

## The Fall 867

### Chapter 867: A Seed Returned

"Are you ready?" Zac asked.

"I- Yes?" Vai hesitated as she gripped her tome tightly.

"Alright then," Zac grinned. He took a step forward and the chamber was flooded with unbridled killing intent. "Then try to survive."

With that, he flashed forward with [Earthstrider] as his eyes bored into Vai's. She had visibly paled from the onslaught of his bloodlust, but Zac still sensed she managed to infuse her tome with Cosmic Energy. The next moment, one Vai turned into ten, and space started to twist refract throughout the whole room.

It was a simple spatial manipulation that essentially turned the area into a labyrinth, where the cardinal directions lost their meaning as they were turned into a Gordian knot. However, Zac only smiled and punched to his left. A tunnel was forced in the twisting corridor of space exposing one of the nun's avatars who looked at him agape.

Zac took another step with his movement skill to appear right in front of her, and his axe was already descending toward her head.

"Eep!" Vai yelped, her eyes wide with horror as she looked at the incoming edge.

"Well, it's better, I guess?" Zac muttered as he stopped his swing mid-motion. "But the aura of your true self was exposed when setting up the labyrinth. And you stopped moving after erecting it, making it effortless to figure out where you were. If you swapped places with one of your doppelgangers the moment the trap was set up, you would have been able to avoid me a lot longer. Also, the trap you set up was beautifully crafted, but all that effort is wasted in front of a Beast King. Remember, keep it simple and keep moving."

This was their fifth training session together, and even if Vai's performance was pretty wretched, it was still a lot better than the first time they fought. Zac had quickly realized that Vai barely had any combat experience at all. It turned out she hadn't been in a single life-death battle in her whole life, and his raw killing intent had been enough to render her unconscious.

When asked, Vai explained she had reached peak E-grade when only 28. From there, she had spent the next fifty years trying to progress using the solitary methods of the Void Gate devotees. Unfortunately, she had hit a brick wall when reaching for Hegemony, and the Void Gate wouldn't pay for their people's cultivation forever if they didn't progress.

Finally, she had been forced to take up a job as an assistant at some research facility, and that was where she had worked for the remainder of her life, slowly rising in ranks until she became a proper researcher. During that time, she hadn't fought a single time, so the little she knew from her cultivation days had slowly been lost.

By now, she had essentially discarded her identity as a combat class altogether, and half of her skills had been replaced with ones that would help her with her research.

That's why Zac had discarded any idea of trying to teach her some basic footwork or to avoid danger and instead settled on the basic method he had used on Emily long ago. If he could get her used to his killing intent, she hopefully wouldn't freeze like a deer in headlights the moment a beast came barreling toward her.

During their second training session, Vai had barely managed to stay conscious, but she had still been so unnerved that she had completely forgotten how to use skills or Cosmic Energy. The little nun had simply tried to stumble out of the way while shrieking at the top of her lungs, almost looking like a mortal who had yet to start cultivating.

So that Vai had accomplished this much just a few weeks later could be considered pretty good.

"I'm sorry, I keep coming up short," Vai sighed.

"Don't worry about it," Zac smiled. "You're making progress, and you're probably a lot better compared to the other researchers already."

"Still... Could we go again?" Vai said with a determined expression.

"Sure," Zac nodded.

Like that, the two went a couple of more rounds, where Vai tried to gain some basic experience. But suddenly, the door swung open, and Zac was surprised to see it was Havasa Yrvis, the leader of the second-string defenders, who walked inside. They had spoken a few times by now, and they had even sparred once – and she was the real deal.

She used a spiked hammer as a weapon, and Zac had been afraid she would tear the whole vessel apart when she swung that gnarly thing. In return, she was on the slower side for a hegemon. She was a lot like Billy in that sense, though their personalities were nothing alike, and neither were their Daos.

"Interesting," Havasa said.

"Captain Yrvis," Zac said with a bow. "I figured this was the best way to increase her odds of survival in case something happened."

"You're right," Havasa nodded. "It's too late for her to gain any practical combat ability, but getting anointed in killing intent will at least help her stay conscious during a beast tide. I am more curious about you, and why you have such a dense killing intent. It borders on the unorthodox."

"There's nothing of that sort," Zac hurriedly said. "I'm simply not too bright, so I have spent the past centuries throwing myself against beasts in the wilderness. That's how I've managed to gain the little amount of power I have."

"Mhm," Havasa answered noncommittally before she turned away. "We're going break through in one hour. I suggest you return to your compartments."

With that, she was gone, and Zac turned to Vai for an explanation. However, he found her looking confused as well.

"How odd, it should be a few more days," she muttered. "Has the corona expanded?"

