

The Fall 890

Chapter 890: Repetition and Reinforcement

“Anything?” Leyara asked, but judging by the thunderous expression on Pretty’s face, it didn’t look good.

“Nothing,” Pretty snorted as she wiped the blood from her hands with a rag. “These people are no better than warslaves, even the native Kan’Tanu. They barely know about the purpose of their own tasks, let alone other missions deep in the Million Gates Territory or overarching plans.”

“The poor people of that Sector,” Leyara said with a sorrowful head shake.

“You need to harden your resolve,” Pretty said as she looked up at the fractured sky. “Things will get worse before it gets better. The more we learn about these invaders, the more serious it gets. We need answers to prepare ourselves.”

“Well, the technicians are finally making some progress. They will open a temporary gate to the next step of the stellar ladder within the next few days,” Leyara said.

“And you’re still not going to tell me what is going on?” Pretty glowered. “I can tell – you know something about all this. Why this weird place of yours is connected to the Million Gates Territory. Why your Master refuses to shut it off even after the Kan’Tanu have infiltrated your domain. What these signs mean.”

In Pretty’s hand, a bloodied parchment appeared, showcasing the distorted seals of the Left Imperial Palace and its nine Outer Courts. The sigils that were the source of Leyara’s current headache – perhaps the source of the whole war.

“Some things are not for us to alter,” Leyara said with a weak smile. “We can only keep vigil and let the chips fall where they may. To put our fingers on the scale would not necessarily make things better, but they would make them more complicated.”

“Whatever, if you don’t want to tell me, fine. I’ll figure it out sooner or later,” Pretty muttered as she walked toward the edge of the realm, no doubt to once more hound the poor nuns working on the odd barrier.

Leyara released an exhausted sigh as she looked up at the sky. It wasn’t the first time Pretty had pushed for answers, and it wouldn’t be the last. But even if Leyara wanted to provide the answers, who could she ask? Her master had only divulged a few select pieces of the convoluted web just before they set off, and that alone was enough to subvert her understanding of the universe.

The Vigil, the Flamebearers, and the eternal destiny.

It was too much. Even war with ruthless unorthodox cultivators seemed preferable to this pressure that threatened to suffocate her. She was just a spoiled scion of the Void Gate. She wasn’t ready to carry this burden. But the minutes passed, and Leyara eventually steadied her resolve. Her master and the long line of predecessors had worked so hard and for so long.

The Void Gate had given her everything, and she couldn’t fail them now. So she donned a neutral expression as she joined Pretty and the others as they worked on the portable gate. Pretty stood to the side, her contrite face making a smile tug at the corner of Leyara’s mouth.

“... I’m sorry. I know you would have helped if you could,” Pretty sighed as she looked over. “I’m just worried about Average. About everything.”

“It’s okay,” Leyara smiled.

“So what about this one?” Pretty asked. “The invaders were trying to break in as well, so they shouldn’t have access to it either. Why is it important?”

“Well, they might have access to the other side. More importantly, this should be a recent addition to the corridor,” Leyara slowly said. “According to our readings, it should not only contain large amounts of ambient energy, but it is likely a supersized Mystic Realm rather than the smaller fragments we’ve passed lately. It has become a critical chokepoint because of its position in the corridor, and only a few smaller realms can squeeze in around it. If we can control this domain, our control over who comes and goes will greatly improve.”

“We could set up a fortress,” Pretty said as her eyes lit up. “As long as we patrol the neighboring worlds, no one should be able to sneak into Zecia. We could even reverse the tides, mounting proper attacks on the invaders reaching the heart of the Million Gates Territory!”

Leyara nodded in agreement, though it pained her not being able to tell the truth. There was one more reason they targeted this place. It hadn’t been dragged into the Void Star by accident – it had been brought here by the mounting storm of fate. Now, they could only keep watch as the direction of the era unfolded.

It had been so evident in Zac’s mind when he was showered in the hazy light of the Left Imperial Seal. The Void Energy his bloodline produced held no Dao, yet it encompassed the whole universe. That was why it could mimic any one of his skills without compatibility clashes on either his human or Draugr sides.

Using that unique feature, he should be able to mimic the effect of the Sutras just like he mimicked the activation of his skills. The Sutras were like a tuning fork, temporarily adjusting the frequency of his body. Or perhaps it was more apt to liken to the process of forging a weapon. The steel needed to be heated up before it could be molded.

But now that the profound understanding of the Left Imperial Palace had long since left him, he was left fumbling in the dark. What was once clear now seemed almost endlessly complex. Even then, Zac didn’t feel any worry as he closed his eyes to steady his mind. This was just a first attempt without any real direction. His work had only started.

