

The Fall 860

Chapter 860: Into the Void

Pretty Peak walked down the engraved hallways, her foul mood not improved at all by the chance of seeing the insides of the newly-built and exceedingly expensive War Fortress.

Just what was going on?

Months spent on pushing deeper into the Million Gates Territory, only to be called back before she could even begin her search. The only reason she didn't find that damned Commander was that she was pretty sure it wasn't he who had ordered her vessel back – it had to be from someone in her family. But why would her elders send her back just as she was approaching the area where her cousin and uncle delved into? It was her father who told her to join the scouting vessel and look around for clues.

Soon enough, she reached the inner chambers she had been instructed to report to, and Pretty cracked her neck before equipping her bracers. There was only one person who could rescind the orders of Strongest Peak, and if he was inside this room, then she was about to be attacked.

The doors swung open, and a cascading wave of killing intent immediately pushed Pretty back a few steps before she managed to regain her footing. She activated [Unflinching], and the world turned red as sanguine runes appeared over her bare arms. Space bulged inward as she unleashed a punch, and the killing intent was pushed aside as she rushed into the room.

However, just as she entered, a pang of danger warned her that she wasn't out of the woods just yet. Space cracked as a projectile flew at her, but she didn't flinch at all. Her hand turned into a claw as she swiped at the incoming projectile, creating four gashes in space that collided with the attack.

She didn't use a skill, but the swipe was infused with the Branch of the Headsman and her frustration, and it barely managed to break through the thin film of energy surrounding the apple that had been flung in her direction.

"Not bad, lass," a rumbling laugh echoed through the hallway. "Have you decided on a name?"

"Not yet," Pretty sighed as she deactivated her battle stance.

As expected, it was her grandfather who had called for her, but she froze in surprise upon seeing a familiar yet foreign figure sitting next to him, playing with a nasty-looking scimitar – her grandmother. Not only that, but her aura was extremely condensed, which could only mean one thing – she had finally become a Monarch.

Was this why she had been recalled? Because Kantaja Peak had finally left seclusion after 1,800 years?

"Hello, child," she smiled. "It's nice to finally get to meet you."

"Greetings, grandmother," Pretty said as she bowed deeply. "Congratul-"

She didn't get any further as a white blur shot up between the mats, aimed right at her forehead. There had been no energy fluctuation and no warning from her Danger Sense, and even Pretty found herself frazzled as her bow turned into a swirl that barely allowed her to move the bracer on her left hand to block.

A sharp twang echoed out as Pretty was launched into the air, slamming into the ceiling above. She felt her organs shift, but she could only push through the pain as she launched off from the ceiling and landed in a combat position, ready to take on any follow-up attacks. There was thankfully none forthcoming, but Pretty obviously wouldn't relax in front of her grandpa.

Or her grandmother, for that matter, considering her reputation was even worse.

"The sixth generation seems promising," Kantaja nodded before she turned to her husband. "But they're still a bit soft. Have you given up on your child-rearing plan? Or is it my three useless sons who aren't following the precepts?"

"Well, a little bit of both, I guess?" Ultimate laughed. "I was bored so I tried a few new things. In either case, the war will help toughen them up."

Pretty couldn't help but feel some annoyance at the discussion as she extracted the projectile – a strand of hair – from her bracer. Her father had essentially tortured her since she was two, including throwing her into a wild mystic realm before she had even started cultivating. How was that being soft? But she could only swallow any complaints lest the Kantaja showed her why she was known as the Knuckle Butcher, one of the most feared assassins in the Allbright Empire.

Most assassins used stealth and planning to execute their plan, but Kantaja instead sent a letter to the target that she'd kill them within the year, and then she bulldozed all the resistance the target erected. If they fled, she searched for their location by uprooting any holdings of theirs like a walking hurricane. Unsurprisingly, most of her assassinations ended with thousands of dead and massive structural damage.

The only reason she hadn't been was a mix of shamelessness and Ultimate Peak's influence. Whenever Kantaja killed people she put up her hair in a certain braid and called herself Tankaja instead of Kantaja, insisting that the assassin was a completely different person. With the Peak Family backing her, no one ever dared call her on her claims.

Thankfully, Kantaja only targeted unorthodox cultivators and those who were suspected of having dealings with the enemies of the Allbright Empire, which was why the imperial clan mostly looked the other way. Even then, Pretty had heard rumors that her grandmother entering terminal seclusion wasn't just because she was getting close to forming an inner world.

She had been a bit too overbearing while searching for some answer to her Path of Butchery, and even the Peak Family started to find it hard to bear the weight of her actions. Pretty wondered what kind of reaction her emergence as a new Monarch would elicit back in the Emyrean Sector. Most likely, they were praying that she'd get herself killed in the war.

