

The Fall 868

Chapter 868: Ultom

Zac felt his soul cry, unable to comprehend what he had been forced to witness. He couldn't think, he couldn't see – his senses were filled with red and the screams of an ancient past. He desperately tried to escape, to scream for help – anything to break the vision that gripped him and was rapidly eroding his mind.

Suddenly, he felt a soothing stream of golden warmth fill him, and his frantically beating heart gradually calmed down. The ancient horror was still there – the comfort that filled him was just a firefly in front of a raging inferno. However, it was as though the vision of the courtyard didn't want to be sullied, and for lack of a better word, it exited Zac's mind on its own as the healing waves spread throughout his body.

Finally, Zac started to gain a sense of his surroundings, though the world was still steeped in red. He tried to clear his eyes, but his hands didn't quite listen to him. So instead, he tried to ask what was going on, but only a slurred groan escaped from his lips.

"Just relax," a low voice said by his side, and Zac arduously turned his eyes to see an elderly man holding his hands over Zac's chest, and a beautiful shimmer was released onto his body.

It was Kantomir, one of the five devotees in the squad who were not researchers. Instead, he was a healer, and a D-grade one at that. Why was he here? Zac tried to force his harried mind to focus, and finally managed to take in what he was looking at.

Blood. Blood everywhere.

Zac was still in his compartment, but no longer inside the cultivation chamber. He was lying in a pool of blood in the middle of his social area, and the remaining splinters of the door to his inner chamber were lying all around him. The walls were covered with large swathes of sanguine red as well – not even the ceiling was spared.

Had he punched himself out of the cultivation chamber in his delirious state? Or had someone broken in to save him? And why had he lost enough blood to paint the whole room red?

"What the- What is going on here?" another gruff voice asked to the side, and Zac recognized the voice to belong to Teo.

Clearly, he was just as much at a loss as Zac himself about the situation. Furthermore, both he and Kantomir were fine, indicating that the thing Zac had just endured only applied to him.

"I- eurh," Zac, trying to force his mind to focus. "I don't know. One minute the walls were started to dance, the next moment I find myself on the floor out here. I might have had a deviation in my cultivation. Did you drag me out of here?"

"I was alerted about your state from the token and found you lying here screaming at the top of your lungs," Kantomir explained before he turned to the Templar captain. "Is it the visions?"

"Visions?" Zac said, trying to look confused as he wiped the blood from his face.

The former wasn't anything odd. The tokens all the wandering cultivators wore contained a tracking array that also monitored one's vitals. However, the second was more shocking. The Void Gate knew about those terrifying visions?

"Enough," Teo said to Kantomir before turning to Zac. "Some warriors, mostly those with Spatial Affinity, are sometimes shown scenes from various layers of the Void Star when met with strong spatial turbulence. Your wretched state might be because you lack affinity with space. Do you remember seeing anything?"

"Nothing," Zac lied with confusion written all over his face. "Seen what?"

"You might have seen one of the Beast Emperors in the depths of the Void Star, prompting the backlash," Teo sighed. "This is our mistake. These things usually only happen in the depth of the Void Star, it must have become more unpredictable than we expected. It looks like completing our mission has become even more important.

"Will this keep happening?" Zac groaned as he slowly got to a sitting position.

"Doubtful. Only you on the vessel were hit when we passed through the barrier, and we haven't had any reports of this being a widespread occurrence. I'm afraid you were just unlucky. I guess it's good to get the bad luck out of the way early?" Teo said with a wry smile.

"Yeah, feels great," Zac grunted.

"Your soul is intact, and your body is free from any foreign Daos," Kantomir commented. "There is a small amount of spatial energy in your body, but it is well within acceptable limits – nothing to indicate this event left any sequelae."

"Try to recover as best you can over the next hour," the Templar captain added as he took out a bottle of pills. "I'll talk to Havasa and have you placed in the inner circle of the formation for the first few days."

"Alright, thank you," Zac nodded.

With that, Teo and the healer left the room, leaving Zac to try and gather his thoughts as he ate a healing pill – one of his own just in case. There had been something slightly off about Teo's explanation, though Zac couldn't say exactly what. Did the Templar know what Zac had just witnessed?

More importantly, just what the hell was that vision? It wasn't a Dao Vision, and it didn't feel like the visions he had seen when awakening his bloodlines or Hidden Nodes. Neither was it a journey of the spirit like when he had met with Be'Zi or her husband.

