

## The Fall 892

### Chapter 892: The Unyielding River of Fate

"You thought you could subvert the unyielding river of fate? Chaos might be able to hide you from the Heavens, but not from me. Twice now, you have fled from me. There will not be a third."

Behind Iz, six radiant wings slowly fluttered, their gentle movements incinerating the very fabric of the unstable Mystic Realm. Not only that, but the [Five Pillars of Absolution] formed a circle around her two captives, illuminating the area with her Dao and conviction.

"What do you have to say?" Iz asked, her eyes searching for any clues in their faces.

"I- Ah, it sounds perfect?" a wretched-looking cultist said with an eager nod. "Perfectly befitting the celestial poise of your Eminence."

"No feedback? Nothing bad?" Iz asked with an expressionless face.

"Mistress, you are perfect, like a radian-" the man eagerly nodded, but he didn't get any further as smoke suddenly filled his mouth.

An instant later, the empyrean flames had swallowed him whole, not even leaving ashes behind. The disgusting parasite didn't get a chance to escape either, with the cleansing fires purging it from the world.

"What about you?" Iz asked as she turned to the other man.

"I- ah? What?" the Hegemon stammered, his face covered in sweat as he looked at the spot where his companion once kneeled.

"How does it look?"

The man hesitated for a second before he grit his teeth and spoke up. "What my colleague said was true, but he missed an important aspect that your Eminence might have overlooked."

"Oh?" Iz asked curiously.

"This poor one has never seen anything that could compare to the beauty and profound power your Eminence exudes, but it does look a bit odd how you are hovering just above the ground. I would suggest either making sure both are in the air when you trap your target, or that you increase your elevation slightly. That way, your Eminence can also look down on them as you should," the man said, looking at her with hope in his eyes.

"Elevation? How about this?" Iz said as she rose a few meters into the air.

"Perfect," the man hurriedly nodded.

"Thank you. If fate wills it, you can return to your people," Iz nodded as she said as the pillars dissipated.

"Thank you, thank you," the cultist said with a deep bow, confusion turning into relief upon seeing that the Templars made no move to intervene. "I will not disturb the rest of your Eminence any further."

With that, the Hegemon flashed away, disappearing among the endless clouds a moment later. Iz nodded as she deactivated her skills, feeling she was one step closer to her imagined outcome.

“This... That man was a captain of the infiltrators,” a hesitant voice said as the leading Templar walked up to her side. “Him being allowed to return will be detrimental to this sector.”

“I promised, so he is fated to live,” Iz shrugged.

“This... Is problematic,” the captain eventually said after a pause.

“Are you questioning the decisions of the young miss?” the five-legged boulder growled as flames covered the sky. “The members of the Vigil have truly grown audacious here on the untamed frontier.”

Iz looked on with some helplessness at her ward’s umpteenth eruption over the last month. How was she supposed to adventure with this overprotective guardian constantly at her side? Back then, Iz had felt a fresh gust of freedom upon learning that the inner regions of this curious anomaly had become too unstable to house Peak Hegemons, let alone Monarchs.

Who could have guessed Kvalk actually had a skill that would allow him to detach a hand and turn it into a clone? Iz couldn’t wait for when they found Mr. Bug. She could picture it – her ward would try to restrain their actions, and she had seen multiple examples of how that turned out when that man was involved. Freedom and adventure were just around the corner.

But for now, she would have to play peacemaker, which was a novel feeling on its own. These people didn’t know her background, only that she was someone important who the Void Priestess had tasked them to guide. Iz hadn’t realized how differently people looked at her and treated her when they weren’t saddled with the knowledge she was a Tayn.

“One straggler will not change the course of destiny, even if he has some providence,” Iz said after some thought. “Him reporting my presence here might even help curtail the advances of these unorthodox infiltrators. More importantly, a calamity has entered your Void Star. The wheels of chaos have already been set in motion.”

“If mistress Tayn could enlighten us about the nature of this calamity, we might be able to provide better assistance,” the captain hesitated. “We cannot interfere with some things, but we are happy to help in other matters.”

“It is not my place to tell you,” Iz said with a shake of her head. “With him involved, who knows how fate will swing. I don’t want to drag the Vigil into this accidentally. Let’s just head to the next realm.”

“Of course,” the captain nodded. “I should tell you – we have already entered the inner half of the Void Star. With the damage caused by the invaders and some other events, we will not be able to take any more shortcuts. Not only that, our maps are not as reliable as before, so finding our way might be difficult.

“The Terminal Disciple of the Void Priestess and some of our elites should be close-by,” the leading nun added. “She might be able to help with your quest.”

“Perhaps, if we run out of options,” Iz slowly nodded before she looked at the horizon with a smile. “But we are close; I can feel it.”

