

The Fall 900

Chapter 900: Some Things Never Change

The whole valley was being dragged to where the altar stood before, and Zac felt a deep sense of trepidation when he glanced at the quickly forming singularity. He could tell it wasn't just the Void on the other side, and neither was it some other realm of the Void Star – there was a sense of antiquity coming from it, antiquity tainted by an ancient madness that would give the remnants a run for their money.

Just being in its presence had made the Cosmic Energy in Zac's body restless to the point he almost lost control of it. Thankfully, the effect lessened the further he moved away from the altar. A moment later, he leaped over the outer gate that served as a demarcation line for the bipedal beasts, ready to fight his way out if need be.

But on the other side, there were no Yetis remaining. The carcasses from his blitz and the spike trap wake were left behind, but the beasts themselves had already escaped. The whole square was already being bent and twisted from the relentless pull coming from the temple, but Zac could still notice there was a new line of annihilation reaching almost halfway across the square.

Within that line, the corpses had turned into new piles of dust, and Zac suddenly remembered the powerful pulse he released upon touching the figurine. It looked like the final pulse had showcased a greater reach and possibly disintegrated all of the Beast Kings who had waited for him at the gate. Or it was also possible they had realized the way the wind blew and left early. After all, they had exhibited an extraordinary level of intelligence for a group of beasts.

Now wasn't the time to worry about the fates of the Yeti, though. The previously impenetrable tiles of the square were being bent and twisted like they were made out of clay, and the enormous valley had almost turned into a tunnel as space itself was being siphoned away. The singularity only grew hungrier, and Zac started to worry if it would even be satiated from just swallowing the valley.

Each step with [Earthstrider] should have allowed Zac to cross hundreds of meters, but space had coagulated. He could only exhibit a third of the effect, which wasn't enough to even offset how much of the square was being dragged into the black hole behind him. But the pull suddenly lessened as Zac released [Void Zone], and the next step he took completely ignored the restrictions placed on the area.

Using his Void Energy in the open like this was a bit risky, but he was out of options. He could sense that he would be swallowed if he stayed behind just a few seconds longer. The unfettered speed of a Void-empowered [Earthstrider] allowed him to shoot out from the collapsing valley in just a moment, cleanly breaking free from the pull as he landed on a cliff overlooking the whole valley.

Behind him, it was like the jaws of a primordial beast were snapped shut as the whole valley was disintegrated. In its stead was a churning darkness that felt like it wanted to consume the universe. But the calamity thankfully didn't spread any further out through the mountain range, though not for lack of trying.

Zac had been prepared to keep running, but nine enormous sigils had appeared at the edge of the valley, each one vaguely familiar. He hadn't seen them in the dilapidated temple but rather on the

parchments lifted from the cultists. That alone wasn't enough to make him feel safe, but he took out one of his copies as he kept running, and it didn't take any time to confirm his hunch.

None of these nine sigils was the one that he had a connection to, but they resembled nine others spread out among the fakes. It really looked like the infiltrators did not only know as much as he did, but perhaps even more. He had no idea what these nine sigils represented, and neither did he understand what the sigils had trapped.

A deep thud from within the heart of the darkness forcibly interrupted Zac's use of [Earthstrider], and a stabbing headache indicated his soul had been wounded as he slammed into a sheer mountain wall. He slammed Verun into the stone to stop the fall as he looked around with bleary eyes.

Only to see a completely changed landscape.

The ball of churning darkness was gone, replaced by an enormous pillar that seemed to cut straight through the whole Mystic Realm. It pierced into the sky like the Tower of Eternity on one end, and Zac could see how it had dug deep into the ground on the other. The pillar wasn't corporeal, but it almost looked like a purple night sky that ran like a river through a tube.

Inside, small motes of lights shimmered like failing stars, and Zac could spot various ruins being dragged toward the sky. It looked tranquil, but Zac's hair stood on end as he sensed its aura. It was not just a river of stars – it was a stream of condensed madness far more dangerous than what he'd sensed back in the temple.

Zac didn't dare look at it for long; it felt like his mind was being invaded. Only by focusing on the sigils that still formed a protective barrier around it was he safe. Not only that, but he felt the sigils contained a hint of the truths he had briefly been in touch with during his epiphany. Part of Zac simply wanted to sit down and meditate in front of this spectacle, but he knew that this was neither the place nor the time.

Those sigils stood strong for now, but that purple sky was simply too ominous. There was no telling what would happen if the sigils failed, so he wanted to be long gone before this thing went sideways. And that was doubly true in case there were infiltrators or Templars skulking about in the mountains.

