

The Fall 859

Chapter 859: Gaun Sorom

Vilari walked down the clattering corridors, ignoring the insect warriors just as they ignored her. With a small mental nudge, she was functionally invisible to their gaze. It was a shame that her power was too low to allow for this kind of measure in the outer world – that way, she would have been able to walk alongside her father without causing him undue trouble.

Sometimes, she wondered, was being undead a blessing or a curse?

Admittedly, gaining sapience from the depths of death was a gift. Without Zachary's impartment, she would never have existed, and she would never have seen the marvels of the universe or touched upon the truths of the Heavens. But this was ultimately a world of the living – she was the aberration, no matter what the Undead Empire believed.

Was she bound to be relegated to a small corner of this vast world while her friends explored the vast beyond?

Or had she become greedy? She was not even ten years old, yet she had seen more than most Hegemons in this remote sector of the Multiverse. Traveling to another sector – that was something that even eluded most Monarchs.

She knew where these feelings stemmed from – the look of impatience in her father's eyes. The expectation when he spoke of Salosar and the Million Gates Territory. Compared to most Earthlings, and even her subordinates, he had become a true citizen of the Multiverse, someone who looked at the vaunted sky with hunger rather than fear.

He wasn't long for this place. Even if Earth was his home, it would only be the location where he would rest for a while before setting out again. At most, he would leave a clone here in the future, while his true self sailed further and further away. She was happy for him, but it also made her a bit lost.

Where did that leave her?

No matter if it was his cultivation speed or the life-attuned destinations he wanted to visit, she knew she wouldn't be able to keep up with him forever. Even a couple of decades was stretching it – she could sense that the time required to complete the next layer of [Paeon of Anguish] would take her the better part of the next century.

Certainly, the stress and negative emotions this sort of situation brought forth were extremely conducive to the Soul Strengthening Technique she got from her master, but she would much rather solve the root of her turbulent emotions. The solution was right there, but it was complex in its simplicity.

She needed to find her own purpose.

Vilari knew she needed to find something more than just being a hanger-on swept up in the fate of Zachary Atwood, the Deviant Asura. She knew this was also what her father wanted for her, but she didn't even know where to start looking for something like that. Finding that spark that would drive

someone to greatness in a world where most muddled along in a dream-like state. Who wouldn't want to find something like that?

Facilitating the unification of undead and living within her father's empire was a worthwhile goal, but that couldn't be considered a purpose. It was a task that would be dealt with soon enough. But what else was there? She did enjoy cultivation, but she knew she didn't have the same burning drive as Joanna.

Being born under the protective umbrella of her father, she had never been forced to awaken that all-consuming hunger that burned in the Valkyrie's heart. Of course, that kind of obsession was not the only path to power – for many, they would even become fetters. However, you needed something that kept you going when months turned to years, and the Dao became your only true companion across the long lonely eons.

Neither did the Undead Empire attract Vilari, in contrast to the desirous Raun spectrals. Visiting their domain would be interesting, but it was not something she was ready to risk her life for.

Well, she had time. Ilvere often joked how she was not even a teenager yet, and it was true in a sense. Had she been born a human, she would not even start cultivating for another 7 years or so. Being too consumed with finding one's purpose might make her focus on the distant future so much that she missed the available paths right in front of her.

For now, she was happy enough furthering her father's goals, which apparently included dealing with rebellious ants and their attempts at possession.

Vilari tapped her foot on the floor, prompting a chasm into the depths of the hive to suddenly open up. However, her surroundings fluctuated as she unleashed bursts of mental energy, allowing her to gently descend by bouncing between the walls, rather than helplessly falling into the gastric acid below. A few minutes later Vilari stepped into the inner sanctum of the Ayn hive, where her target was sitting in silent meditation.

Seeing that her entrance had gone unnoticed, Vilari let out a small cough, prompting the young girl to swirl around in shock.

"Who are you! This is a restricted area," Lily exclaimed with wide eyes. "What- this energy! The rumors are true! There are zombies hidden within Port Atwood!"

"So they are, though we prefer to be called Revenants," Vilari smiled. "My name is Vilari Blackwood, and I have been sent here by Lord Atwood. What shall I call you?"

"If you're really sent by Lord Atwood, you should already know my name," Lily frowned as she slightly repositioned herself to guard the small pillar behind her – the core of the adolescent Hivequeen.

"There is no need for games, child," Vilari said with a shake of her head. "We have known about your situation for some time now. I was sent to confirm the details. Just going by the mental fluctuations, I have a decent idea, but I hope you can clarify some things for me. How far has your fusion gone?"

Lily's eyes widened in alarm, and the whole chamber suddenly shook as powerful mental fluctuations started radiating from both the beastmaster and the Hivequeen's Core. However, Vilari smiled as the

massive eye appeared in the air above her, its emotionless stare crushing the duo's assault before it could begin.

Cracks spread across the small pillar, and blood started running down Lily's nose and ears as she rolled around on the floor screaming.

