

The Fall 863

Chapter 863: Examination

Having infused a wisp of his aura into the task screen, Zac walked over to a nearby kiosk manned by an acolyte. It was the location where you picked up a mission token so that the captains could contact you when it was time to go.

“Task #1,032? High danger D-grade mission?” the acolyte said when Zac infused his aura into a tablet, glancing at Zac with some surprise.

“That’s right,” Zac nodded with a terse expression.

“Understood,” the acolyte said, his expression becoming slightly more respectful. “Name, affiliation, and origin?”

“Gaun Sorom, unaffiliated, Tumbling Sky Cluster.”

The acolyte jotted the details down before handing Zac a token. “The tests to join special missions are held inside the administrative building. If you haven’t completed them within 24 hours, your reservation will be annulled and you will lose the chance to take on any other missions.”

“What about the contract?” Zac asked.

“It will be presented to you after passing the test,” the acolyte explained.

“Alright, thank you,” Zac nodded before he fastened the token to his belt and walked away.

His face had stayed impassive throughout the exchange, but his heart had started beating a bit quicker after being asked his name. He had stayed close by to observe other cultivators picking up tokens, but the acolytes hadn’t inquired about their identities back then. It looked like his strength wasn’t the only thing that would be investigated when taking on these special missions.

It looked like his preparations would be put to the test even earlier than expected.

Even then, Zac didn’t rush toward the administrative building in hopes to get accepted before they found out more. If anything, he wanted to wait a bit to give the Void Gate a chance to investigate. If it worked out, then great. If not, he would have to go back to plan B – to shed his disguise and come forward as Zachary Atwood, the Deviant Asura, and ask for Leyara.

But honestly, he wanted to avoid that if possible.

It was not just a matter of avoiding being targeted by assassins aiming the Tsarun Clans’ bounty any longer either. With the knowledge of the invaders becoming more widespread, a couple of troubling rumors had started to flourish as well – where some people believed he was responsible for the upcoming war.

They believed that his summoning of the Stele of Conflict set into motion a series of events that led to the invaders appearing, and that he was the focal point of this war. And if the war was a tribulation the System had set up for the Deviant Asura, then killing him might cancel the invasion before it started.

Zac had wondered the same thing since Catheya mentioned that Zecia had been put on lockdown, but he ultimately chose to not carry the burden of the invasion. This was clearly the System wanting to create some chaos in the hopes powerful warriors would be forged in the heat of battle. It had done things like this since the day it was created, following its core protocols of expansion and empowerment.

To think that a single F-grade cultivator was the cause of a massive event like this was laughable. He might have been some sort of catalyst, but the System would no doubt have found a pretext to stir up a war one way or another, even if he hadn't conjured the Stele of Conflict. Neither did he believe this war was designed as some sort of challenge tailored to him – the System did not need to cause such a massive event for that.

It could just meddle with fate to drag him into some other conflict while pushing him in the direction of the next set of remnants, or setting the Atwood Empire at a collision course with another local faction.

Thankfully, it seemed like most people had come to the same conclusion – that this was just a tribulation conjured by the System, aimed at a Sector that had seen relative peace for almost a million years. However, that seed of doubt could prove lethal to him. For example, what if the Starfall Monarch felt that killing him had a 1% chance of averting a war that would reap trillions of lives?

Wasn't it worth killing him, just in case?

At best, the Starfall Monarch would become the hero who saved Zecia. At worst, he'd kill a random E-grade cultivator with no affiliation to the Void Gate. If Zac was presented with that kind of scenario, to kill one random stranger to potentially save Earth, he honestly wasn't sure what he'd do. And neither was it something that Leyara Lioress would be able to stop in case things went south.

So unless his back was pressed against the wall, he'd try to stay under the radar until he wasn't completely helpless in the face of Monarchs. For now, Zac walked the recruitment station with a solemn but unworried demeanor, occasionally striking up short conversations with other wandering cultivators to exchange snippets of information.

In reality, his senses were on full alert, and he was ready to activate the [Flashfire Flourish] hidden within his robes at moment's notice. However, nothing untoward happened after an hour had passed, and Zac eventually continued to another section of the station. It was a square even larger than the one holding the missions, but there were no hovering screens at all.

Instead, there were thousands of makeshift stalls set up, and the sound of thousands of wandering cultivators haggling for dear life was almost deafening.

"Two [Frigid Core Tempering Pills] for sale! They are low-quality, but they were concocted by Ya'vo Haosar of Salsoar Two, so they are low in pill toxicity! The seal is intact for anyone to inspect!" an early Hegemon shouted, sounding like a random hawk. "I only trade for Earth-expected Core Tempering pills or Natural Treasures of a similar grade!"

Core Tempering Pills were one of the most basic pills used to nurture a Cultivator's Core. They were essentially the race-boosting pills of the D-grade, except that just pills weren't enough to make a core stronger. Since the pill was given a Frigid prefix, Zac guessed that the alchemist had added some sort of cold-attributed herbs to the recipe.

