

## The Fall 918

### Chapter 918: Flicker of Hope

The weak rustle of leaves formed a tranquil song as the silence stretched on, even though the plants in the inner courtyard had died out eons ago. Replacing the plant-life was a thick layer of ashy dust. It created a paradoxical environment – the utter desolation of eternal autumn mixed with the fresh winds of spring. Fifty by fifty meters, boxed in by ancient stones and an anthracite sky. Emily only had two things for company; her thoughts and the tattered banner hanging from the stele.

The sigil on its surface was simple, yet it held power and profundity beyond anything she had ever heard of. Possibly of anything in the whole sector. It looked like a rising sun, but it carried the breath of the universe. The unending cycle that brought the seasons, that brought life and death.

The Sigil of the Radiant Court.

Emily still couldn't believe she had been accepted when Pro'Zul and Ynaea had both been turned to ash right before her eyes. She still felt like an impostor benefitting from something not meant for her, and she was just waiting for the pulse that would claim her as well. That was part of the reason why she hadn't moved over the past eight months, even if the sprawling castle might hold more treasures. Even if the army was slated to leave for the next sector more than three months ago.

She was afraid to draw unwanted attention, waking up the terrifying power slumbering in this private garden. The other reason was that she simply couldn't. The gates had been sealed shut behind her, and she knew all-too-well just how sturdy those stones were. Even if she struck with all that she had, she wouldn't leave a mark.

It wasn't all bad, though. The energy was both unbelievably dense and filled with meaning, and she was making tremendous progress. The random herbs and baubles she had picked up in her first excursion with the Coliseum was nothing compared to this. The only things of value she got back then were some painful lessons and the ticket to the Million Gates Territory.

Just sitting in front of the banner obviously couldn't compare to those shimmering lights, but it still felt like she was gaining a week's worth of comprehension every day she sat here. And she had a lot of work on. Forming a Supreme Path-bound skill with the help of the three strands of light was just the first step. Creating the Axe Array that would make the most of it required a lot of work, even with the banner helping.

Before she could even begin, she had been forced to digest the truths from the lights. Truths that had completely upended her understanding of synergistic energy, which was the basis of both her supportive skills and offensive ones. Still, she was still just grasping the corners of those truths, and she was getting less and less from the tattered banner. It almost felt like she was extracting the very last drops that it held.

The sky shuddered, for the third time this day, prompting Emily to look up with worry. Was the Mystic Realm really collapsing? What did that mean for her? Would the whole castle be thrown into the void, with her in it? How could she possibly survive something like this? Emily's heart shuddered as her thoughts turned to her squadmates, to Earth. To her family. To Zac.

Would she ever see them again?

No! She wouldn't give up. She was so close now. A little bit more, and the array would be finished. If she were right, it would unleash a terrifying amount of force if used together with [Summer's Squall]. It might even be enough to crack open the gate. So she forcibly pushed any stray thoughts aside, and poured everything into the banner.

And it worked. Three days later, it clicked, and the [Dance of the Five Seasons] was born. The moment everything came together, the banner disintegrated, and a screen popped up in front of her.

[Seal of the Radiant Court (Unique, Inheritance): Form a seal of the Radiant Court. Reward: Become a Lightbringer of Ultom. (1/3)]

Emily looked at the quest with surprise, but she immediately shot to her feet upon hearing a grinding sound. The gates were actually opening, and tears of relief poured down her face as she started running. She didn't spare as much as a glance to the small courtyard that had been her home for the better part of a year. All her thoughts were on escape as she stormed into the corridor, where she made a beeline for the exit.

She wondered what the elders outside would say upon learning that more than 80% of the army had died on the first day inside this deathtrap. Some deaths were unavoidable when scanning a Pocket Dimension for invaders, but this was completely different from stumbling into some nasty environment or frayed space.

Soon enough, Emily reached the first corner where one of the wardens waited, but the fractured golemoid guard didn't react as she closed in on it. Emily breathed out in relief as she flashed past it, but her relief didn't last long. A deep rumble shook the whole castle, and the previously indestructible bricks started to show cracks.

The whole castle was collapsing! Was this her doing? Emily had no way to tell, but she could only urge her legs to run quicker. Why hadn't she created a movement skill instead of a Supportive-Offensive Fusion Skill?! What if she died from rock to head after surviving spatial tears, murderous constructs, and annihilation pulses?

Her panic only grew as the walls closed in on her, but she finally saw the gate leading to the enormous courtyard. The place where they had realized they were trapped, unable to either leave or send a message for help. The place that had eventually been flooded with lance-wielding constructs when the army had opted to not head deeper into the sketchy castle.

