

The Fall 864

Chapter 864: Teo Kastella

“You seemed quite engrossed, but I could only wait so long,” the man said with equanimity as he stepped into the room, which was immediately flooded with his overbearing aura. “Good instinct for danger. I am Teo Kastella, and I will oversee this trial.”

As the Hegemon walked over, Zac tried to get a sense of what kind of warrior he was. Teo’s aura was pure and condensed, meaning his accumulations were beyond the norm. Then again, anyone who made it to Hegemony was a one-in-a-million genius, so him being an elite was par for the course. More importantly, it looked like he was a Middle-Stage Hegemon.

As for his attunement, it was a bit reminiscent of Zac’s old Undying Bulwark class, and not just because the man was wearing full-body armor. There was a sense of impermeability and stability to his aura, making Zac guess he not only had at least one defensive Dao but also endurance as his main attribute.

Between his level, equipment, and focus, Zac knew there was simply no way for him to defeat this Teo Kastella in a straightforward battle, but there was thankfully no way that could be the trial.

“I am sorry about wasting your time,” Zac hurriedly said as he bowed toward the Void Gate templar. “I am Gaun Sorom. It’s an honor to make your acquaintance.”

“Gaun Sorom,” the templar slowly said. “According to our investigation, this is not the level of mission you were expected to take. Neither do you have one of the prioritized classes for this mission. Could you explain why you applied?”

Zac knew this was coming. Gaun was considered stronger than average among wandering cultivators, but taking on a dangerous D-grade mission was still a bit much. And he was also a pure offensive warrior, while the prioritized classes for task #1,032 were guardians, scouts, and defensive array masters.

He had figured the discrepancy of power between himself and the real Gaun would become an issue sooner or later, and he had workshopped a believable tale with the help of the original owner of his face. Thankfully, Gaun had been lying low the past decade because of his wounds, so it gave Zac some leeway to spin a believable tale.

Furthermore, Zac had one final ace. It was the trump card that made him dare infiltrate an established faction like the Void Gate in the first place – his mother’s array. Not even Catheya’s master, a Peak Monarch, had managed to find anything amiss. How could some middle Hegemon, or even the Starfall Monarch, fare any better?

Zac still had no idea exactly how it worked, but apparently, Va Tapek had said everything was in order when trying to glean anything from his body or Status Screen. That was obviously impossible, considering there were no actual Arcaz Black while his body contained all sorts of weirdness. In other words, the Array was most likely worked on perception, making spying eyes see whatever they expected to see, finding nothing amiss.

Va Tapek expected to see Arcaz Black, so that was what he saw. These people expected Gaun Sorom, so that would be what they saw. Of course, that didn’t mean he was out of the woods. There were various

arrays and skills geared toward infiltration and it would be up to his performance to completely pass this hurdle.

“Ten years ago, I encountered a great opportunity,” Zac said. “It gave me the chance to break through.”

The next moment, Zac emitted a strand of his aura – the Branch of the War Axe. Preferably, Zac would have wanted to use his Life-attuned Dao as well, but Gaun only had two Dao Fragments he had tried to fuse into a singular Branch of the Axe for the past 400 years. It would be weird if he suddenly showcased a second branch completely separate from his recorded abilities.

“A major breakthrough, at your stage?” the captain hummed with some surprise. “Branch of the Axe – a pure one. You’re planning to force a breakthrough?”

“My preparations are still lacking, but I hope to enter terminal seclusion soon after this Beast Tide is over, using any materials and rewards I gain here” Zac nodded.

Breaking through as a Half-Step Hegemon was much harder than doing it as a Peak E-grade Cultivator, to the point most people considered impossible. The biggest hurdle was the defective core you had allowed to fuse with your body. It had to be completely crushed and reformed into a proper one, but that would unleash its energies into one’s body, which was pretty much the same as detonating a bomb inside your belly.

Attempting it was akin to suicide, but some people had accomplished the impossible through the combination of improved foundations and unique treasures. Even if it was just one out of ten thousand who succeeded while the others perished, that glimpse of hope was enough for some.

“I admire your courage, but this is not a training trip,” the Hegemon said. “An offensive Dao Branch built on incomplete foundations is ultimately not enough for this mission. Some of our researchers are just E-grade. We need warriors who will be able to keep them safe, which includes repelling Beast Kings.”

“I understand,” Zac bowed. “However, I do have some confidence in my ability. The breakthrough was not the only thing I gained. I also contracted a powerful companion. With her, my ability to restrain enemies has increased significantly. Together with my Dao Branch, I should meet the requirements.”

