

## The Fall 882

### Chapter 882: Black Heart

The sun covered half the sky, and its warm rays felt like a caress on her skin. For a moment, it was almost enough to forget that the Heavens were shrouded in this corner of space. But the illusion broke as the sound of a door opening broke the tranquility.

"I am sorry for the interruption, but I have gathered the information young miss requested," Kvalk said as he stepped onto the terrace.

"Oh?" Iz exclaimed with anticipation as she opened her eyes.

"As young miss had gathered from your, ah, research sessions, there is indeed a war that is about to break out in this sector," Kvalk said as he handed over an information crystal. "For now, it is contained to a semi-integrated corner of the endless storms that the locals call the Million Gates Territory. A Space Gate is currently forming there, but it's hidden by the Heavens."

"What about the other sector?" Iz asked.

"They are Dark Sector ruled by the Kan'Tanu Cult," Kvalk said.

"An Unorthodox Cult?" Iz asked with a frown. "I have never heard of them."

"Neither have I. They are likely some small faction that has taken over either a declining or a remote sector. Unfortunately, with the restrictions, I cannot find out more," Kvalk sighed. "But generally, for them to control a whole sector, they are most likely part of a larger faction. Otherwise, some local B-grade force would have stomped them out already."

"I never met a heretic. I hear those people can be quite strong?" Iz asked curiously.

"They break convention for power. Those who survive the rites and the backlashes are usually stronger than common cultivators," Kvalk nodded. "Of course, they are still just ants with a crooked path compared to young miss."

"These natives did not have much information, so I cannot be certain," the golem continued. "But the invaders all seem to carry a somewhat familiar blood curse. If I have to guess, then these Kan'Tanu are a branch or subordinate organization of the Black Heart Sect. Perhaps, one of their outer disciples found their way to the frontier."

"I think I have heard of them," Iz slowly said.

"The Black Heart Sect are ruthless to others, but more so to themselves. There are seldom more than a million members of their sect because of their standards and recruitment method, and almost all of them are outer disciples. Each candidate is placed in a harsh environment with ten thousand others, each one implanted with a nascent Heart Curse. Every warrior they kill will strengthen themselves, and only one candidate will walk out alive.

"To become an outer disciple, a candidate has to survive two rounds, with the second being a battle against 10,000 other candidates who survived the first gauntlet. To become an inner disciple, you have to survive a third round against in a slaughter-fest among outer disciples."

"A trillion deaths for one cultivator," Iz sighed. "Why?"

"Part of the reason is to find true elites," Kvalk said. "But more importantly, it's to strengthen the Heart Curse. With every death, the curse will siphon a small part of the strength and talent of the fallen. With a single round, it will not amount to much, but by the third, an already talented individual will have been pushed a whole tier higher."

"Stolen talent cannot come without a price," Iz muttered.

"It is just as young miss says. The reason it's called a curse even if it increases your talent is the tremendous fell karma it carries. It is like an unrelenting Heart Demon that eventually turns most of the members mad. Even those who can resist will find their personalities gradually get twisted," the golem explained. "The curse will also cause them to be beset by terrifying tribulations."

"Ruining their fate for power," Iz said with a shake of her head. "How pointless. Are all of the invaders like these?"

"No, only the elites will have these kinds of curses, and in this area, they will probably have some inferior version," Kvalk snorted. "To steal providence is incredibly difficult and costly. The common warriors will have simpler brands that will provide power and durability in exchange for their longevity. They are essentially battle slaves whose lifespan is cut down to a tenth."

"Hm," Iz nodded.

She was a bit curious if there was any relation between this invasion and the competition her grandpa warned her about, but these natives had no idea what was going on. There wasn't any point trying to find the answers herself though – there was a much easier solution. She simply needed to find Mr. Bug, and he'd lead her straight into the eye of the storm where the answers waited.

"What about the incongruous readings?" Iz asked.

It had been extremely frustrating to finally break into this sealed sector only to find she couldn't find Mr. Bug. The image hadn't been restored since he conjured that ball of Chaos, and now even the tracking feature was acting up. One day the signal would indicate one direction, and the next day it said he was in a completely different part of the sector.

