

The Fall 879

Chapter 879: Uzu

The news about invader influence deep in the Zecia heartlands was shocking, but Zac wasn't as surprised that Uzu had betrayed the Void Gate – few wandering cultivators held any allegiances except to themselves. What did Uzu care about which sects controlled this sector? If these invaders paid well enough, he was probably more than happy to sabotage the Spatial Cortex.

"I've seen your potential. I can introduce you to my contact," Uzu continued when he saw Zac's thoughtful frown. "You wouldn't believe the means of these people. Did you know? Their sector is unified – ruled by a supreme expert at the level of the Eveningtide Asura. Zecia's powers are doomed. Why fight for these corrupt factions that left you to fend for yourself? Join us, and we'll seize a proper place in the new world order."

Zac's eyes thinned at that. A warrior at the level of the Eveningtide Asura? Uzu no doubt referred to an Asura at the level of when he came back to Zecia for vengeance rather than his far-greater power as the Twilight Lord, but it was still extremely daunting. That kind of power could not be nurtured on the frontier. Even if you encountered some unique opportunity and rose above everyone else – why stay in the frontier?

Someone like that had a shot at Autarchy and should have set off for greener pastures.

"They have so many methods – they can even help you reach Hegemony without risking everything," Uzu continued with an enticing smile.

"Hegemony without risks?" Zac muttered thoughtfully.

The Law of Balance demanded an equilibrium of risk and reward. Of course, that was not to say the law couldn't be broken. The impossible could be made possible as long as you were willing to pay the price. The Great Redeemer was living proof of that, where he progressed through the sacrifice of whole planets. But that was the ways of dark unorthodoxy, a path of evil.

The deep scar left behind by Havasa's swing earlier suddenly got a new meaning. That attack should have left him half-dead, yet Uzu was standing here with a decently stable aura. But from within that wound, a rank and sinister aura leaked out, and Zac could barely spot some dark-red strings keeping Uzu together, pulsing with malevolent power. Was this ability a gift from his new benefactors?

Were these invaders Unorthodox Cultivators? But if what Uzu said was true, that would mean the whole sector followed an unorthodox path. Was that even possible? Wouldn't the System strike down such a place, either directly or through lucrative quests?

"Creating a real Cultivator's Core is my only goal right now," Zac eventually said, drawing a gasp from behind. "What do you want in return?"

"Simple – kill the girl. She is dead weight, and she cannot be allowed to go back," Uzu shrugged. "That way, you prove your allegiance as well."

"Ai," Zac sighed as he glanced at the little researcher, who fearfully shrunk back behind the tree.

The next moment, she was thrown away by one of Vivi's vines as an almost invisible sword beam shot out from a ring on Uzu's finger. Zac looked like he barely managed to stumble out of the way, but the ground beneath him cracked as he shot toward the Hegemon with a ruthless gleam in his eyes.

"Fool," Uzu laughed as the massive broadsword appeared in his hand.

Zac had hoped to keep Uzu talking a bit longer, even if he knew the Hegemon was only stalling to recover his grievous wound. Zac had monitored Uzu since he tried to trick people into Hako Lake, and he had long since realized that his open facade hid a sinister schemer. Of course, until now, Zac had thought his devious methods were only meant to take out the competition and gain a larger share of the bounties.

Now, it was clear he played an even bigger game. Zac wondered if even his greedy personality was a ruse to hide his true intentions. In either case, Zac knew there was no way Uzu's offer was genuine. Why would Uzu risk his payout for a stranger, and potentially introduce someone these invaders would value more than him? He only wanted to sow a seed of doubt to create an opening.

Unfortunately for him, he was talking with Zac rather than the real Gaun Sorom, and the promise of finally breaking through only served as an early warning rather than a distraction. Zac didn't need the help from some other random frontier sector to progress, and neither would he kill a friend just to join some shady organization of traitors.

