

The Fall 513

Chapter 513: Pathways

Zac grunted as he got to his feet after having finished his recuperation for the night. One week had passed since the events in the Dead Zone, and he had finally restored the pathways in his leg to optimal condition. It had also given him some time to take it easy and find some stability. Having first rushed through the levels in the Tower of Eternity, only to be thrown into a hectic battle against the Undead Empire had taken its mental toll.

Redrawing the pathways had felt like a chore the first days, but he quickly realized the benefits of doing so. One of his weaknesses was a lack of familiarity with the patterns and fractals that made up pathways and skill fractals alike, but he was slowly shoring up that weakness while redrawing his fractals.

The process was slow, but it allowed him to gain a far greater insight into how the fractals actually worked and how they interacted with nodes and skill fractals. He had generally considered them magic veins until now, pumping Cosmic Energy instead of blood, but he realized that was a reductionist way to look at it.

The pathways created an extremely intricate network of thousands of fine energy routes, that actually worked together to transform the Cosmic Energy he used. You could say that raw cosmic energy entered his pathways from his cells, where it was stored until he would form a Cultivation Core, but that Cosmic Energy wasn't in tune with his class.

However, the energy was split apart into thousands of minuscule streams through the fractals, and when they recombined in the Skill Fractals the energy had transformed a bit, like the previously raw Cosmic Energy had been forced to all stay on the same wavelength. Zac guessed that the pathways also did the same with Cosmic Energy that was absorbed through cultivation, though he couldn't test that for himself.

He hadn't been completely certain why the pathways between classes were so different before, but this was the most likely explanation. It was not only about fitting with the skills but rather forming a specific type of Cosmic Energy. It didn't quite go as far as give the energy an attunement though, but perhaps that was exactly what would happen at higher grades.

Having spent most of his waking time redrawing these pathways had given Zac a newfound understanding not only of the fractals but also about his class. He still lacked a theoretical foundation, but he felt that his understanding would perhaps even eclipse that of most cultivators by the time he reached peak E-Grade.

Furthermore, his week of introspection had also given him a better understanding of the pathways, then he had also gained a better understanding of what the Nodes actually did. If the pathway was a pattern of pipes helped remold his Cosmic Energy, then the spinning whirlwinds of the Nodes were essentially self-sustaining repeaters that sped up the process.

He still couldn't figure out exactly how his Hidden Node fit into this system just yet, but he hoped he'd be able to find out more when exploring the Mystic Realm in the future.

Seeing as he had essentially been holed up in his courtyard since returning, Zac decided to take a stroll through Port Atwood. Most things were pretty much the same as usual, but there was an extraordinarily large number of Tal-Eladar and their beast companions walking the streets. Zac knew that these were only the ones on a break as well, with most of them working on the surroundings of Port Atwood and Azh'Rodum.

Verana had quickly made her stance known as she appeared in Port Atwood just a few hours after Zac, bringing with her most of her non-combat class clansmen. They had quickly gotten to work at rebuilding broken parts of the town, replanting burnt-down trees, and even expanding the town with new structures.

The leader herself had spent a lot of time in the Atwood Academy, teaching the kids what she knew about beast rearing and cultivation, even bringing a couple of litters of infant beasts. Zac had half-expected her to flee with the Brindevalt Clan, but she clearly felt there was more value to stay on, even with the cooling relations with Zac.

Zac obviously didn't really buy into this PR-campaign, but he also wouldn't say no to free labor.

As for the Brindevalt, they were long gone. The few remaining Incursions had all closed their doors and returned to wherever they came from by now, apart from the cultists. The Brindevalts had even sent a batch of resources and their congratulations through Verana before leaving, while setting things up so that taking over their domain would go smoothly.

Verana was most likely the reason for their congeniality, as the others had simply slunk away in the night after looting everything they could. They probably understood that the natives would come for them next, even if they had fought against the Zombie hordes together.

Or perhaps they had heard about Zac's existence and his deeds inside the Tower and had decisively left.

He still had no idea exactly what kinds of waves his emergence had created. He was still a small shrimp, but he had done something that hadn't been accomplished for a million years. No one living in the whole Zecia Sector had reached his level in the Tower of Eternity, at least not to his knowledge.

Zac had asked Calrin to try to buy some reports of what was going on, but he still hadn't heard anything from the Sky Gnome. It wasn't that surprising though as less than ten days had passed since he left the Base Town. With Calrin's limited network it might take some more time before they got hold of the news.

But that very same uncertainty made him unsure about his next steps. One of the first orders he had sent out to his people after returning was to look for places with high numbers of E-Grade beasts. Mystic Island was the best place in the archipelago, but much of its core had been cleansed of beasts to secure the base camp by the spatial tunnel.

Unfortunately, there weren't a lot of other good options. He had essentially out-leveled Earth, making it extremely hard for him to advance. He had gotten his hands on quite a few Teleportation Tokens by now though, allowing him to go to a lot of interesting places. He alone had the tokens from Galau, Pretty, Boje, and Catheya. But that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Ogras had received over a hundred tokens from all kinds of forces during the time he stayed behind in the Base Town. Zac essentially had access to every major Empire in the Zecia sector, except a few xenophobic and racially uniform ones. Unfortunately, it turned out that all the tokens he had gathered were useless at the moment.