"One last try," Vilari said. "The Lord feels regretful about how things ended for this poor girl, and he wanted me to solve this situation without bloodshed if possible. I don't carry those limiting emotions. If you can't convince me that you're not a threat to Lord Atwood or his subjects, I will incinerate your soul before he returns."

"If you kill me, she dies as well," Lily slowly said as she crawled to her feet, the cadence of her voice suddenly changed.

"Then that would be her fate. She wouldn't be the first to fall in the service of the Atwood Empire, and she won't be the last," Vilari said with equanimity. "But you still have a way out. Relinquish control of the girl and form a proper contract. Your children will become warriors for the Atwood Empire, and you will be provided the resources to continue your growth."

"Join that man? He killed my mother, killed thousands of our children," Lily growled. "All that suffering – for nothing?"

"Suffering is Heavenly Law," Vilari said. "Your hive was transported here by the Heavens, and the situation only allowed for one victor. The Lord has already been magnanimous to let you live on after your mother's attack – I doubt your mother would have been so benevolent. But our patience is running thin. Now, make your choice."

Having some stranger killed just to achieve his plan didn't sit right with Zac, at least not with a target like Gaun Sorom. If it had been an unorthodox cultivator who had committed numerous atrocities, it would be a different story, but Gaun Sorom was just a normal Wandering Cultivator who fit Zac's requirements.

Gaun had been active for over 500 years in this neighborhood of the Zecia Sector, though he originated in some place called the Tumbling Sky Cluster, named after the local overlord – the Tumbling Sky Sect. He had been staying in Karbron over the past 10 years and had now chosen to head to Salosar to join the fight against the Beast Tide.

Little was known about his combat style as he preferred to look for opportunities alone in the wilderness, but his weapon of choice was an axe. Add to that, he was primarily human with only a small hint of orc in his heritage. There were some small discrepancies, but Gaun ticked off most of Zac's checkboxes for his main plan – to borrow a local's identity for the beast tide.

Zac had some backup plans, no matter if his meeting with Triski fell through or if there were no suitable targets, but this one felt like it had the best odds of him coming and going without causing any waves. He wasn't in any mood for another cataclysmic event like the Twilight Harbor this time around. Zac just wanted the Ferric Worldeater so he could get his ship. Unfortunately, Zac had started to wonder if that was a fool's hope over the past days as he waited for Triski to get the second manifest.

Fate was gathering.

It was still nothing compared to what he felt when that burning golem attacked the Orom, but he could somewhat feel that something was slowly building. Seeing as the Beast Tide was the only big thing going on in the area, it was a reasonable assumption it was the source of the feeling. Things were not as simple as they seemed, and he was afraid he'd get dragged into something big if he contacted Leyara Lioress.

"Do you have any idea on how to get a private face-to-face with him without anyone noticing, including himself?" Zac asked.

"The next batch of mercenaries will be ferried over to Salsoar Prime five days after Gaun arrives on this planet," Triski said. "I can try to arrange something depending on where he'll end up staying, but it will cost some money in bribes."

Zac only snorted and transferred 3 D-grade Nexus Coins, which almost made Triski's eyes pop out of her head. "I expect there'll be no hindrances?"

"Of course," Triski eagerly nodded. "With this kind of money, there will be no problems even if you kill him on an open street."

Three days later, a hooded Zac stood waiting at a servant's gate outside a walled-in forest protected by a barrier that shimmered like starlight. Inside were hundreds of mansions for rent, targeted at visiting guests of a certain dignity. Soon enough the gate soundlessly swung open, and Zac stepped inside.

"The pattern," the young woman whispered as she handed over a small parchment and a token. Zac looked it over for a few seconds before nodding, and it spontaneously combusted a moment later.

With that, the servant girl scurried away, eager to be far away from whatever would happen next. Zac only shook his head with a smile before making the adjustments on a nearby teleportation array, finalizing the process by socketing the array with the key.

With a flash, his surroundings changed, and Zac found himself in the middle of a secluded courtyard.

The pattern was actually the solution to the supposedly personalized array. When new guests checked in at this particular resort, they would be able to modify a certain part of the barrier, almost like setting a pin-code, so that not even the residence employees would be able to teleport inside. Yet there were clearly backdoors built into the system, backdoors that would open for whoever had enough cash.

If Yrial had shown him some of the dangers lurking in the dark for wandering cultivators, then Triski had broadened his knowledge even further. You could never trust the means and motives of outsiders – you needed to depend on yourself. And clearly, Gaun was quite conscious of this universal truth.

Dozens of roots suddenly appeared from the ground, all of them trying to ensnare Zac and seal his movements. Meanwhile, a hooded being shot toward him with a snarl, the ferocious axe in his hands already shuddering with what seemed to be two braided Peak Fragments. Zac inwardly smiled, feeling that Gaun's aura was just the right strength – around 60% of his own.

That way, Zac would be able to impersonate the wandering cultivator while hiding a good chunk of his true power.

Zac subtly shifted his position with a couple of seemingly simple steps, utilizing his understanding of Armaments to avoid the roots gunning for him. Simultaneously, a spare axe appeared in his hand, and Zac prepared to crush Gaun's assault head-on to end the fight early.