Besides, his effective Luck was over 1,500 by now. He had sensed a subdued danger from the Hegemon since he appeared, a warning signal that had turned into a siren the moment he surreptitiously activated the offensive treasure on his finger.

Cascading waves of killing intent emanated from Zac's body and the common axe in his hand was replaced by [Verun's Bite]. The mission had failed and most of the squad had probably died. Stuck in this Mystic Realm with a hostile Hegemons and invaders lurking about, Zac knew the time for stealth was over. It was time to get back to his roots – pure unadulterated violence.

Uzu seemed a bit surprised at the density of Zac's killing intent, but he still maintained a confident demeanor. Even if he was wounded, so was Zac. And one was a true Hegemon while the other had failed core. A storm of blades shot toward Zac as Uzu swung his broadsword, creating a cone of utter desolation that continued for hundreds of meters.

Zac had no time to worry about Vai at the moment, but he figured she'd be fine considering she made it here in one piece. A storm of leaves spread out from his body as Zac released a horizontal swing. [Nature's Edge] was not only imbued with the Branch of the War Axe this time, but also the Branch of the Kalpataru in one of his self-made Dao Braids.

The combination resulted in a terrifying force that effortlessly warded off the innumerable blade beams inside Uzu's attack.

"Wh-" Uzu exclaimed with surprise at the unexpected strength in Zac's attack.

But Zac wouldn't give the man any time to adapt, and clouds of dense life and death were unleashed with two rapid swings. The Abyss and Arcadia made their appearance and conjured the signature delimitation that cut through everything as it flew toward the Hegemon. Uzu had just been about to

soar into the air, but Zac's Branch-empowered [Rapturous Divide] forced him back on the ground as he countered with a herculean swing of his own.

His broadsword was covered in a radiant swordlight as it blocked the incoming spatial divide, and Zac was slightly surprised that Uzu managed to perfectly block it. However, Uzu's face turned a shade of green as bursts of blood shot out from his open wound. Blocking Zac's strike had clearly worsened his condition.

More importantly, the skill had kept the Hegemon landlocked. If Uzu took to the skies, the odds of Zac killing him were pretty low. Competing with skills at a distance against a Hegemon wasn't a good idea – even a recently ascended D-grade cultivator like Uzu should have at least one or two D-grade skills that could make proper use of his enormous energy pool.

But now, Zac was already upon him, having forced the man into a melee – Zac's forte. The air screamed with keening bloodlust as Verun left chaotic whirlwinds in its wake, the axe heading straight for Uzu's head while Vivi's vines attacked Uzu from the flanks like bloodthirsty packs of hyenas.

It felt like the cage that kept him restrained over the past month had finally been broken apart, and both his soul and Verun sang with freedom as Zac entered his Evolutionary Stance. Vivi's vines were already stabbing at Uzu's vitals while Zac's unpredictable barrage completely overwhelmed a flustered Uzu who found it difficult to deal with the surprising amount of force contained with every swing.

Suddenly, Uzu threw away his cumbersome broadsword as two thinner scimitars appeared in his hands. His large and heroic swings were replaced by a ruthlessly efficient technique where his two arms felt like six. His two swords seemed to work independently from one another, creating an unpredictable tempo as Uzu tried to break through Zac's stance.

The technique was leagues beyond what he'd showcased over the past month, proving once more there was more than met the eye to this cultivator. However, Zac felt it was just a small delay of the inevitable – even if Uzu's technique showed both proficiency and experience, he still was barely in the formation stage.

If the Hegemon had a vastly superior attribute pool, it would have been one thing, but Zac guessed his own effective attributes were actually higher. Uzu's raw strength was noticeably worse, but his speed was slightly better. And since Uzu no doubt was a more conventional warrior without a slew of attributes to prop him up, it meant his other stats were significantly lower.

Uzu's real advantage lay in his vastly superior Energy Reserves, but how could Zac let him make use of that? His [Cosmic Gaze] was continuously running, and Uzu's every attempt at activating skills was met with a near-death experience that forced him to abort and respond. Uzu had still managed to avoid any killing blows, but his face was locked in a pained grimace as smaller cuts kept joining his big wound.