Finding the solution was a process of discovery and elimination. Every time Zac failed, he would gain a small nugget of understanding, and the path toward the truth would become more apparent. This month was only meant to deepen his foundations. Actually creating the [Void Vajra Sublimation] could only happen with the help of the next piece of the seal.

Zac spent the next couple of minutes going over the sensations just before he keeled over. His biggest worry was that the pain had been a rejection of the method by his bloodline. But after going over his

experience, it didn't seem like it. It was instead an issue of control and harmony. He was supposed to copy a tuning fork, yet he had essentially released a foghorn in the form of a deluge of Void Energy.

It had utterly ruined the interlocking system that made up the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation], resulting in a minor backlash to his mind. Luckily, a backlash of this level couldn't harm his evolved soul in the slightest, allowing him to experiment with impunity. And with him and Vai being locked in here for the time being, he had all the time he needed.

Over the next three days, Zac kept experimenting, trying all kinds of things with his void energy to see how it affected the method. The problem was that with Void Energy being essentially traceless and invisible, it was impossible to see how it responded to his various experiments. Instead, he could only observe the effect of the life-attuned energy and measure success and failure by how powerful the backlash was.

His first experiments centered on mirroring the paste array on his body, but that didn't seem to work. He also tried various methods, such as inverting the pattern or using the other ones provided by the technique. Next, Zac tried using [Void Zone], but that simply disrupted the whole process, as did infusing Void Energy into the paste itself.

This time, Zac had filled his whole body with Void Energy. He was trying to essentially form small whirlpools all across his body to turn himself into a proverbial void. The result was an unmitigated disaster. A stabbing pain made him groan with pain as he blacked out for an instant, and he once more found himself on the ground.

A few shuffling steps and a door opened. "Is everything alr- WHAT?!"

Zac's vision was still swimming from the powerful backlash, but he could still make out three copies of a furiously blushing Vai at the door. She seemed to be caught between wanting to run away and come over to help, resulting in her being frozen in place.

"It's me," Zac groaned as he shook his head, turning the triplets into a singular researcher. He had returned to his original appearance to practice the method, and he was afraid she'd mistake him for a stranger, especially with all the paste covering his body.

"That's- That's not-" Vai stuttered.

At first, Zac didn't understand why she was reacting so strongly, but he soon realized what kind of scene Vai had walked into. Not only was he almost entirely naked and covered in goop, but his training kilt had shifted to expose his butt when he toppled over just now. Zac quickly forced down his vertigo and scrambled to his feet, trying to hide the embarrassment.

"Sorry about that. I tried to figure something out," Zac coughed as he donned a simple robe. "When did you come out?"

"J-Just now," Vai said, her gaze finally turning back to Zac after he was fully dressed.

"How are you feeling?" Zac asked as he took out a bottle of water.

"I'm better. What are you doing? Is it body tempering? I haven't seen you do that before," Vai asked, curiosity overcoming embarrassment.

Zac first planned on making something up, but he suddenly turned toward the researcher thoughtfully. Even after forming a Dao Branch, she wasn't much of a fighter. But in this department, Vai was no doubt his superior. Perhaps she had some ideas that could streamline his experiments.

"Not yet, but I am trying to change a Body Tempering Manual I stumbled across," Zac said.

"Why do you want to change it?" Vai asked. "Do you want to upgrade it? That's an enormous undertaking."

"No, it's a high-quality method, but it doesn't suit me," Zac explained.

"Most manuals are created through trial and error over generation after generation of practitioners," Vai slowly said. "Changing things up, at least as a low-grade cultivator, is likely to result in something worse."

"Humor me," Zac smiled. "I'm trying to swap out one part of the technique, but now I'm just doing things randomly hoping I'll stumble onto the correct answer."

"Are you willing to show me the method?" Vai asked, her face lighting up with academic exuberance. "There's only so much I can do without understanding what I am dealing with. I can swear a confidentiality agreement."

"I wouldn't mind, but it is locked in my head," Zac grunted. "Anytime I try to copy it or divulge its details, my brain just blanks out, and I can't remember anything. But I can tell you it is a Buddhist method. I want to replace a certain part of the technique with something suited to my Bloodline."

"I knew you had a Bloodline," Vai exclaimed with a victorious smile on her face. "You are so weird; it makes sense you had to have some inherited advantages. But why didn't the Void Gate know you? If any clan in Salosar managed to awaken such a powerful bloodline, they'd immediately get recruited."

"Only I have it," Zac smiled. "I'm sorry, I can't tell you much more. It will only bring you trouble. Do you have any ideas?"

"Well," Vai slowly said. "I am no expert on Buddhist methods or even Body Tempering in general. But everything has a purpose. If you only want to change one part of the method to suit you, you need to properly understand what it does and how it connects to the other parts."

Zac nodded in agreement. So far, he was on board.

"Have you ever cultivated the actual method?" Vai asked.

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I fear I will be stuck if I do."