Not even Pretty dared imagine what kind of trouble her grandmother would kick up now that she had ascended to C-grade, though it was a relief to see a fourth Monarch having appeared in the clan in addition to grandfather, granduncle, and her father. Each one was a strategic resource, and they would need every bit of power they could get in the upcoming war.

"How are things in the Million Gates Territory?" Ultimate Peak asked. "Killed any of those bastard yet?"

“More than I expected. The Landing has been erected,” Pretty sighed. “The number of invaders has increased tenfold over the past year, and some have even been spotted in the sixth band. Almost all of the scouting units are led by Hegemons by now.”

“Sixth band, still some time then,” Kantaja muttered as she stabbed the scimitar into the ground a few times. “It’s too far. I was hoping there would be some people nearby.”

“Is this why you asked me to return?” Pretty hesitated. “I still haven’t found any clues of Average or Uncle Greatest.”

“Your uncle returned a month ago,” Ultimate sighed. “He is currently in stasis.”

“What!” Pretty exclaimed, but her shock quickly turned to pain as another strand of hair pierced straight through her gut, prompting a fountain of blood to splatter across the floor.

“Never lose your vigilance, you little runt,” Kantaja laughed.

“Thank you for the lesson,” Pretty coughed as she ate a healing pill. “Is my cousin fine?”

“The fate of Average is still unknown, though his Life Candle is still burning strong,” Ultimate said with a shake of his head. “Greatest encountered something while hunting for leaders of these Kan’Tanu invaders. They had set up camp at an uncharted world for some unknown reason. While Average launched a raid on the surface, something suddenly emitted an extremely powerful energy.

“Our vessel, along with most of my son’s squad, were instantly annihilated as cracks in reality spread for millions of miles. Hearing the description, it is most likely the source of those powerful fluctuations we could sense all the way in the Red Sector back then. Greatest managed to save some of his subordinates by opening a path back from the Void, but by the time he emerged, the planet was gone.”

“If the planet was destroyed, then Average,” Pretty hesitated.

“It wasn’t destroyed from what Greatest could tell,” Ultimate said. “It disappeared.”

“The whole planet was moved?”

“No,” Ultimate said. “That planet was too big, not even a late Monarch would be able to take it away. Besides, the energy was different to anything they had encountered from the invaders so far.”

“But little Great said he did somewhat recognize it,” Kantaja added. “He believed it was related to the Limitless Empire.”

“And you just so happen to know someone with insight into that matter,” Ultimate added. “Someone whose master just so happens to be the most powerful Spatial Cultivator in the Zecia Sector who can make sense of this mess. We need to get to the bottom of this. For one, it’s our best chance to find Average. Furthermore, if there are powerful relics appearing in the depths of the Million Gates Territory, they can’t be allowed to fall into the hands of the invaders.”

“Grandfather wants me to go to the Void Gate?” Pretty Peak asked.

She didn’t ask why they didn’t go in person – there was no need. Ultimate had killed no less than five promising Void Templars on one of his Rampages at the edge of the Zecia Sector. Each one had been a

prospect for Monarchy, and if not for the Allbright Emperor interceding, the Void Priestess might have hunted him down over a hundred thousand years ago.

“How about Clever? Clever Peak doesn’t sound too bad?” Ultimate grinned. “Your flight to the teleporter at Chaos Landing leaves tomorrow. The Space Gate Guild will ferry you over. It’s good timing as well. Something odd is going on over there as well. Try to figure out what’s going on. Back when the Void Gate appeared in the Zecia sector, there were rumors they had connections to some outside force. Now, millions of years have passed and people have mostly forgotten, but it might be relevant now.”

“Something odd is going on in the Void Gate as well?” Pretty asked with surprise.

“Lots of that going around since I emerged,” Kantaja smiled. “Looks like I broke through at just the right time.”

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“Don’t worry, I’m not interested in your life or your possessions,” Zac said as he slowly took away his axe from Gaun’s throat.

However, he didn’t release Vivi’s bindings, since that would allow the wandering cultivator to escape. Zac also erected a series arrays around them, making sure that the proprietor of this place wouldn’t be able to spy on the conversation. Of course, this wasn’t his only assurance. Triski had been paid handsomely to keep the Peak E-grade proprietor company during this meeting, to make sure he didn’t have a sudden change of heart.

“If you’re friendly, why appear in my courtyard in the middle of the night?” Galau muttered with discontent, but Zac was relieved to see he stowed away the Escape Talisman. “Thought you were an assassin. Could’ve just sent a letter.”