The dark pillar was hundreds of times bigger than an incursion light, and those things could be seen from miles away. If there really were people in these parts, there was simply no way this display wouldn't attract attention. This wasn't how he wanted to rejoin the Void Gate squads. He needed to create distance between himself and the Left Imperial Palace if he wanted a chance to sneak out unnoticed.

If some elite force from the Void Monastery discovered him absconding with a piece of the seal, then the mutated Ferric Worldeater in his Beast Pouch would be the least of his worries. Perhaps he would have taken the risk if the opportunity was more palpable, but he only got a familiar feeling from the sigils rather than the real thing.

There was also Vai to worry about. He was only a few mountains away from the hiding spot, so chances were she'd been hit by that pulse as well. Or she might even have been implicated by the exodus of the Yeti horde. The thought alone filled him with a sense of foreboding, and Zac swallowed a Soulmending

Pill before he shot toward the mountain cave he had left her in. A moment later, Zac passed through the fake wall, and his heart sunk to rock bottom.

The cave was empty.

The odds of her leaving on her own accord didn't look good – there were a few splotches of blood on the ground. Had her protective bubble run out of power? Or had someone managed to get the drop on her, sealing her movements before she could take it out? Zac desperately looked for clues, and his eyes lit up when he suddenly saw something upon activating [Cosmic Gaze].

There was a small mark of space-attuned Dao right by the exit, its aura clearly belonging to Vai. If he looked at it normally, there was nothing special about the spot. But to his attuned gaze, it looked a bit like a purple streak. It had to be intentional – Vai would have needed to infuse the rock with her Mental Energy for it to stay on like that. She was trying to leave a trail for him.

That alone was extremely good news. Most importantly, she was still alive. Secondly, the little researcher was extremely considerate. If she had thought her captors were too much for him to handle, there was no way she would have left that mark behind.

There was no hesitation in Zac's heart as he set out, his gaze roving through the cliffs and crags in the area. He didn't immediately see anything, but he didn't give up, not even when one of the runes holding back the starry sky broke apart. Zac ignored the inauspicious signal and methodically checked his surroundings as he flashed around in a growing spiral. Finally, he found a second mark a few hundred meters away on a piece of rock jutting out from the wall.

He had found his direction, and he immediately set out. Like this, he followed the clues like breadcrumbs, where some were markings on stones and others were space-infused droplets of blood. Even if he was quickly getting the hang of things, he wasn't sure if he was actually getting closer to Vai and her captors.

They were quite careful and changed direction more than one time, forcing Zac to backtrack and start circling until he could pick up a trail again. Finally, Zac knew he was getting close as a droplet of blood was actually still wet. But the moment hunched down to inspect the drop, he immediately realized there was trouble.

The ground beneath him suddenly disappeared and was replaced by a world of darkness. Zac looked around as he readied himself for a fight, but his opponent was nowhere to be seen. Zac's battle-honed instincts told him in no uncertain terms someone was close, but not even [Cosmic Gaze] could expose their whereabouts. In other words, an assassin.

Zac knew an assassin wouldn't let him prepare, and as expected, the attack was already bearing down on him. A lance of condensed shadows shot toward him from the side, containing enough force to punch a hole through a mountain. The attack didn't exactly look like Ogras' [Shadowlance], and two Dao Branches possibly powered it. However, the resemblance was still so uncanny that it almost made Zac forget to defend himself.

That brief moment of hesitation actually helped him avert disaster. His Danger Sense suddenly did a one-eighty and told him the danger was coming from behind rather than from the lance that was about

to pierce into his chest from ahead. Zac felt like he was looking at a mirror, where he had actually been looking at the mirror image rather than the real thing.

There was no time to sort out the confusion, the lances were moving too quickly. Ultimately, it didn't matter which one was real and which one was fake – just destroy them both and the problem would be dealt with. Zac turned into a blur, and [Verun's Bite] keened with savagery as its edge drew an almost full-circle arc with enough force to shred everything in its path.

Zac didn't celebrate averting the initial salvo. This was obviously a skilled assassin, just like the Faceless assassin he'd fought inside the Tower of Eternity. They were slippery as eels and difficult to kill. More importantly, Zac needed to actually catch them if he wanted to figure out what happened to Vai.

However, Zac was a bit stumped when no second attack came forth, and he found himself standing in the churning mists. Had the assassin actually just left like that? Had he displayed too much power in dealing with that initial salvo?

"Bastard, where did you get that axe?" a hoarse voice said from within the shadows, and Zac felt like he had been struck with a bolt of Tribulation Lightning.

The voice was slightly different, but there was no mistaking it; it really belonged to Ogras. The field of shadows and the shadowlances had felt familiar, but Zac had immediately discarded the possibility it might really be his old companion. There was no lack of shadow-based assassins in Zecia. Even a clan like Azh'Rezak had managed to get their hands on a partial heritage.