Doing so required a certain amount of skill, considering adding a single ingredient could cause a chain reaction during the concoction process, ruining the medicinal efficacy altogether. As for the seals, they were essentially a stamp of authenticity that contained a bit of the alchemist's aura, which was quite popular with higher-grade pills.

Still, Zac wasn't interested in some basic core-tempering pills. He had whole chests full of higher-quality wares in the spatial rings he had left back home. The same was true for most things that the cultivators were trying to pawn off, but one particular stall caught Zac's attention.

"What's this?" Zac asked curiously as he walked over, even though he had a pretty good idea.

"Good eye!" the brutish-looking warrior who ran the stall. "It's a core of a unique beast inside the Void Gate – a Celestial Skybeast."

"A Celestial Skybeast? Zac whistled. "Never heard of it. More importantly, you've completed a mission? And you can just sell the wares like this?"

"Of course!" the man nodded. "The Celestial Skybeasts are rare and powerful creatures, but their cores are not a restricted material. Most people sold their materials to the depots for a pretty penny, but I wanted to take mine back to benefit my fellow brothers."

Zac nodded in enthusiastic agreement, though he inwardly sneered. What Celestial Skybeast? This was obviously the core of a Half-Step Void Beast, an item most likely worthless to anyone but him. The Resource Depots of the Void Gate probably weren't willing to pay much for something that contained such chaotic energies, so the man was hoping to scam someone by making use of the fact Void Beasts were so rare.

"What does it do?" Zac asked, deciding to play along. "If it's just another Beast Core..."

"Not at all," the man hurriedly said before leaning over with a hushed tone. "Just sense the energy within. Odd, right? Unlike anything else you've seen before, no? Don't you find it weird that these unique beasts appear in the Void Gate and nowhere else, while all the templars have bodies seemingly forged from steel?"

"You think it can temper bodies?" Zac muttered. "Impossible."

"Nothing's impossible in this world," the man said. "I know it sounds crazy to cultivate using the chaotic energies of a Beast Core, but there is something different about the Celestial Skybeasts. You can't tell now that the templars are just standing around, but when you join the missions, you will understand the truth of my words."

Zac pretended to be slightly moved as he inspected the Void Core a bit closer, inwardly applauding the man's performance. He was a warrior judging by his aura, but he would be able to give Calrin a run for his money. Obviously, Zac didn't believe his words. The only chance of the templars using these cores was if they all had a similar constitution as himself.

However, he didn't get that sense at all from the Void Gate warriors walking around in the area, and neither were there any hints of that kind of bloodline or constitution in any missive. From the looks of it, the 'void' in Void Gate rather referred to space, compared to whatever weird anti-Dao he and the Void Beasts were instilled with.

The only reason he didn't discard completely discard the warrior's ramblings was the connection between the Void Priestess and the Limitless Empire. There was actually a very slim chance the man had inadvertently caught onto a huge secret when concocting this sales pitch. Honestly, it didn't matter. For now, Zac just wanted to buy the core.

"This, I don't know," Zac hesitated. "It might be true, but a treasure is worthless if you don't have the method to use it."

"Alas, that is true," the warrior nodded. "But you can always submerge it into a common herbal vat and let its energies slowly enter your body. The effect would be worse than using the method of the templars, but -"

"And poison myself while you run off with the money?" Zac interrupted with a snort. "However, I am willing to buy it for study, how about 100 E-grade Nexus Coins? That's already a lot better than an average Beast Core."

"How can you compare this unique treasure with those useless baubles!" the man almost roared, his face turning red with indignation.

"Just calling it as I see it," Zac shrugged.

"Even an elemental Core will bring in over 300 coins!" the warrior said. "This thing is a unique marvel of the sector, with only a few being allowed outside of the Void Gate. 2,000 coins, and not a single one less."

Zac only rolled his eyes and turned to leave.

"Alright, alright," the warrior urged when he saw Zac walking away. "Since we're kindred spirits, and I can tell you're on the precipice of breaking through, I will sell this at a loss. 1,500 E-grade Nexus Coins."

Like this, a similar scene to the other stalls appeared, where Zac and the warrior almost came to blows as they shouted their offers. Eventually, they settled at 580 E-grade Nexus Coins, and as Zac walked away, he believed they both felt they had tricked the other party. The warrior had probably gotten an explanation at the supply depot, that Void Cores were essentially useless, and anything he got for it would be a victory.

Still, Zac was extremely happy with the purchase, considering 480 E-grade Nexus Coins was nothing to him. The core only contained a fraction of the energy trapped inside the weird organ Zac bought at the Twilight Harbor Auction, but it was still the best item available to quickly restore his Void Energy in a pinch.

As Zac walked the stalls, he found and purchased another three Void Cores, proving the first one wasn't a coincidence. After surreptitiously asking, it became clear that only two of the sellers had taken part in the same mission. In other words, Void Beasts were appearing at multiple spots inside the Void Gate.

Was there really some sort of connection, or was it an inevitability when you controlled as many Mystic Realms as Vai Salas implied? Was the beast tide led by Void Beasts? No that couldn't be right – no matter if you looked at the mission descriptions or the materials for sale, there couldn't be too many Void Beasts.