“There’s someone who’d be willing to go through all this trouble just to assassinate you?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

“Somone as handsome as me is bound to make an enemy or two,” Gaun shrugged. “While I always act aboveboard, sometimes the competition for resources gets heated. Now, may I ask who you are and what kind of business you have?”

“My name isn’t important,” Zac smiled. “And I’ll make it brief. We want your identity. Name your price.”

“My identity? Why should I believe that? I’m just a Wandering Cultivator, my identity is worth noth-“ Gaun snorted, but he suddenly froze as he looked at Zac with hesitation. “You’re an outsider?”

“It seems you understand the situation,” Zac nodded. “We can make it worth your time.”

Gaun hesitated for a few seconds.

“I don’t want to know why you want the identity of a known person in this cluster, but it cannot possibly bode well for me,” Gaun slowly said. “This is the Void Gate we’re talking about. If you or whatever organization behind you cause havoc under my name, how will I eke out a living? And what’s to stop you people from silencing me?”

"If my boss wanted you dead they would have sent an assassin instead of me," Zac shrugged. "We're not some sinister cabal. A certain individual simply wants us to enter the territory of the Void Gate and look around. I can tell you this much, it is not some simple Beast Tide they're dealing with. You might be better off not going in either case."

"No need to tell me more," Gaun exhorted. "The less I know the better."

"So, you agree?"

"Well, on a few conditions," Gaun said. "First of all, you need to take me away from the Void Gate's sphere of influence, even if you're saying you won't cause any trouble. It shouldn't be too hard since you're an outsider, right?"

Zac only smiled as he took out a box full of Teleportation Tokens, prompting Gaun's eyes to turn to a needlepoint as he drew a sharp breath. Zac could understand what Gaun was thinking – only someone with an extremely powerful background could take out so many different tokens.

Truthfully, less than a third were actual Teleportation Tokens. The rest were the Fate Tokens he had collected inside the Orom World. They emitted almost an identical sort of energy though, so Zac had thrown them in with his leftover tokens to make himself and his fake boss seem more impressive.

"We can send you to all kinds of places. No C-grade continents though. Your identity isn't worth that much," Zac said.

"A- Alright," Gaun said, clearly a bit shaken by the scene. "Secondly, I want fifty- one hundred D-grade Nexus Coins to get myself set up and replace my Lifewarding Treasure."

"That thing can't have cost more than one or two D-Grade Nexus Coins," Zac snorted. "It wouldn't be able to block more than one strike of an early Hegemon."

"Still, you should know the difficulties of being an outsider on a new world, money will be needed for all kinds of-

"Twenty-five D-grade Nexus Coins, not one more," Zac countered.

"Ai... Fine," Gaun sighed, but Zac could see how his eyes were practically radiating from the sudden windfall.

Twenty-five D-grade Nexus Coins might not be much for a Hegemon from an established faction, but for a Wandering Cultivator in the Zecia Sector? It was no doubt way more than Gaun had ever held at one time – most Wandering Cultivators were flat broke. Even if they occasionally made decent money exploring Mystic Realms or the wilderness on larger planets, they would be forced to spend it all on cultivation resources and various fees to the local overlords soon enough, making it nigh impossible to accumulate a fortune.

Seeing as they had reached an accord, Zac took out his prepared contract, only adding the two rewards to the settlement. It was quite simple. Gaun would get the rewards, and in return, he wouldn't be allowed to use his own identity or return to this area of Zecia for the next five years. In addition, there was a clause of confidentiality from both sides.

Honestly, it wouldn't be impossible for Gaun to break this contract, but it would require the help of a decently powerful Hegemon. And Gaun would hopefully not dare do something like that since it might anger some unknown force who would know where to find him.

"Why does it feel like I'm selling myself?" Gaun sighed as he imprinted his energy onto the contract.

"Well, consider it a testament to your reputation that someone wants your identity," Zac smiled as he handed Gaun a cloak with the same kind of function as his own-attention averting treasure. "Now, come with me. I need to learn some things that are not covered in the missives."

The wandering cultivator wordlessly nodded, and the two teleported back to the side gate from where Zac led Gaun to a mansion he had rented. There, Zac spent the better part of a day going over Gaun's background, mannerisms, contacts in the area, so that his disguise wouldn't be exposed the moment he stepped onto the recruitment station.

Finally, Zac had everything he needed, and the two sat in front of each other in the courtyard. However, Gaun had now taken on another face. His skill was much worse than [Million Faces], but it was good enough for a quick trip to the Teleportation Station. Meanwhile, Zac looked almost exactly like Gaun had before. Looking into the mirror, couldn't help but marvel at his own handiwork.

His previous attempts at subterfuge had varied from unsuccessful to downright disasters, but Zac felt that he might actually have a shot this time around.