful swing, and the four chains lounged.

Both hands were temporarily bound just as Zac's axe shot forward, aiming straight for the reaver's chest. The opening had finally presented itself after hundreds of exchanges; death had come to collect. However, just as Zac was about to checkmate the reaver in this meticulously planned game of his, Kaldor did the one thing that would prevent a victory.

He flipped the whole table.

The indistinct steam oozing out of the reaver's bones suddenly moved, transforming into an unrecognizable seal beneath Kaldor's right foot as he stomped down. Zac's chains were completely disrupted and lost their grip, while Zac himself was once more flung away.

"Good, good!" Kaldor growled, his form barely visible in the thickening mist. "You didn't disappoint me. To think you managed to push me this far. But it's not enough. Not enough! Show me your Path. Show me Carnage!"

"Are you breaking the agreement?" Zac frowned as he steadied himself.

"Breaking what? This is just killing intent, the mark of a warrior," Kaldor laughed. "I never used a skill! How did I cheat? How?!"

Zac looked at the skeleton with wide eyes for a moment, once more lamenting that most of the old monsters he had encountered shared one common trait; shamelessness. Was that a core component required to reach the peak of cultivation, to blatantly twist the situation into one's favor, forgoing any sense of dignity?

Certainly, it hadn't been explicitly stated, but using the killing intent of a Peak Monarch was overstepping the bounds of the duel. That strike had been decidedly more deadly than anything that could be dished out with Peak Fragments. He had even felt huge pressure when using his Dao Branches.

It was the first time Zac had seen killing intent be weaponized to this degree. Zac himself had used it a few times before to suppress or even knock out weaker enemies, but that method was extremely crude compared to what Kaldor had done. The skeleton had actually controlled the intent somehow, then turned it into what looked like an array to amplify his power.

"Are you going back on your word?" Zac repeated.

He immediately got his response as Kaldor rushed forward, his killing intent on full and unabashed display. Zac only hesitated for an instant before he rushed forward to meet the charge. He didn't know if Kaldor was losing control due to battle lust, as reavers were reportedly wont to do, or if he wanted to push Zac a bit further to test him.

If it was the former, Zac could back off and return when Kaldor's head had cooled down. Since Zac would have won with that final strike if not for the interruption, Kaldor would probably hand him the remnant without complaint. However, if it was the latter, Zac felt giving up so quickly might cost him his chance to get the splinter. Kaldor had made it clear; he had no love for cowards.

For now, Zac would keep going a bit longer since he hadn't reached his limits. Kaldor no longer bothered to rely on finesse, and Zac's instincts told him that that had never been the skeleton's true path. It was painfully obvious as the reaver clawed at him with wild abandon, his fingers glowing red.

Zac countered with a swing of his own, but even death was rebuffed by the insatiable will contained in Kaldor's attack. Zac was pushed back a step, but he immediately adapted and lunged for another strike. With unprecedented focus, Zac restarted his stance as he calmed his mind. Death couldn't be impatient, it couldn't be swayed by outside events.

It was steady, intractable. And if it failed, it was only a temporary defeat. Death would win out in the end; no one could escape. But it quickly started to feel like Zac was trying to contain an enraged Barghest with a prison made of twigs. Kaldor's punches seemed simpler compared to before, but they contained an indomitability that broke Zac's Dao.

The reaver's strikes ignored everything as they went in for a kill. Technically, it should have meant leaving his body with numerous openings, but Kaldor kept unleashing those red arrays with his fists, feet, knees, and elbows in a furious barrage.

Every time their attacks collided, Zac felt like being rebuffed by an army of battle-hardened veterans, where their wills had been turned into a power of faith. Zac tried to regain control, but he repeatedly found his technique unable to withstand this kind of power. It was undying, everlasting, a true manifestation of the Dao of Conflict.

The strikes put Zac under a kind of pressure he hadn't felt since entering the Orom World, where every strike of Kaldor's carried the threat of death. The whole courtyard was drowned in it by now, pushing Zac's nerves to a breaking point. Even Zac's vision started to blur, like he was being dragged down into Kaldor's madness.

No matter what the reaver was planning, one thing was clear. The killing intent was all-too-real, and every single strike was aimed at Zac's vitals with the intent to kill. If one of those array-empowered strikes was allowed to hit his body without its force dispersed, his Duplicity Core wouldn't be able to fake his death and save him.

Zac briefly considered giving up on his chains, fully concentrating on his axework to focus his strength. However, he immediately discarded the idea, choosing to trust what he had built over these past four years. Part of him wanted to discard it all now that he finally encountered something that cleanly suppressed his Inexorable Stance. When real stakes were at play.

But his path was not a lie. It had led him through insurmountable odds, and it would take him through this as well. The clamoring calls of the illusory war hidden in Kaldor's bloodlust faded away as Zac's abyssal eyes stared straight into Kaldor's soul. He advanced again, and he felt something shift as his soul and body melded into one, where his path filled his very essence with enduring purpose.

He was inexorable.