Zac received the occasional cut himself, but he didn't care. He was swept up with the joy of returning to his path. Every moment his technique was reborn, creating something better suited to break through Uzu's defenses. Zac's soul surged with every swing, and he once more felt that mysterious state of harmony as his Dao spread through the framework of his [Thousand Lights Avatar].

But a sudden pang of immense danger broke Zac's rhythm, and he instinctively dove to the side just as a thorn filled with malevolent energy struck out from the wound in Uzu's chest. Zac narrowly avoided the

ambush, but by that time he realized he was in trouble. During their fight, Zac had pushed Uzu further and further back, but it looked like that was a planned retreat by the Hegemon.

Unbeknownst to Zac, the massive broadsword has silently floated up into the air and was now hovering right above him as Uzu had created some distance.

“Die!” Uzu roared as the sword shattered, turning into a pillar of terrifying sword energies.

Zac was extremely surprised – the broadsword Uzu had used for so long was an offensive treasure rather than a conventional blade by the looks of it, one instilled with a powerful Sword Intent Zac doubted belonged to the wandering cultivator. He suddenly found himself under tremendous pressure from the combined domains of Uzu and the self-destructed sword.

Even with the drastic turn, Zac wasn’t overly worried as a golden laurel appeared on his head. The dusky Mystic Realm was illuminated in empyrean splendor as the defensive domain of [Empyrean Aegis] swallowed not only Uzu but the whole descending beam of empowered Sword Intent.

Uzu ferociously growled as he unleashed two cross-slashes with his scimitars, but his eyes widened as he suddenly stumbled. Zac inwardly snickered, seeing that the man’s feint had backfired. It was the immense suppression brought by the golden domain – the Hegemon had actually tried to fly away rather than attack. Therefore, his circulation of energy had prompted the defensive domain of [Empyrian Aegis] to knock him back down.

By this time, the beam of Sword Intent had already descended, its unyielding latent will forcing its way through the golden domain. Even then, Zac didn’t bother with it as he lunged toward his enemy before he figured out he could force his way through the restrictions. A moment later the beam descended like heavenly judgment, swallowing Zac whole.

Deep tears stretched for thousands of meters in every direction as the beam exuded a terrifying cutting intent, and space itself shuddered as it was on the verge of breaking apart. It was impossible to see what was going on within, but the savage energy waves proved it was an unrelenting meatgrinder. One of the golden pillars of [Empyrean Aegis] immediately crumbled as cracks spread across the second.

At this time a bloodied Zac crashed out from the beam, his eyes giving no hint of pain as a flickering golden barrier around him died out. Uzu was dismayed to see Zac survive his finishing blow, but he could only keep going. But by this point, Zac was already right in front of Uzu again, and the four vines of Vivi wrapped around the Hegemon’s arms, temporarily locking them in place.

Uzu quickly broke the vines apart, but [Verun’s Bite], now illuminated glowing sanguine runes and two Dao Branches slammed into his shoulder. A barrier containing hints of the Dao of Swords appeared to shield the Hegemon, but it broke apart in an instant. The barrier shattered, leaving Zac with another set of shallow wounds as the shield turned into an attack.

Even after the surprise attack, the edge of Zac’s Spirit Tool continued unabated until it bit into Uzu’s body. A thick calcified layer appeared on his skin at the last moment as a second layer of defense, but it was nothing in front of Zac’s furious momentum. The Branches of Kalpataru and War Axe were empowered by [Spiritual Void], and Verun itself was imbued with its runes for sharpness and heaviness – the swing contained the power to cut through almost anything at the moment.

A pained groan escaped Uzu's lips as Zac finished what Havasa started – a second deep scar ran from shoulder down to his hip. With Havasa's attack, a gory 'x' had been carved into Uzu's chest, but Zac's attack bit far deeper – it cut through the Hegemon's whole body, including his Cultivator's Core.