“What’s going on?” Zac asked.

“We’re about to enter the domain of the Void Star, but we’ll have to pass through a very dense spatial film first. It’s very powerful and can leave hidden pockets of spatial energy in your body, which you definitely don’t want to have when entering a powerful spatial field. There has been more than one Void Gate disciple who has suddenly died from a tear opening up from within their body.”

“Great,” Zac muttered.

“Don’t worry, the odds of that happening are quite low, and our compartments have an additional layer of shielding. You are much more likely to die from a beast attack,” Vai hurriedly said.

“You’re not helping,” Zac sighed as he walked out of the sparring room. “So, after we’ve passed through that film, we’ve arrived?”

“Almost. We will have to enter the correct layer, but that will only take a few hours. Thank you for the help these past weeks,” Vai said with a bow. “I didn’t realize I had such a glaring weakness. I will try not to make your job any harder than it has to be.”

“Don’t worry about that and just focus on fixing that anomaly of yours,” Zac smiled. “The sooner we can go back, the better.”

Seeing as they had an hour, Zac walked over to an almost-full viewing deck while Vai returned to her quarters. The Void Star essentially covered their whole vision by this point, a huge glaring wall of blue that consumed everything else. However, there were still no clues to how a star could hold thousands of Mystic Realms – there weren’t any glimpses of anything except fire hiding within.

Neither were there any clues to the film Havasa mentioned they were approaching, so Zac returned to his cabin soon enough. There was no point in tempting fate and getting blasted with a wave of supercharged spatial energies. After all, the barrier had clearly moved out a lot further than Vai expected, so who was to say it couldn’t drift a bit further?

So Zac sat down at the sealed cultivation chamber and started going over his own research instead. Most of Zac’s time over the past three weeks had been spent in his room, where he deepened his understanding of the [Book of Duality]. By now, most of the second chapter was ‘completely’ deciphered, though unlocking the remaining five chapters would no doubt add new layers to what he knew.

As to how long that would take, Zac couldn’t be certain, but he expected at least a year. And that was if he focused solely on the book. Problem was, he had a lot of things on his plate at the moment, even after having put a hold on his Soul Strengthening now that he didn’t have access to the right environment.

The more he had learned from the [Book of Duality], the more he had felt Three Virtues was onto something. The System, and the whole universe for that matter, was based on the concept of balance. And while there were innumerable ways to look at balance, it did seem reasonable that his human side should be life-attuned rather than just... nothing.

Problem was that the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] was not just a Body-strengthening Manual. On the surface, the training method seemed quite simple – there were three different life-attuned and body-

strengthening compounds you needed to prepare, or one of their many replacements. With these compounds, you would then draw a specific array on your body before practicing a certain set of movements while chanting the provided sutras.

It was Heart Cultivation and Body Cultivation mashed into one, and Zac's instincts told him that the Heart Cultivation was a trap. It was based on a completely different path from his own, where he drew strength from his convictions and his goals. Meanwhile, the Heart Cultivation method centered around relinquishing – letting go of the fetters that kept you from enlightenment.

An approach like this wouldn't necessarily turn you into an unthinking arhat, as long as you managed to hold onto your path. But even then, it was only suitable for the type of cultivators who had severed everything in their pursuit of the Dao – family, emotions, desires, and mundane interests. It would strengthen your conviction and connection to the Dao while eroding everything else.

This didn't work for Zac, so he was trying to figure out a way to extract only the Body-tempering component of the technique, and discard the Heart Cultivation. This was easier said than done. It wasn't like he could just skip chanting the sutras. Not only would that throw off the rhythm of the technique, but he could somewhat tell that the actual stances could affect his state of mind as well.

So even though he already had more than enough materials to start the introductory stage of the method, he hadn't practiced it once. Heart cultivation was intangible and elusive, and he feared he wouldn't notice his personality changing until it was too late.

The minutes passed, and Zac finally started to see a change in the cultivation chamber. Normally, you'd only sense the powerful spatial fluctuations outside when visiting the viewing deck, but Zac now found space all around him starting to stir. It was as though his surroundings had come alive, with the walls, ground, and even the air itself dancing with the beat of the cosmos.

At first, it wasn't too bad. But then the pulse came and reality cracked.

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The palace was vast beyond comprehension, looking down at the world with indifference. It held back the endless storm, a stalwart defender that had kept its vigil for an unfathomable number of years. The very air was filled with antiquity and conviction. But few things in this universe were eternal – and the great fortress had seen its fair share of assaults.