They had even tried visiting one of the locations the mirror indicated, only to find absolutely nothing there. Had Mr. Bug figured out some way to avoid detection? No, that was impossible. He was far too stupid for something like that. It felt like she was stuck at the finish line, and she had ultimately settled in the hometown of some local family called Havarok.

They weren't very powerful, but they did have access to all the local information networks.

"These natives haven't heard of young miss's associate for years. Instead, I chose to look for clues to the Left Imperial Palace. Since your associate is related to its awakening, I figured we should be able to find him that way. And with the odd readings of the mirror, I have a theory," Kvalk said as he handed Iz a second information crystal.

"Void Gate?" Iz muttered as she scanned the contents.

"I believe the Void Gate is a branch of the Vigil," Kvalk added.

“Ah!” Iz exclaimed as she stood up. “Mr. Bug is off causing trouble in that spatial anomaly!”

“The guardian of the Void Gate is quite powerful,” Kvalk hesitated. “If she’s a part of the Vigil, I fear I’m not her match in my restricted state.”

“If this Void Priestess is a part of the Vigil, she will not interfere with the process,” Iz countered as she started packing away her furniture. “Let’s go.”

“The local dynasty was wondering if young miss was interested in visiting their inheritance realm,” the golem added. “I think their young master wants to use the opportunity to court young miss. Should I test their fate?”

“Don’t bother, what fate can they have? Just ignore those people,” Iz waved her hand as she hurried toward the door. “Come, let’s find someone to teleport us over.”

-----

The thick layer of ash on the ground kicked up the occasional dust cloud in the large hollow. However, the creatures who had gathered in ritual obeisance seemed to not even notice the layers that covered their thick coats of black fur. They simply stared at the ancient temple in the center of the hollow with the dull gazes of fanatics.

How the hell would he do this? There were ten thousand of these bastards, with the weakest of them being Late E-grade. More than two weeks had passed as well, and none of them had moved an inch.

“You still insist on keeping the details to yourself?” Ogras muttered from his hidden chamber in the mountain wall, his aura and words shielded by dense layers of shadows. “No matter what, I am taking whatever’s inside. My guts tell me the most valuable treasure in this godforsaken realm is in there.”

“Why the hell should I help you?” K’Rav snickered as he appeared opposite Ogras.

“If I die, I’ll be sure to throw you right into the hands of one of the alphas,” Ogras spat. “Have fun slowly getting swallowed and digested by these freaks.”

The goblin glared at Ogras for a moment, but his eyes thoughtfully turned to the temple as it released another of its weird ripples.

“These buildings might come from the Lost Plane,” K’Rav eventually relented. “I’m not sure how they were dragged to the surface dimension though – we never managed to bring back anything more than energy beings.”

“The Lost Plane? The same place as those crazed familiars of yours came from?” Ogras frowned. “Bastard, even now you’re lying? Do I look blind? In what way are those pulses anything like the nightmare plane of the Qriz’UI?”

He sounded annoyed, but in reality, Ogras was actually inclined to believe the Tool Spirit. Why else would the mysterious brand on his arm urge him forward and respond to every pulse? Besides, finding this place had been exceedingly easy – these temples had called for him since the day he stepped into the badlands.

If not for the worry this was yet another trick by K'Rav, Ogras would have arrived at this place two whole months earlier. And along his circuitous route, he had spotted three similar ruins, each one of them surrounded by these humanoid beasts. However, none of the others had called to him as this temple did.

Of course, he still wasn't convinced this wasn't a trap, but it took all of his self-control to ignore the beckoning pulses from within.

Ogras was almost certain this was the last piece of the puzzle. Upon finishing the sixth key for his quest in the Ra'Lashar Kingdom, the six tattoos had turned into this singular brand on his hand that still hadn't shown any use. Initially, Ogras had worried he had lost his opportunity when the bastard of a Tool Spirit activated the self-destruction of the whole tower, but he no longer believed that to be the case.

The brand itself was the reward for managing to pass all six trials of the quest, but it was still a key to a repository. However, it was not the Ra'Lashar Treasury the brand would give him access to, but rather this mysterious ruin that not even these powerful beasts dared enter.