A second lightning-quick backhanded swing destroyed Uzu's head as well, a lesson engraved into Zac's body after his time in the Orom World. A tremendous surge of energy entered Zac's body, proving that this was not another trick. Uzu was well and truly dead, and his maimed and bisected body fell onto the ground leaving a panting Zac above.

Zac ate another Healing Pill as he thoughtfully looked down at the fallen warrior. After his abrupt victory over the Raun Ghost King, this battle was a good reminder that no real Hegemon was a weakling. Even a wandering cultivator like Uzu had a couple of last-ditch measures that were quite lethal. For example, his Peak-quality [Empyrean Aegis] had barely managed to protect him from the Sword Intent Uzu had sealed in his weapon.

There was also that thorn that Uzu had released from within his body, which felt even scarier. That malevolent energy had felt extremely threatening. Zac would probably have been grievously wounded if it managed to stab his forehead as Uzu planned. But now that was over with, and Zac began his customary looting by snatching a bloody Spatial Ring from Uzu's finger.

He kept searching through pockets for anything of value or anything that could shed some light on these unorthodox invaders. However, a sudden pang of danger screamed for him to watch out, and he urgently shot backward with [Earthstrider].

At the same moment, a gristly explosion erupted from within Uzu's corpse, completely destroying his body. From within his chest, a tangle of hundreds of malevolent thorns burst out, and sharp spears shot out in every direction. To Zac's horror, the attack was far quicker than he was, and he felt a sharp pain as one of the spurs dug into his gut.

A storm of malevolent energy flooded his body, and it looked like the other parts of the tangle rapidly withered away. Zac had no idea what this thing was, but it acted like a parasite trying to swap hosts. For an instant, Zac felt himself unable to even breathe as the foreign energy somehow sealed his movements and circulation.

But from within, a ferocious thud of ancient voracity echoed out from his heart as [Void Heart] woke up with newfound vigor.

The node had undergone a subtle change after swallowing the mysterious light released by the Seal of the Left Imperial Palace. It never spat anything back out as it did with tribulation lightning. Instead, it grew slightly larger.

Now, it emitted a stronger pull than it ever had before, while [Purity of the Void] similarly released a cleansing pulse with more efficacy than ever. The combined effort of the two temporarily broke the seal on Zac's body, and he urgently conjured a bladed leaf to cut off the thorn before it transferred any more of its energy into his body.

The parasitic tangle tried to reattach to Zac, but it was withering away rapidly. It looked like it couldn't survive for long on its own, and a moment later it was gone. Meanwhile, Zac saw a small brand appear by his Specialty Core, formed by the malevolent energies that had managed to invade his body. But it

didn't even have time to properly form before it was broken apart and swallowed by [Void Heart], extinguishing the threat before it had a chance to take root.

There was still some energy left in his body, but it had lost direction after that brand broke. Some of it was eradicated by his Daos, while the rest was dealt with by his nodes. Just half a minute later, it was completely removed from his body. Zac breathed out in relief, but he also felt a bit reproachful over his mistake. Death could really come at any time and in any form in the Multiverse.

With the body destroyed, there was nothing left to investigate, and Zac turned around to see Vai running toward him with panic in her eyes.

"It's a blood curse! I'm so sorry. Because you wanted to protect me, you were afflicted by this horrifying thing!" Vai cried with tears pooling in her eyes.

She immediately started rummaging through her Spatial Ring, and one odd contraption after another appeared. "Try to fight the pain, and try not to move – it will slow it down. I'll try to form a small spatial tear inside your body. According to our research, if I can destroy the main seal quick enough, it will not be able to take root."

"No need, I'm fine," Zac said as he took a step back, prompting the frenzied Vai to look up with confusion.

"You-You're not in pain? You can move?" she blurted, her eyes glazing over from confusion. That's... Impossible."