The next moment, a dozen thick vines appeared from the spatial tube on his back. Zac had deliberated what he should display in this trial, and he felt Vivi was the most suitable. His [Empyrean Aegis] would probably let him pass, but it was a bit too flashy. Meanwhile, Vivi was just right. She was extremely durable, and would even be able to restrain beast kings just long enough for him or someone else to deal with them.

“Oh?” the man muttered as he looked at the slithering vines with interest.

Teo waved his hand the next moment, and a life-sized dummy flew over to land behind Zac. “Defend the dummy.”

Zac wordlessly nodded, and one of the vines moved over to protect his ward. As for Zac, he placed himself right between the dummy and Teo.

It sounded like a bomb exploded as the Hegemon suddenly shot forward, making a beeline for the unmoving puppet, seemingly intending to barrel straight through Zac. Teo’s momentum was ferocious,

but Zac was still inwardly relieved to sense the Templar only used the strength of a Half-Step Hegemon at the moment.

Over a dozen vines shot out from the tube on Zac's back, while another set formed a corridor of death no more than twenty meters wide. Zac had essentially turned the battlefield into a narrow trench, where he was the goalkeeper.

A shortsword and a metal buckler appeared in Teo's hands, the two probably a paired Spirit Tool judging by their aura matching design. The Hegemon immediately unleashed a dazzling set of swings that hacked into the vines while he used the buckler to create odd shockwaves that pushed others aside.

One by one, long ropes of Vivi's vines fell onto the ground as Teo stepped closer, costing Zac a constant stream of energy to restore. Normally, Zac wouldn't have used such a clumsy method to deal with a simple advance, but he didn't want to use his evolutionary stance like this. Instead, he adopted a technique that was more akin to Gaun's, where he used brute force as a feint to deliver his real strikes.

Having properly stepped into the Integration Stage, it was quite easy for Zac to control how much of his technique to showcase. Currently, he had extracted any hint of his Daos from the way he used the vines, and rather fought as he did while trying to level his [Armament Mastery] skill from high to peak mastery. He even added in some inefficiencies to the way he controlled Vivi to make it seem slightly less impressive.

Vivi's assault still looked ferocious, with almost twenty thick vines thrumming with vigor as they tried to lash the Hegemon. However, it almost looked like Teo was taking a stroll as he walked closer, and he almost gave off the impression of a farmer cutting the weeds – there was almost a bored expression on his face.

But suddenly, three vines split off from the chaotic mix and nimbly evaded Teo's sword before shooting forward with almost double the speed compared to the others. Teo immediately realized what was going on, but he only managed to destroy one of the vines before the others latched onto him and started dragging to pull him off-balance.

With the impressive sharpness of that sword, it wouldn't take long for the Templar to break free, but Zac had no intention of giving Teo that kind of breathing room. He shot forward with [Earthstrider] with one of his spare Spirit Tool axes already in his hand. A mighty shockwave erupted as Zac's axe intercepted Teo's sword.

But Zac barely had time to stop the Hegemon from breaking free before a scream of danger erupted in his mind. The buckler was heading straight for his head, and it thrummed with barely contained momentum. The strike wasn't uniquely quick or inscrutable – if anything it felt extremely mundane if not for its force.

The problem was that the Templar must have begun the attack before the previous clash even took place, like he knew exactly what would happen. Zac urgently ducked, but his idea to counter with a devastating gut-punch was pre-empted by an armored knee rising to meet him. Once more, his movement had been completely predicted, but Zac knew it wasn't a matter of prescience.

It was experience and millennia of drills being turned into lethal muscle memory.

A duck turned into a somewhat unsightly pirouette where Zac barely managed to avoid both Teo's strikes, but by that point, three daggers were already flying toward the dummy. It was not a big deal though, and one of the vines flicked them aside as Zac resumed his assault. The two were soon again locked in a heated melee, where Zac tried to break open the Hegemon's impenetrable defenses one way or another.

The Templar wasn't extremely quick, nor had he mastered technique as Pavina had. Teo probably didn't focus on that aspect of cultivation at all, having simply learned his combat stance from the Void Gate. Even then, he proved a tricky enemy to deal with. Between his armor and steady stance, he was like an immutable mountain, and Zac found it extremely difficult to impede his strikes or change the tempo without physically overpowering him.

Even then, Zac was slowly gaining an advantage thanks to Vivi. Neither of them used any skills, so the two found themselves locked in a melee, and it was impossible to completely avoid the unceasing advance of vines coming from the spatial tube on Zac's back. However, Zac soon found himself in a familiar situation – the force behind Teo's swings was gradually increasing, just like when Kaldor started cheating.

The Templar didn't change up his technique or add Daos, but when every swing hit harder and faster than the one before, Zac soon found himself at a disadvantage. For a while, he matched Teo's increase in power, but he eventually found himself using all the strength he could without raising suspicion. So he could only try to hold on as long as possible, hoping that would be enough.