"What do you know, fool?" K'Rav snorted. "A little tadpole questioning the vast knowledge of the Ra'Lashar?"

"I'm questioning you, you wailing ghost," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "Everything that's come out of your mouth since we met has either been outright lies or modified truths. Why should today be any different?"

"Then why did you ask, you wretched thing?" K'Rav spat. "Now, will you listen or not?"

"Go ahead, sing your song," Ogras said with a generous wave.

"Bastard," K'Rav muttered before the spirit took a calming breath. "The Lost Plane is ancient, and even we didn't know much about it. We stumbled upon it by accident through a small crack leading into that domain. Our explosive growth was thanks to the few things we managed to extract from that place."

"And your demise," Ogras pointedly added.

"Well, yes," K'Rav shrugged. "We got too greedy, but don't think you would fare any better. For one, the truths that place contained beggared comprehension – we only managed to gather some scraps at the edges, and we turned into what you call a C-grade force in a few short millennia. Problem was, something corrupted the Lost Plane long before we found it."

"The Qriz'Ul," Ogras muttered, his eyes widened with realization as he looked at the thick layer of dust covering the area.

He hadn't made the connection over the past week simply because the auras of these ruins and the rune parasites were so different, but there was a similarity. Everything those purple scars touched was reduced to dust, just like these ancient buildings seemed to have destroyed all around them with their pulses.

"Those bastards are just a symptom, not the cause," K'Rav said. "In a way, we believed the Dao itself was the corruption."

"What?" Ogras asked with a raised brow. "The Dao is the Dao."

“Well, I don’t have all the answers,” K’Rav muttered. “We were busy strengthening ourselves – who would bother to look a gift horse in the mouth? I’m sure there was more to it. In either case, these temples might be related to the Lost Realm – an expression of its power without the taint that turned that realm into a nightmare.”

“Well, even if you’re right – so what?” Ogras grunted. “How does that help me?”

“These dumb brutes don’t dare to go inside, and there is a big pile of dust right by the gates. Entry means death for these things,” K’Rav snickered before he pointedly looked at Ogras’ arm. “But not necessarily for you.”

“Let me guess, I should just rush through these beasts and jump headfirst through the gates – in the hopes the brand on my arm will keep me safe?” Ogras asked with a roll of his eyes. “What’s next, should I slather myself in grease and tasty Natural Treasures for good luck as well?”

“You asked my opinion, so there it is,” K’Rav said. “I’ve said it before and I’ve said it again. Nothing great will come without taking some risks. If my idea works, you will pass through in one piece and get your hands on a true relic of the Lost Plane. If it fails, you’ll quickly and probably painlessly turn into a pile of dust.

“And don’t tell me there isn’t logic to my plan. You didn’t so much as glance at those other temples we passed, including the one that looked a lot fancier than this one. You clearly believe this place is related to you.”

“So, why are you being so helpful all of a sudden?” Ogras said with thin eyes.

“I can’t reason with a paranoid rogue like you,” K’Rav spat as he flew back into the flag in Ogras’ robes. “Do what you want. I almost hope it fails – that way I’ll finally get some peace and quiet.”

“Unless I haunt you in the afterlife,” Ogras snorted as his gaze turned to the valley full of beasts sitting in reverie.

Even if the goblin’s idea worked, there was still the issue of getting through the sea of creatures. These things weren’t like the dumb zombies they had lured away with some Miasma Crystals back on Earth – these things were pretty hard to trick because of their energy sensitivity. There were also the leaders at the front – six Beast Kings as far as he could tell, each one of them possessing strength well above the average power of a Beast King.

Even then, with all he had accomplished over the past decade, it should be possible – as long as he dared enter that courtyard.

He hesitated for a few minutes, but Ogras ultimately steeled his heart. It was just like the long-nosed little bastard said. Power or death, there was no in-between. If he died, he died – just another forgotten warrior on the path of cultivation. As far as he knew, everyone on the outside believed him dead already, so what did it matter?