It rather felt like an invasion. One moment there was nothing, but the next this whole reality had crammed itself into the recesses of his mind, latent echoes that created an unbearable crescendo for someone at the E-grade. And with the power contained in the vision, Zac's very sense of self had been suppressed and replaced by knowledge and impressions that were now out of reach.

But he still remembered the castle – and what was hidden in its center.

The power that the vast citadel exuded beggared Zac's comprehension. He sincerely doubted that even that enormous golem that accompanied Iz Tayn would be able to leave the kinds of markings which

crisscrossed those walls. Even then, the castle couldn't compare to the profundity of that lonesome courtyard.

It was like every grain of sand contained a universe, or at least truths that even surpassed the glimpses of Chaos he had conjured. Who could have built a place like that?

There weren't too many options in that regard. It was obviously erected by a peak faction far surpassing any force in Zecia or its neighboring states. Judging by the sense of antiquity and Zac's current location there was a clear contender; The Limitless Empire. Just like that wandering cultivator had said the day they boarded the ship – The Limitless Empire possessed means that were far beyond their understanding.

That would explain why only he was affected while Teo and the healer were fine. If so, it had to be an important facility of the Limitless Empire to emit that kind of power, completely different compared to the essentially useless scraps that had popped up in Zecia so far. It seemed almost impossible for something like that to appear in this desolate corner of the Multiverse.

But at the same time, Zac wasn't certain. It felt like an obvious conclusion that it was related to his bloodline, but his bloodline hadn't reacted at all, and nothing had changed in his constitution. Besides, even if the truths hidden in the scars on the castle or within the small pebbles of the courtyard were blurry now, he could somewhat tell they weren't exactly related to his origin.

There was a vague sense of connection between him and whatever lurked in the heart of that small pagoda at the heart of the courtyard. However, it was more like that place held a connection to all creation and the Dao itself, rather than holding the answer to the true meaning of the 'Void' in his bloodline.

That unfathomable sense of having surpassed the limits of the Dao raised another possibility, one that was perhaps even more outlandish – was it an Eternal Heritage? Did the castle stem from an earlier era?

Or was he underestimating the profundity of the A-grade? Those people were at the very peak of the pyramid, and someone like Zac didn't have the capabilities to gauge the difference between an Autarch and a Supremacy. It was possible that the castle simply came from some other powerful faction who had fallen during the endless years of the current age.

After all, the Multiverse was nigh-endless, and there were probably extremely powerful factions who existed outside the System's purview. That was doubly true during the start of the System's era when it only controlled a fraction of the domains it had now integrated.

Or was the castle even real?

"Ultom," Zac muttered.

The next moment, his eyes widened in alarm as he looked around with fear. Fate had started gathering around him the moment he uttered the name had been engraved in his mind at the end of the vision. Thankfully, the convergence dissipated soon enough, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief. But that short moment had been enough to leave his back slick with sweat.

It was real – all too real – and just saying the word came with implications.

Zac spent the next hour stabilizing his soul while using [Surging Vitality] to quickly mend the small tears that had appeared throughout his body. Thankfully, the healer's diagnosis was mostly correct, though his mental energy was almost completely drained after witnessing the scene.

Even after one hour, he wasn't any closer to figuring out what was going on or what to do from here. He couldn't bow out now, especially not if the Templar Captain knew more than he let on. It would be counted as desertion, and possibly land him in big trouble. Furthermore, Zac wasn't sure he wanted to leave, even if he could.

It was he who had been shown the scene the moment he entered the Void Star, and Zac believed an opportunity waited for him inside as long as he dared seize it.

The smart thing would probably be to keep his head down and avoid trouble as he completed the task and caught a Worldeater. However, the vision of that lonesome courtyard might as well have been branded onto his soul. And if there was one thing he had learned from socializing with wandering cultivators over the past weeks, it was that opportunities that could change one's providence were few and far in-between.

Most of those he had spoken with had spent centuries desperately fighting and looking for a lucky break, risking their lives over and over. Even then, most of them had very little to show for it except their current levels of cultivation. A few had struck it rich a few times when risking their lives inside wild Mystic Realms, but those kinds of opportunities only lasted so long after paying the entrance fee along with house and board.

Zac knew he had encountered enough opportunities to last a lifetime already, but he knew that the same was true for everyone who had ever reached the peak – he needed to continuously find and seize them if he wanted a shot at Monarchy and above. That was true for everyone, but doubly true for him with his odd constitution and extremely ambitious path.

He didn't delude himself into thinking he could conquer that terrifying citadel, but any random scrap related to that place could probably be considered an earthshattering opportunity for an E-grade cultivator. This was what was required to pursue the peak, the conviction he needed to catch up with his mother. Greatness didn't come from playing it safe, there was no way his goals could be accomplished that way.