But that voice... It was unmistakable, and there was no way some random assassin would know to impersonate it. First of all, no one should know his real identity, making it impossible to impersonate his friends. Or was this all an illusion? Was someone messing with his senses, dragging out his old memories to make him lower his guard?

There was only one way to find out.

"Ogras? Is that you?" Zac asked with a hammering heart as he looked back and forth.

There was no response for a few seconds, but the shadows eventually dispersed to expose a figure warily standing fifty meters away with a banner in his hand that emitted an uncomfortable aura that made Zac think of that starry pillar before. Zac's mind descend into chaos, and words failed him when he saw the familiar face.

It was him. This was no illusion – Zac was pretty much certain of it. It really was Ogras in the flesh. The demon in front of him looked a lot like ten years ago, but there were some noticeable differences. For one, his aura was pretty odd. It was so faint that Zac could barely feel it, yet it gave him some pressure. The demon's body was the same. Even looking right at him, Zac felt like he was staring into empty space.

Something about his presence made Zac's subconscious overlook the demon and his attacks. If not for his extremely honed Danger Sense, he wouldn't have been able to sense the attack coming from behind before. There hadn't been so much as a ripple of energy; the second lance had suddenly just appeared while the first one became a fake.

At the same time, Ogras hadn't become a shade. If anything, his body looked sturdier and more corporeal than when Zac last saw Ogras inside the Mystic Realm. He was still monochrome in scales of

gray though, a side effect after Void's Disciple killed him. Back then, Asshole had taken the place of his heart, which in turn had resulted in a series of unusual changes.

"Who are you, and how do you know my name?" Ogras frowned as he glanced at Zac's axe. "How are you related to that temple?"

Zac's mind was a mess after suddenly running into a familiar face in the heart of the Void Star, but he still had the presence of mind to realize the problem. There was still a risk this was all a ploy, but Zac felt risks be damned as he activated [Million Faces].

"It's me, Zac," Zac said with a wide smile as his face transformed. "Ogras, is it really you?"

Zac had expected to see his own feelings mirrored in the demon's; shock, delight, and confusion. But Ogras' eyes only thinned as he looked at Zac with suspicion.

"More delusions? Are you seeing what I'm seeing? Is it him? Am I still lucid?" Ogras muttered as he looked at Zac with slightly wild eyes, and Zac frowned when he heard a hollow snicker.

The next moment, a wretched-looking spectral goblin appeared out of Ogras' sleeve and flew over to Zac's side. Zac stared down at the ghost with suspicion, feeling a familiar aura on its body; the aura he had sensed in the starry sky and the chasm that had swallowed the temple. An aura of madness and corruption.

Why had this thing come out of Ogras' body? Possession?

"Young man, you have shown great potential to so easily rebuff this wretch. Don't believe what you're seeing – his mind has long since been corroded by the shadow creature in his body. Rescue me, and I'll grant you power you couldn't- Ai!"

The ghost didn't get any further as a Kalpataru-infused fractal leaf ripped him in two. Between Ogras' slightly odd state, and the sinister aura coming from the ghost, Zac figured he was better off swinging first and investigating later. If the goblin was the threat, then problem solved. If it spoke the truth, then better safe than sorry.

With how the sigils of the Left Imperial Palace had sealed the place this goblin probably came from, they were possibly bound to become enemies in either case. And if Ogras really was possessed, then Zac would have to knock the demon out until he could find a purifier or something similar. But Zac's plans were immediately derailed when the ghost reformed, much to Zac's shock.

Even an Eidolon would be hard-pressed to survive a point-blank strike like that, but this little goblin was seemingly unscathed?

"Bastard! Wretch! I should have known! Violent animals, both of you," the goblin swore as he flew into the flag in Ogras' hand. "I hope the Lost Plane swallows you whole."

"Uh," Zac hesitated. "sorry?"

Ogras hadn't made a move yet, but his hands suddenly turned into a blur as he furled up the flag and sealed it with two talismans. Only then did he turn toward Zac. "Who is your mother?"

The sudden shift of topics threw Zac for a loop, but he soon realized it was a test. Only two people from earth knew of Zac's heritage; Ogras and Kenzie. No information report would contain the truth, and a pretender would never get that question right.

Zac hesitated for a moment, but he eventually decided to tell the truth, his heart beating so hard he was almost stuttering the words. "Leandra Atwood, a Technocrat. What were the first words you said to me?"

"I said, 'You natives truly are barbarians, so aggressive,'" Ogras said with a small smile. "I guess some things never change."