"If you say so, young miss," the captain slowly nodded, and the group set out again.

However, the golem held her back, prompting Iz to look at her guardian confusedly.

"Young miss, I need to remind you of your task," Kvalk said when the others were out of earshot.

"Meeting up with your friend is fine, but this journey is contingent on your promise to Lord Mohzious. Having passed the first watershed is proof Ultom has deemed you worthy, and you can no longer back down. There is a high chance you will be pitted against that acquaintance of yours – for real."

Iz sighed as she opened her quest screen again.

"Flamebearer of Ultom," Iz muttered. "This is a bit troublesome."

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The path flickered as the array deactivated, and Zac stumbled back into the hidden cave, his face a green mask of pain and nausea. Over the past couple of days, the anxiety over the sudden pulse had become too much. Zac eventually opted to see if he could forge a path through the toxins with the help of [Void Zone] and his constitution, just like he had in the depths of the Twilight Chasm.

The good news was that the beasts outside had long since returned to their slumbering state, where they conserved their energy wrapped together in a ball of horror. The bad news was that he had severely underestimated the Undrusian Spring.

"Ai-" Vai screamed as she rushed forward.

"Don't touch me; I'm toxic," Zac said with a hoarse voice as he stumbled to one of the rooms they didn't use. "I'll be fine in a bit."

Zac couldn't believe how virulent the waters still were. Not even his Draugr Constitution was a match, and the toxins had flooded his body far quicker than his Hidden Nodes could purify them. Not even [Void Zone] was of any help since most of the poisons were actual compounds rather than some energy. It did weaken it by blocking out the Dao, but that wasn't enough for him to withstand the onslaught.

Thankfully, he had realized the danger pretty quickly and had jumped back into the quicksilver in time. But there was no doubt about it – no matter how anxious he was about the sudden ripple, there was nothing he could do about it.

Ten hours later, [Purity of the Void] had finally cleansed a good deal of the poisons that had snuck into his body, while [Void Heart] had turned another chunk into pure energy while leaving large amounts of toxins in his blood. Thanks to [Purity of the Void], Zac rarely had to exsanguinate his blood any longer, but this time there were simply too many toxins.

So Zac cut open his arm with his axe and let a pool of acrid blood form next to him, which caused Vai, who had anxiously waited in the distance, to scream with horror.

"What are you doing?!" Vai screamed as she scrambled over, a vat of cauterizing salve already in her hands.

"Oh, sorry," Zac smiled as he incinerated the blood with a talisman. "I forgot you were there."

“W-What are you doing?” Vai stuttered. “Don’t give up on life. The toxins are painful, but you should recover in a week or two.”

“The toxins?” Zac laughed. “I’ve removed them already. It wasn’t as bad as I first thought.”

“What? There’s no way, I saw you,” Vai exclaimed as she looked at the burned patch on the ground.

“The Udrusian Spring is not a blood poison. And you are already recovered? How is this possible?”

“You should have realized I’m pretty resilient by now,” Zac shrugged.

“Is it the same as what protected you from the blood curse?” Vai asked curiously. “Is it? Your bloodline?”

“It’s rude to look into other people’s secrets,” Zac snorted as he poked Vai’s forehead.

“Fine,” Vai muttered. “It was just academic curiosity.”

“Well, we won’t be leaving this place early, that’s for sure,” Zac grunted.

“I still don’t understand why you did all this,” Vai muttered.

“Just getting the lay of the land,” Zac smiled.

There was no simple way to explain the gnawing anxiety after that additional pulse. Even if he was making decent progress on his [Void Vajra Sublimation], it was hard to concentrate when he didn’t know what was going on. With every sign pointing toward the invaders looking for the remnants as well, a sudden change didn’t feel like a good thing.

Still, his short outing had proved there was nothing to do about it. There was a reason not even the venomous Beast Kings dared traverse the Undrusian Sea right now. So even if Zac was reluctant, he could only nicely stay put and keep working on his research. At least the short outing had allowed him to put the matter aside. If he hadn’t gone out, he would have constantly been worrying whether he was making a mistake not leaving early to find the next piece of the seal.

The days passed as Zac continuously cycled between cultivating the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] for inspiration and meditating on his own direction for Heart Cultivation. The more he experimented, the more he believed he was on the right track. The solution to swapping out the Heart Sutras had to be forming authentic expressions of the Void with Void Energy.

It was a combination of forming the right truths in his heart and mirroring them with his Void Energy. That should elicit the same harmonization that the original version used, allowing for his body to properly integrate the Life-Attuned energies before his Hidden Nodes gobbled them up.

The problem was – what was true? Struggle as he might, he couldn’t create anything that filled him with the sort of certainty he’d felt when going through Three Virtue’s mental gauntlet. Still, he was rapidly deepening his understanding of both Heart Cultivation and the method in general, which would be immensely helpful down the road.