The Nexus Hub was still inert, most likely because the Cultists were still on the loose.

That meant he was stuck on earth for the time being, unable to whizz off to some off-world hunting grounds to grind out a couple of levels. His predicament had also made him understand why the Dominators barely had gained any levels apart from the boost from the hunt. It simply wasn't possible on Earth.

Zac's aimless wandering soon led him to the Academy, and he entered after having thought of something he had put off until now. He found Alyn sitting at the veranda of her house like many times before, and he sat down next to her.

"A cup of tea?" Alyn asked as she looked over with a smile.

"No thank you," Zac said. "A lot to do today."

"Be careful, or you will get addicted to the stress," Alyn said. "It's okay to take a break sometimes. In fact, it's advisable. It allows your Dao and your path to harmonize with the real you, the one that isn't forced into one desperate situation after another."

"I will hopefully have time for that when I've closed the final Incursion," Zac smiled, though he honestly wasn't so sure.

"Have you found their whereabouts by now?" she asked. "They've killed quite a few of our people through their two visits to this island."

"Not yet," Zac sighed. "I've been busy, but I have my people looking into it. We'll probably hear back soon."

"Good," Alyn nodded. "You are nurturing the heart of an Emperor. Let others deal with the little things while you focus on your cultivation."

"Got any tips?" Zac smiled, feeling a bit reminiscent of the days the two spent in the Nexus Crystal Mine while Zac was working on ridding his body of his Cosmic Water dependency.

Life had felt a lot simpler back then.

"What tips can I give you?" Alyn shook her head. "My teachings are meant to bring the most out of the talentless cultivators, turning them into contributing cogs in the machine. Neither I nor Clan Azh'Rezak knew anything about raising true elites. If we did we wouldn't have been a clan that could barely be considered nobility. You will have to find your own path, or find a better teacher."

"I was just kidding. On another note, can you call back any students who participated in the Dao Funnel last month, in case they are out training? Not a single one can be missing," Zac said.

"What's going on?" Alyn said, a small frown adorning her face.

Zac was about to explain, but he froze for a second and instead took out the Lantern. He immediately infused some energy into it, and he suddenly felt a connection to the thing as a ghastly white flame lit up behind the glass.

The two were doused in the spectral shine, and Zac was suddenly covered in ribbons in all kinds of colors. A few were pretty thick, but most were thin as a strand of hair. Alyn also had a few bonds, most of them stretching out in various directions of the town. There were also two that rose straight into the sky, but Zac was relieved to see that they looked completely different than those of the Great Redeemer.

They rather had the same red color as the Demon Incursion had while it still was active, making Zac believe they were rather Karmic Links to some family or friends back on her home planet.

Satisfied that there was no hidden problem with Alyn quickly turned off the Lantern, unwilling to spend any more lifeforce than needed. He had actually seen a grey hair when his hair started to grow out the other day, a reminder of how much lifeforce he had already lost because of the Shard of Creation.

He would gain it back many times over when he reached D-grade Race, but it was still pretty disconcerting to see, considering his lifespan should be over 500 years by this point.

"I need to do this with everyone who was there," Zac said. "It turns out the Redeemer guy is actually a bastard from a C-Grade clan of Karmic Cultivators. This thing will root out hidden dangers. Keep this to yourself."

The truth about Voridis A'Heliophos, or rather The Great Redeemer, was still not disseminated among even the core of Port Atwood. No one present really knew too much about the means about the abilities and limits of that mysterious power, so they kept it on the safe side. The fewer who know any real details, the smaller the risk of inadvertently forming any Karmic Links.

"I understand, I will arrange things properly," Alyn nodded as she took out a crystal. "When do you need them gathered?"

"Make it three days from now," Zac said as he stood up. "A few of the soldiers are out to sea right now I think."

Since he couldn't scan for Karmic threats right now he could only focus on one of his other projects while he waited for Julia to return. Zac couldn't help but smile when remembering the former government employee's excitement to get some responsibilities. She had lived a quiet life while her partner had worked on Ogras' movie along with a few PR gigs across the archipelago, and she seemed bored out of her mind.

Ogras had said that it was suspicious how eager she was to go talk with some unknown people at the New World Government, but Zac didn't believe she was a spy. There were no doubt spies on the island judging from how the invaders seemed to have known about the general situation, but Julia wasn't a prime suspect.

She had been restricted to a far greater degree compared to others to avoid this very situation, so it was more likely that she just wanted to do something productive. Besides, she seemed to have gotten

extremely complicated feelings for the New World Government since hearing Emma's stories. The suspect was likely someone else.

Not that it really mattered any longer. The undead were dealt with and the Zealots were next, and any planning or scheming of the New World Government was redundant in the face of pure power. Besides, they seemed more invested in their 'Ark Project' than world domination by now, even after the undead threat was dealt with.

Zac was soon back in his private area, and he stepped onto his private teleporter. The next moment he appeared in a small nondescript cave. It looked like any other place among the subterranean tunnels of his mountain range, apart from being illuminated by Luminous Pearls rather than the luminescent moss.

But it was anything but normal.

Zac started walking toward an empty wall, but when he passed an almost invisible layer the surroundings changed, and he was inundated in dense waves of energies. The hair on his arms stood up as he was simultaneously buffeted by both life and death.

It looked like his cultivation cave was finally up and running.