His years in the Orom World had pretty much exhausted the momentum and inspiration he had gained from all his previous opportunities, and it was time to dive into the deep end again. Zac didn't care if the vision was shown as part of the System's machinations, a result of his weird heritage, or even a stroke of fate. He didn't even care if his actions or pursuits would have unexpected ramifications for the Void Star or Zecia.

It might be greedy and selfish, but Zac would still face this head-on, win or lose.

Of course, that didn't mean he would blindly rush into the depths of this unknown terrain. It might mean he had to delay his trip to the Million Gates Territory though. There was no guarantee he'd find what he was looking for right away, so he might have to stay on and complete more missions inside the Void Star to search for clues. But so what?

Having come to a decision, Zac could somewhat feel how something had shifted inside him. It almost felt like his heart had sped up and adrenaline coursed through his body, but he knew it was something else. It was momentum, just like when he decided to risk his life for Kaldor's remnant or when he chose to immediately break through to the E-grade upon returning from the Tower of Eternity.

It felt like he was being carried forward by a wave of fate, pushing him further than he would have been able to reach on his own. Still, he let none of this surging show on his face as he finally exited his compartment, looking as good as new after having scrubbed the blood from himself and the compartment.

Right now, he was just Gaun Sorom. Right now, he would stay his hand, until it was time to make his move.

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Perala's eyes shot open as the scar in front of her shuddered. A storm of space was released from her hands, but it was to no avail – an ancient aura permeated the chamber for a few seconds before the scar closed. It felt like her soul had been hit by a hammer, and tears spread all over her body, separating her into hundreds of small parcels of flesh that floated across the chamber.

For a moment, she was nothing, but the void eventually drew her back together. Even then, her white robes were drenched with blood, and she knew she had lost eons of vitality just now. She closed her eyes, but there was no answer to her call. The heart had closed itself off, its beat no longer walking in step her own.

The ramifications were clear, and she shook her head with despair.

"So another pillar is about to be unearthed," she sighed, filled with a sense of weariness and reluctance. "Why here? Why now? It's too early."

She had prayed it wouldn't come to this. Its appearance was important, vital even. But at the same time, the suffering its descent would bring to the Multiverse, to Zecia, and to the Void Gate was inestimable. All these talents that had been raised, how many survive the winds of fate?

Suddenly, she felt a ripple in the void, and she waved her hand as the blood disappeared from her dress. The void was parted by her command, opening a gate through space. Two people stepped through, one warrior and one nun. It was Grand Templar Kalcas and Head Abbess Salvara, the previous-generation leaders of the two branches of the Void Gate.

"Mistress," both said with a bow, their eyes immediately turning to the spot where the scar should have been.

"Is it really...?" the Kalcas asked, his eyes veritably burning as his fighting spirit caused the void to shake.

"Tranquility," Perala urged. "What brought you here?"

"The Void Star just released a massive wave of energy, and we have lost contact with the depths," the Abbess said. "With the marker extinguished..."

"With the unfortunate anomalies that have plagued the Void Star as of late, we will have to make sure it's not a coincidence," Perala said. "But it is likely true."

“Billions of years – so many generations,” the warrior said, his eyes fraught with emotion. “The search, it’s finally over. We will get to see it before we face the Void. We can face our ancestors with pride.”

“There is still a long way to go,” Perala said. “But for now, stop the excavation and stabilize the paths as best we can. If we have managed to latch onto one of its nodes, we can’t lose it again.”

“Of course,” the warrior eagerly nodded. “What about the outsiders and the missions?”

“For now, let everything proceed,” Perala said with some thought. “Many are watching us right now. Besides, we don’t know what triggered the reaction – it might be a result of all the new blood arriving. Surely, we have missed more than one person carrying the bloodline over the eons.”

“What about the inner array?”

“Even if we have lost connection, it should still be operational,” Perala said. “I will head over myself in a moment.”

“Congratulations on finishing the Eternal Vigil,” Salvara said with a deep bow, and Kalcas immediately followed suit.

“Alright, enough of that,” Perala said with a small smile. “Go fulfill your tasks. We have prepared for this for an eternity, we cannot get complacent now.”

The two Monarchs nodded, and a moment later they were gone, having teleported away to activate the Monasteries and the Templar Orders. Perala sighed again as an ancient token appeared in her hand, and she silently looked at the fine engravings for over a minute. Eventually, she stowed away the token again before opening a window in space, showing the Void Star in all its glory.

What should she do to protect her? What could she do?