Not only that, but Zac even got to enjoy some of the benefits that made the Sangha’s methods so desirable for elites – the Heart Tempering. Repeatedly rejecting a boundless heart was a form of cultivation on its own, and Zac felt his convictions gradually growing more solid. After just a couple of

days of practice, he no longer needed to use [Void Zone] to reset his mental state and heart after each practice.

This was also a great hint of what was to come and another reason to keep the Heart-aspect intact in the [Void Vajra Sublimation]. After taking on the previous set of remnants, he realized that a strong soul wasn't enough to ward off their subtle influence. But with this additional form of cultivation, he would shore up his final weakness and hopefully pass the Atavism that A'Zu and Be'Zi had warned him about.

The only downside with the repeated practice was losing purified Creation Energy every time he experimented. Just like some of the purified motes of Oblivion nurtured his soul, so did crumbs of Creation enter his cells. Unfortunately, when he was cultivating the [Boundless Varja Sublimation], these motes were swept up, which meant they also got expelled by the [Void Slate]-concoction.

Then again, that could be seen as good news since it proved the Creation Energy could indeed help boost the speed of body tempering, something that was extremely important considering he was behind schedule on that front. The quicker he could push his constitution to something that matched his Draugr body, the faster he could head to the Perennial Vastness and work on his Cultivator's Core.

Like this, Zac completely lost track of time as he dug deeper and deeper into the secrets of the Void and the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation]. But finally, a deep rumble that shook the whole hidden cave dragged him out of his reverie. Zac immediately walked out of his room, just in time to see Vai emerge from her seclusion as well.

"These vibrations..." Vai muttered. "It must have started."

"I guess that's it, then," Zac grunted as he wiped the paste from his body. "Get ready to head out."

"What!" Vai exclaimed. "You read the reports. After the Undrusian Spring, a lot of treasures have been born or evolved thanks to all that released energy."

"You're only making my argument stronger," Zac commented and received an annoyed wave in return.

"There will be a melee of millions of energy-starved beasts outside," Vai said with a roll of her eyes. "We should wait for them to fight it out and claim their prizes before heading out. We won't even make it to the waystation if we go out now."

Zac was reluctant, but he knew Vai was right. "Alright. One more day. That should be more than enough time for the beasts to tire themselves out."

Vai looked like she wanted to barter for more time, but she eventually gave up on the idea. Instead, she headed over to the laboratory. She didn't squeeze in some more time for research, but she instead started cleaning the place and putting everything back in order. Zac wasn't quite so dutiful and instead returned to the room he'd spent the last month inside.

With time running out, he didn't experiment with the [Void Vajra Sublimation] any longer. He had already reached an impasse, where he simply couldn't figure out how to form the 81 Truths of the Void. Practicing the method any longer wouldn't bring him any closer, and it would only increase the risk of getting entrapped by the sutras.

At least he was mostly sure of the direction he needed to take. Forming arrays with Void Energy to match those he painted on his body was a dead end. Vai's solution was far better; he needed to create representations of the Void with Void Energy and instill them with his conviction that they were true.

It was just like his insights related to the Dao of Conflict he gained under the Stele of Conflict. Purpose was the key – it could change everything. It could make true false, and false true. But to take this step, he either needed to gain an epiphany or set aside years, perhaps decades, to find an answer.

But just because he didn't experiment any further with his Body Tempering Method, it didn't mean he would just laze about. Instead, he started up his Soul Cultivation for the first time in a while. There was no time to set up one of the extravagant arrangements, but his goal wasn't to maximize his gains.

Zac always felt refreshed and clear-minded after cultivating his soul, and he believed it would help stabilize his condition after the past month's experiments. Zac soon got lost in the mysterious transformations and trajectories of Life and Death in his mind until the better part of a day had passed. After that, he simply closed his eyes and took the first proper nap in weeks.

Some time later, a shuffling sound woke him up, and he found Vai entering his compartment.

"Why do you keep a statue of a man next to you when you sleep? Who's that?" Vai asked as she looked at the alabaster monument to Yrial's beauty skeptically.

"It's my teacher," Zac coughed as he stowed away the statue with some embarrassment. "He's a bit eccentric, but the statue has unique effects that speed up my cultivation and stabilizes my mind."

Vai hesitantly nodded and instead turned to the large crystal. "I've never seen such a big [Mind's Eye Agate]. It must be worth a fortune. Can you really get this many treasures from adventuring?"

"If you're foolhardy enough," Zac said with a wry smile. "Is it time?"

"A day has passed," Vai nodded.

"Alright, perfect," Zac said. "Let's set out. I'm curious to see how things have changed outside."