Each mark marring its structures was a Dao perfected, each scar the representation of an indomitable will. Even the wrath of the Heavens formed intricate patterns across the walls and the towers, yet they proudly remained standing. Together, the indelible marks formed a tapestry of fate so rich that it beggared comprehension. The loss and destruction this castle had seen were enough to make the heavens cry.

Who had built it, and who had wanted to see it destroyed? And what was the storm that forever drew closer? And what was that mark? The mark looked so-

The sobriety was deafening across the courtyard. It was hollow yet not wanting – not even the Heavens could impugn on its domain. There was no life, but also no death. No conflict, no future, no past. There was just emptiness.

Nine seals. Eight pillars. One destiny.

The white pebbles that made the path leading toward the solitary building were simple and unadorned, yet they made up the basis of the universe. The seven steps at the end of the path held the weight of an era, each one marked with the same solitary brand.

The building atop the small platform was simple, but the aura emanating from within had surpassed the Heavens, surpassed the Dao. It couldn't be defined by the heavenly laws, because it had transcended what should be possible. And it was waiting.

Ultom.

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Mohzius' thoughtfully frowned as he mulled over the messages from his disciples. The Starbeast Alliance was gathering strength while the ancient clans launched massive wars. Even the Sangha and the remaining Apostatic Clans were stirring.

Why now? It was much too early for another ascent. The Heavens were still gathering momentum. But there were few other things that could cause such a stir.

Suddenly, space rippled, and a smile spread across his face as he looked at the sky.

"What's wrong, love?" he asked. "The Heavens will find you if you keep popping in like this."

"It's busy at the moment. One of the pillars is stirring."

"Well, that would do it," Mohzius grimaced as he glanced at the missives in his hands. "This is not a great time for us. What do you want to do?"

"As you said, it's not for us," the Empyrean Throne said. "Perhaps we'll find an opportunity in the future depending on how things turn out. For now, let the others fight it out. The pillars are not so easily seized. Last time, the struggle lasted almost a million years."

"That one was special, though," Mohzius muttered.

"They're all special. Just stay put until I can emerge, and keep little Iz safe from the storm that's coming."

"About that..." Mohzius coughed.

"Old man, what have you done?" a chilly voice growled as the galaxy shuddered.

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"Amitabha, excuse me, brothers," Blessed Fate smiled.

"Off to that decrepit little temple of yours again, brother Fate?" Kendos frowned. "Why not just move down from the mountain? The forest path is growing treacherous. Basto's son almost got gored by a beast of a boar the other day."

"I'm telling you, something odd is going on," Hastus added. "The animals are growing bigger, meaner."

"Amitabha, what will be, will be," Blessed Fate sighed. "One of the heavenly constants is change, but this poor monk still needs to tend to his temple."

The men in the room froze before starting to fade. The happened to the small mountain village, the mountains, the country, and soon the whole world. Tens of thousands of years of history, gone. Billions of lives lived across hundreds of generations. Stars were extinguished and galaxies died out as all creation returned to the origin.

Joys and sorrows. Hopes and aspirations. Suffering and despair. All gone. Remaining was just a golden ocean stretching toward eternity.

"Amitabha, Almsgivers. Born from the heart, returned to the heart. Come, child."

Space shifted, and a small island appeared, on the center of which a small mountain temple stood. Waiting by its gates, stood a rotund halfling.

"Teacher," the child said with a bow when Blessed Fate walked over.

"Just a few dozen millennia have passed, and you are already making progress," Blessed Fate smiled.

"It is all thanks to teacher's blessings, but this one still has a long way to go," Three Virtues said with another bow. "I am still far from creating a world with my heart, let alone a reality."

"Enlightenment cannot be rushed," Blessed Fate said. "What will be, will be. But this poor monk has to confess, I am surprised. This one thought you wanted to keep your incarnations on the outside until your rebirth was complete."

"It could not wait. As expected, teacher was correct," Three Virtues said as he handed his master a small white pebble whose very presence caused ripples to spread across the whole ocean.

A moment later, a golden buddha rose from the depths, its hands joined together in a mighty seal containing the authority of Buddha. Order was restored, and the Dvarapala sunk back to resume its eternal vigil.

"The Kalpa turns as Ultom stirs," Blessed Fate sighed, his eyes trained on the pebble rather than the scene outside. "Are we prepared?"

"A pebble brought out and a seed returned," Three Virtues nodded. "Though I confess, the path teacher chose seems... Precarious. This poor monk fears it will have the opposite effect."

"There are no certainties in life, and our actions might end up accruing Mara. With everything at stake, there are no safe paths down the road," Blessed Fate said with a sorrowful smile. "Even so, we will shoulder the weight. If this useless monk doesn't step through the gates of hell, who will?"