However, a scream of danger made him urgently scramble out of the way, but the roots which had appeared to be a simple restrictive array suddenly lit up with esoteric patterns while their speed more than doubled. The incoming figure of Gaun was slowly dissipating as well – it was an extremely lifelike illusion.

The real Gaun was already behind Zac, the edge of the cultivator's axe falling toward his skull. It was quick, efficient, and ruthless – showcasing the strength and experience of someone who had walked the rivers and lakes for the better half of a millennium.

No longer underestimating the Wandering Cultivator, Zac flooded the fractal on the back of his head with Cosmic Energy, the Branch of the Kalpataru, and a small amount of Void Energy. In an instant, a laurel crown of golden leaves appeared on Zac's head while the whole courtyard turned golden.

The ground was gold, the sky was gold – the world was drowned in empyrean splendor. Two pillars, each one studded with a thick stele with inscrutable characters had appeared as well, but it was clear to anyone with eyes they listed some sort of supreme edicts.

The scene was magical, almost making Zac believe he had been transported to some sort of celestial court, but it didn't change the fact that Gaun's axe was almost upon him. However, Zac wasn't worried in the slightest as his own axe ripped through the roots around him rather than moving to intercept.

As planned, the attack was stopped just a few decimeters from his head, with a shimmering golden barrier having appeared to block out the strike.

The shield rippled a bit, but it held against a mighty swing of a Half-Step Hegemon who had infused their weapon with two Dao Fragments, proving that being classified as a Peak-quality skill wasn't just for show. The barrier even nullified the shockwave that would normally turn the interiors of the courtyard to shreds, though that also spared Gaun from any counterforce.

However, just as the Wandering Cultivator was about to launch a follow-up strike, he suddenly groaned and stumbled with shock evident in his eyes.

This was the true form of [Empyrean Aegis], the new defensive skill he had received at level 125. The first part was the basic ability of any proper defensive skill – a barrier. The golden barriers of Zac's skill would both activate automatically or on command, and he could currently have two of them active at one time. The only slightly unusual feature of the feature was that it seemed to be based on a mix of both his Vitality and Endurance, rather than just Endurance.

The second half of the skill was a bit more unique – the whole area drowned in gold had become part of a powerful defensive domain. If Gaun had simply stood unmoving, the skill wouldn't have affected him at all. But the moment one started rotating Cosmic Energy, they would suddenly get pushed down by a terrifying pressure while their energy circulation would be disrupted.

It was like the Heavens themselves were punishing any action against Zac, becoming his personal protector.

The effect was even better than Zac had expected. He had only tried the skill while restricted before, and it was great news that it had such an obvious effect even on Half-Step Hegemons. With Gaun almost falling over, the skill should be able to affect even true Hegemons to some degree. It might only provide a small delay before they crashed through the interference, but a small delay could change the tides of a battle.

The skill represented an interesting facet of the Dao of Life – the facet many equated with divinity. Life was the fount of all beings, so going against its will was to go against the universe itself. The concept didn't exactly mesh with Zac's own comprehension of the Dao, but that didn't really matter. If anything, it shored up a weakness in his own understanding.

Zac wanted to seize the opportunity the skill had provided so he stepped forward, but an amulet around Gaun's neck cracked and conjured a barrier. The defensive treasure seemed to be Early D-grade, but its quality was extremely low as to allow for a Half-Step Hegemon to activate it.

"I just want to talk," Zac urged, but Gaun wasn't listening.

Zac could understand the sentiment – how could the man trust someone suddenly sneaking into his courtyard at night? Zac needed to defeat him first. That would both prove he wasn't after his wealth or his head, and allow him to negotiate from a position of power.

Another swarm of roots suddenly crashed through the ground as Gaun scrambled to his feet, but they didn't target Zac. Instead, they tried to take down the two pillars who the cultivator, correctly, assumed was the source of the restrictive domain. The roots were ferocious, and some small cracks started to appear on the pillars.

However, Zac didn't care. They were more durable than they looked, and they were actively being repaired by his Dao Branch. They would last long enough for him to accomplish his goal – and the air screamed as his axe slammed into Gaun's barrier. Just the first swing was enough to cause small cracks, and a second one was following right on the first's heels.

"Wha—" Gaun grunted as he stumbled again, but Zac noticed how it was a feint – the man's hand was already moving toward the Cosmos Sack on his waist.

Zac snorted and unleashed his [Spiritual Void], its boost allowing him to immediately crash through the faltering barrier. With an inscrutable step infused with his Evolutionary Stace, he passed through the chaotic energies, appearing right in front of the wandering cultivator. The thing Gaun took out was actually an escape talisman rather than an offensive treasure, choosing survival over mutual destruction.

But he was too slow – Vivi's vines had already rushed forward the moment the barrier cracked, and Gaun suddenly found himself bound by Branch-infused vines, making any attempt at teleportation impossible.

"Now, are you ready to talk?" Zac smiled as he placed the edge of his axe against Gaun's throat.

"Uh, nice to meet you," Gaun said with a reluctant smile. "How can I be of service?"