Furthermore, it didn't mesh with what he'd learned about these weird creatures. After the events inside the Research Base, he had made some inquiries. Void Beasts were not nearly as common as one might think. They didn't pop up around normal Mystic Realms, and they couldn't be found inside chaotic places like the Million Gates Territory.

The best working theory Zac had found was that there were layers to the void. Normally, people would only enter the surface of the Void when teleporting, and it was at the surface layers where most Mystic Realms could be found as well. Meanwhile, Void Beasts possibly lived deeper into the void, only emerging when searching for beings to feed on.

It made sense. Zac wouldn't be surprised if his mother's family had the capabilities to hide their facilities even deeper inside the void, pushing it to a layer one normally wouldn't reach.

Apart from the Void Cores, there wasn't anything that piqued Zac's interest. Even then, he stayed on for an hour, browsing through the wares and making a couple of purchases with pretend excitement in case someone was spying on him. A gathering of this many wandering cultivators was a rare chance to trade without auction houses or consortiums taking a large cut, so a lot of people took the opportunity to unload their wares or shop at a discount.

Walking the square also allowed him to pick up more gossip. There were a couple of takeaways from the cultivators who had returned from their first stint into the Void gate. First, the dangers were very real – the beasts were seemingly endless. The casualty rates were just a guess, and more than one party had been completely exterminated, even when undergoing normal difficulty tasks.

Secondly, the Void Gate was treating the cultivators with some amount of sincerity. There were a lot of complaints about how haughty the templars and devotees were, but they didn't use the unaffiliated cultivators as meat shields or sacrificial pawns.

Finally, the Void Gate was powerful, exceedingly so. The returnees were restricted from discussing certain aspects of the missions, but they all said the same thing; the Void Gate possessed shocking means and resources. Everyone knew they were the local ruler with multiple Monarchs, but what these warriors had witnessed had clearly surpassed their expectations.

But finally, it was time to go, so Zac made his way toward the administrative building at the back of the recruitment station. It was a massive structure far surpassing anything built back home on Earth, and one would be able to fit a whole district inside if one wanted.

After showing his token to an administrator inside, he was led to a large sparring chamber that was essentially a hundred-meter-cube.

"An examiner will be with you shortly," the guide said, and Zac simply nodded before sitting down.

Still, with no one appearing even after twenty minutes, Zac eventually took out the [Book of Duality] and started reading. The more he had studied it over the past weeks, the more marvelous Zac found it. It wasn't that long – just over a hundred pages, and reading it the first time had only taken him a few hours.

The readthrough had provided some shallow insights and a brief explanation of the path of dualities. However, on the second readthrough, Zac had started to realize just how much was hidden inside this

seemingly simple tome. He'd already noticed the characters contained special impartments when he got the book, but he had underestimated just how much they contained.

He had deciphered the first couple of pages easily enough, but the problems started to arrive when reaching the second chapter. Suddenly, he had realized that he still hadn't unearthed the true meanings hidden in the first chapter, and he used the second chapter as a reference to delve even deeper.

One plus one didn't equal two when putting the meaning hidden inside the words together. They somehow fused into completely new concepts, seemingly unrelated to the original ones. And with every added character, the interconnected web of hidden truths grew increasingly complex, and it required more and more time to integrate each new character into the tapestry that was slowly forming in his mind.

At first, Zac had figured that the best approach was to unearth all the layers at once by trying to decipher the whole book in one go, but he had quickly realized the futility of that. Perhaps if he was an intelligence-based Peak Hegemon he'd be able to accomplish something like that, but there was simply too much contained in the [Book of Duality].

If he tried to comprehend it all at once, the depth disappeared, and he could only glean the surface-level of meaning.

But the little Zac had deciphered so far had filled him with inspiration. There were no actual Daos or Heavenly Truths hidden into the book, but rather an extremely comprehensive set of information that related to the very essence of energy, patterns, and control. It was not something that related to just cores either – the insights of Kalo, the mysterious author, were universal.

No matter if it was arrays, crafting, or creating skills, the [Book of Duality] covered some of the fundamental underpinnings that made them possible, the process where Dao and some inscrutable patterns turned into magical things like the huge wooden hand of [Arcadia's Judgement], or how it could allow you to turn into something intangible with movement skills or teleportation arrays.

In other words, the book could be considered a whole heritage, as long as you managed to unearth the truths within. It was no wonder Yrial had called it one of the most valuable items in his inheritance. Zac couldn't imagine the effort and comprehension required to impart so much into a few characters – it was another reminder of what kind of exalted existences Monarchs were.

Their understanding of the universe was so far beyond his current level that it wasn't even comparable, to the point they couldn't be considered humans any longer.

Zac kept reading, almost forgetting where he was. But a sudden pang of danger cut through his comprehension, and his eyes shot open just as the door to the chamber opened. Through the door a middle-aged man walked, decked in a full-body armor that was of clearly better make than the average templar gear he had seen so far.

It only took a glance to tell it was a proper War Regalia judging by the massive amounts of energy that coursed through the engraved runes covering its surface. That could only mean one thing – his test would be supervised by a Hegemon, and a pretty strong one by the looks of it.