As Zac found himself pushed harder and harder, he couldn't help but appreciate the templar's technique – or lack thereof. It was simple and direct, without any flourishes or complications. It made Zac think of the flavor text to his old skill [Chop], how there was greatness in simplicity. Teo felt like a soldier in a Roman phalanx – methodical and extremely deadly.

After having almost solely focused on technique for the past years, it was an important reminder. There were innumerable paths to the peak, and honing one's technique was just one of them. Teo was accomplishing great things even without bothering with the Integration stage or the stages above, freeing up his time to improve other aspects of his cultivation.

Zac couldn't get ahead of himself and think himself able to easily defeat any Hegemon just because he had polished his technique to a level that probably superseded theirs. Between their experience and deeper comprehension of the Dao, the difference wasn't all that big, and they had all kinds of ways to only bridge but surpass that gap in a real battle.

The melee became more and more desperate as Zac felt himself barely hanging on by the time Teo was solidly using the power of a Hegemon. Vivi's vines were no longer able to restrain him since he destroyed them too quickly, which increased the pressure on Zac. He knew the trial was all-but-over, and he readied himself to give up.

But suddenly, Zac's eyes widened in surprise as the sword in Teo's hand was gone, and a sharp whistle echoed through the room. His swing had somehow turned into an underhand throw, and the shortsword was barrelling toward the dummy. There was no way to intercept, so Zac did the only thing he could think off – he slapped the dummy with a vine, throwing it a few dozen meters away, out of the way of the sword's trajectory.

In a real scenario, the researcher would have been battered but alive, which was preferable to being turned into meat ribbons by the attack of a Hegemon. The sword suddenly stopped in its trajectory before flying back into the templar's hand as he took a step back.

"That's enough," Teo nodded, almost looking a bit regretful. "Your axework is extremely solid. You have a surprising connection to your weapon, it's a shame you never joined a proper faction. Looking at your strength, you can deal with the weakest of Beast Kings, while any stronger specimen will require assistance."

"I also have a supreme Defensive Skill. It is what allowed me to survive to this day, but it has a powerful backlash so I cannot showcase it," Zac added when it looked like the Hegemon hesitated whether he should accept him. "It can buy some time even against an Early Beast king."

"Well, I'll take your word for it. Your foundation is barely enough for the first string, but your individualistic style is not a good mesh. However, you can easily qualify as a second-string defender," the man said.

"I'm sorry, what does that mean?" Zac asked, not remembering anything about that in the quest description.

"Due to the dangers and the fact we will be traveling with researchers with no or low combat ability, we will have two lines of defense. The vanguard will deal with most of the threats, while the second string will be assigned as personal guards," the hegemon explained. "Anything that slips past our outer perimeter or suddenly appears out of nowhere will be dealt with by you. In other words, a situation just like this trial.

"We don't expect you to be an immutable boulder, but someone who can buy enough time for one of the party's real Hegemons to deal with the threats. As such, your compensation would be on the lower end of the spectrum, and your priority when distributing rare materials would be lower."

Zac frowned as though he was in thought, but he felt it was a pretty good deal. The task had a span of 1-5 D-grade Nexus Coins, but the remuneration was not a priority. He was rather worried that it sounded like a somewhat restricted position. Unless they were given free time to explore, he would find it hard to sneak off and catch a Space-attuned Ferric Worldeater.

"Would I have any opportunities to hunt for beasts or bounties as a bodyguard?" Zac asked.

"You would have an opportunity to leave for three days every month, but that is contingent on the situation being stable. We will not accept any run away with a tide barreling toward us," Teo explained.

Zac figured it was fair enough. Just like the templar said, this was not a training journey. Getting three days a month to explore the Void Gate's restricted areas was pretty generous. He would have to leave it up to his Luck. Even he couldn't find and capture a space-attuned specimen, he should still be able to get a normal one.

And if even that failed, might be able to have the first string cultivators capture one of the wyrms in exchange for part of his reward.

"I am willing to take on this mission," Zac nodded.

“Then let me reintroduce myself,” Teo smiled. “I am Marshal Teo Kastella of the Order of the Hollow Vigil. As the leader of task #1,032, I hereby invite you under the authority of the Starfall Monarch.”

As Teo finished his sentence, two screens popped up in front of Zac – a contract and an actual System Quest. Zac had no idea what hollow vigil meant, but he still bowed in deference once more before focusing on the screens.

Task #1,032 (Decree): Protect your designated ward until the target anomaly has been stabilized, or for a maximum of 6 months. Reward: 0.5 – 1.5 D-grade Nexus Coins depending on performance. (0/1) (0/178).