"I think you will have to if you want to get to the bottom of things. Theoretical understanding can never match up to practical experience. And if you are worried about going down the wrong path, you can use this," Vai said as she took out a vial from her spatial ring.

"What's that?" Zac asked curiously as he looked at the shimmering mixture within.

"It's a resetter," Vai said. "This particular concoction is a proprietary blend of the Void Gate – [Void Slate]."

"A what?"

"A resetter," Vai repeated. "If you drink this before and after a cultivation session, your gains will only be temporary. We use them when performing limited trials. Typically, if we want to change a cultivation method, we'd simply hire ten thousand warriors and give them slightly different manuals. That way, we can study the impact of our changes. But that is not always possible."

"Sometimes, the method is secret and cannot be shared, or only a select group has enough talent to train in it. For those trials, we use resetters. We have the research subject try out various things and measure the effect as we gradually refine the result."

"That's amazing," Zac said as he took the vial. "This is exactly what I need. But does it work on Heart Cultivation as well?"

"Heart Cultivation?" Vai exclaimed with surprise before her eyes widened in understanding. "Oh, right. The Buddhist Sangha. Well, no. Heart Cultivation is intangible, even more so than Soul Cultivation. There is nothing for [Void Slate] to expunge. But as long as you have a strong mental state, you should be able to rid yourself of the effect by stabilizing your heart after each session."

"Is that safe?" Zac hesitated.

"Well, the heart is elusive," Vai slowly said. "A small crack can break a dam. But from what I understand, Heart Cultivation is based on the repetition and reinforcement of one's belief. If you take some time to reclaim your footing afterward, you should be able to remove any lingering effects. But you should know just how powerful the Buddhist Sangha is; you will be taking a risk if you do this."

"Repetition and reinforcement," Zac hummed. "You're pretty clever. Are you interested in joining my force instead of staying with the Void Gate? Maybe I should just kidnap you?"

"Wh- What!" Vai stuttered with shock as she took multiple steps away. "I- I can't! My wows, my niece. I-I-"

"I'm just joking," Zac laughed. "Or I mean, you'd always be welcome to join if you really wanted."

"Scoundrel," Vai huffed before she smiled. "Even if I've had a lot of fun the past days and experienced marvels I never thought I'd get to see first hand, I cannot leave. It's not a compulsion, mind you. The Void Gate is an important part of me. It's where I grew up, where my sister and her children are buried. Where little Lara is. It's home."

Vai's smile was so warm it made Zac a bit homesick. Not only for Earth, but also for a simpler time. A time when his father was still a steady pillar of his life, where his sister was just an unruly teenager finding her path in life. When his every decision didn't have massive implications for not just himself, but billions of people."

"I get the feeling," Zac smiled.

"I- Ah- I'm sorry. Are you okay?" Vai asked with worry when she saw Zac's change in demeanor.

"I'm fine," Zac sighed. "Just a bit nostalgic. Well, I'll try this thing out. Thank you for the tip."

“Wait, take this as well,” Vai said as she handed him a high-quality information crystal. “These are notes for an experiment we conducted a few centuries ago. It was to investigate a possible direction for a Cultivation Manual. The project was ultimately a failure, but the notes might provide some idea on how to approach your problem.”

“Oh?” Zac said with interest as he accepted the crystal. “Thank you.”

“I won’t disturb you while you figure things out,” Vai said. “I’ll be at the other side getting acquainted with my Dao. I haven’t had a chance for some quiet meditation for months. But just call me if you need me.”

“Thank you,” Zac nodded. “And if you need to, I don’t know, talk about all you’ve been through lately, I’m here for you.”

Vai slightly smiled in response before she left Zac to his own devices. Zac’s eyes turned to the two items in his hands with a thoughtful look. Should he do it? Did he really dare cultivate the original version of the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation]? Ultimately, the resetter wasn’t a protection against the real danger – the path-breaking nature of the Buddhist Sangha.

He couldn’t help but recall the smiling face of Three Virtues as he agonized over his choices. Was this part of his schemes? That Zac would be forced to dip his feet in the water if he wanted to extract the benefits from the technique. This was exactly what he had wanted to avoid and why he’d held off practicing until now.

But Zac eventually steeled his resolve. Forging ahead didn’t just mean throwing yourself against powerful foes. It meant having conviction in yourself and your path. If his path couldn’t even survive a clash against an F-grade layer of a Buddhist Body Tempering manual, then his path wasn’t worth holding onto.

Of course, that didn’t mean he would just jump into it blindly, so Zac first infused consciousness into the information crystal. The mountain of data that greeted him almost made him throw away the crystal in disgust, but he could only stifle the sense of boredom and go over it. Only ten hours later did he put away the crystal with a sigh.

He had to hand it to the nuns of the Void Gate – they took their job seriously.