Ogras turned to shadows as he slithered down a crack in the mountain wall. He slowly inched his way closer to the outer perimeter of the beasts, wanting to advance as far as possible before he was exposed. Eventually, a few of the humanoids started sniffing the air and looking around, realizing something was amiss. That was his cue – and Ogras exploded into action.

Two rapid teleportations left him in the heart of the horde, but when he tried to flash forward with [Darkside] a third time, the dense auras from the beasts barred his path. Even then, it was better than Ogras had dared hope for, and a sea of darkness spread out with himself as the epicenter.

Since [Sea of Shadows] had been upgraded to E-grade and pushed to Late Mastery, its lethality was simply tremendous, and wails echoed out in every direction. However, the domain didn't even last a second before it was ripped apart by the sheer number of enemies, exposing six identical copies rushing toward the gate of the temple.

One by one they were struck down, but when the final copy was about to fall, it took out a spear and swiped in a wide arc around him. Over a hundred E-grade beasts were felled in one go, and the void allowed Ogras to activate his movement skill once more. Now, there was only one barrier between himself and the temple – the Beast Kings and their direct underlings.

Ogras waved the [Shadewar Flag], and screams from the depths of the underworld echoed through the hollow as over a hundred specters appeared. They formed a vanguard as Ogras melded into the shadows, his eyes never leaving the closest Beast King who blocked the gate with a massive Dao Field.

The ghosts swarmed the humanoid beasts with wild abandon, but they were being torn to shred at a rapid pace, unable to withstand the sharp claws of these things. Ogras didn't care – the moment the spirits were released, he had already resigned himself to the loss. But he could collect new souls for the flag as long as he made it through this.

A lance of hyper-condensed shadows, surrounded by circles of esoteric runes, shot toward the final guardian, the force contained in the attack far surpassing the F-grade [Shadowlance] it had evolved from. The brutal-looking beast wasn't worried though, and it unleashed a cascading shockwave with a roar.

The attack destroyed everything in its wake as it swallowed Ogras' skill, but a pained screech suddenly echoed out when a lance of darkness pierced through its body – from behind. With [Mirage Lance], real was false, and false was real. The Beast King's keen energy perception had worked against it – it instantly realized that the attack from behind was an illusion.

However, as a fusion of smoke and mirrors, reality was malleable with his evolved skill, and real and illusion switched places just before they struck. Ogras knew the attack was far from enough to deal with these incredibly durable bastards, but the infusion of his Dao had interrupted the Beast King's Dao Field for a moment.

And a moment was all that Ogras needed.

With a flash, shadows swapped places, and Ogras found himself right next to the wounded humanoid beast. Even if it was in pain, it reacted instantaneously with a ferocious swipe that left spatial tears in its wake. The claws tore straight through his body, or rather the body of the mirage that had replaced Ogras the moment he appeared.

As for Ogras himself, he appeared right in front of the temple, where his appearance kicked up a cloud of dust. There was no time for hesitation or second thoughts – the beast kings had already destroyed the specters and were already bearing on him with madness in their black eyes. He leaped forward through the gate and landed square inside the temple's courtyard.

The cobblestones beneath his feet oozed antiquity and the solemn atmosphere quieted Ogras' beating heart in an instant. However, the ethereal state didn't even last for a second before his mind screamed of disastrous danger. Two of the Beast Kings had actually jumped through the gate in their fury, and their claws were about to strike him down.

Ogras was set to evade the attacks, but a sudden pulse from within the temple froze him in place. He briefly felt an odd ripple on his arm and his mind immediately blanked out, overloaded with a rapid succession of images. The first beast king descended on him a moment later, its claw going straight for Ogras' forehead.

However, while there was death, there was no blood. The instant the claw touched Ogras' forehead, a shudder went through the Beast King and it was reduced to dust in a flash along with its brother. Ogras was fine, and he took a shuddering breath as he woke up from his stupor. It worked – the Voidbrand had granted him access.

He threw a teasing smile at the furious beasts stuck at the other side of the gate, but by the time he turned his gaze toward the decaying temple, his eyes were full of solemnity. The images that had suddenly crammed into his head were scattered and hazy, but one thing was clear; this place had far surpassed his expectations.

It had far surpassed his realm of comprehension.

“Ultom...”