The corpses and constructs were gone by the time she barged through the gate. It was completely empty, like it had been scrubbed clean after the battle. She was about to leave through the exit, her eyes widened with alarm when another one of the gates vertiably exploded as a fierce-looking Ogre crashed straight through it with two gargantuan stone axes in his hands.

It was Kan'Kalo, one of the five leaders of the mission, and a member of the Big Axe Coliseum just as she. He looked ready for a tough fight, but he stopped in confusion upon seeing Emily the only other one there.

“Little girl! You survived as well?” Kan’Kalo said with surprise. “I figured you’d get skewered by one of those lance-wielding monstrosities with your embarrassing strength.”

“Wouldn’t die before a fool like you,” Emily snorted in response.

The five-meter-tall ogre laughed loudly in response before another rumble reminded him where they were. “We can’t stay here. Want to ride with me?”

“Sure,” Emily smiled and jumped up on Kan’Kalo’s left shoulder.

Cosmic Energy surged, and Emily’s eyes widened with shock. “You’ve broken through!”

“Was only a matter of time for someone this handsome!” Kan’Kalo boisterously laughed as they flew through the exit, but Emily knew the truth.

This big brute was powerful, but he had been stuck as a Half-Step cultivator for centuries. She might have gotten her hands on the grand prize, but it looked like she wasn’t the only one who had gained from the experience. The enormous castle turned more and more distant as the Hegemon flew through the sky, and she saw one figure after another emerging from various spots.

“Should we wait for them?” Emily hesitated.

“All men for themselves,” the ogre muttered before he hesitantly looked at Emily who wasn’t even as large as his head. “And runts.”

Emily rolled her eyes and a crackling axe appeared in her hand. It released a few arcs of lightning into the clouds before she slammed it right into Kan’Kalo’s head. He almost stumbled in the air, but he soon regained his composure as he flew away with even greater momentum.

“Little brute,” he snorted as a huge eye looked over at her with confusion. “No breakthrough?”

“I got insights instead,” Emily shrugged. “I’ve learned to make an axe array.”

“Fancy,” Kan’Kalo hummed with interest. “Show me later, yeah?”

“Sure,” Emily nodded. “If we get out of here alive.”

“Haha, I’m not dying in this shithole after being stuck for months,” Kan’Kalo laughed, though he hesitantly looked at the rapidly fracturing sky. “The closest exit isn’t that far from here. The real problem is what’s waiting on the other side. Better get ready to hold your breath, brat.”

Emily’s smile turned crooked as she finally remembered how they had arrived. Their squad had found a pathway in the middle of space, far from any planet. Since it emitted strong energy fluctuations, the joint army had erected a temporary platform and sent in Emily’s squad and a few more to perform reconnaissance.

But if the army had left three months ago as they had planned, would they pop out in open space? She didn’t have any Cosmic Vessel, and the famously poor Ogre who carried her obviously didn’t have one either. However, a familiar aura suddenly filled the sky, and Emily’s eyes lit up with relief.

“Teacher!” she shouted, and space was cut apart.

Through the collapsing sky, Warsong emerged, his body reeking of blood and killing intent. He sported a nasty wound across his face that almost seemed to have blinded him, but his aura was stronger than ever.

“What happened to you?” Emily exclaimed, but the axemaster only shook his head.

“Later,” he muttered as he performed a grasping motion with his hand. “This place is about to blow.”

The next moment, twenty more people appeared next to herself and Kan’Kalo, and Warsong immediately turned his heel and dragged everyone out through the entrance he’d cut open. They soon found themselves on the platform the army had erected, though Emily frowned upon seeing it was covered in scars and cracks. A battle had taken place here.

Still, there was breathable air, and the enormous warship floating in the distance still seemed to be in working order. Emily and the Ogre shared a look, and they both breathed out in relief. They had made it. They had survived a certain-death trial.

“We were afraid you had left us behind,” Emily sighed as she climbed down from Kan’Kalo’s shoulder.

“The Mystic Realm was sealed shortly after you entered, but the locked pathway started releasing extraordinary amounts of energy. We figured something big was happening inside, so we chose to change plans,” Warsong said. “Just what happened inside? What was that castle?”

“We got sucked into that place the moment we entered,” Emily grimaced. “Most of us died inside.”

“I expected as much when I saw so few of you come flying out,” Warsong sighed. “Did you learn anything inside? Like who built it?”

Emily described the building as best as she could, with Kan’Kalo adding details of his own. He was actually a lot more helpful than she was, with his knowledge of various architectural styles and materials. He even knew how to roughly determine the age of the ruins by studying the bricks that made up the inner wall.

According to Kan’Kalo, the castle most likely pre-dated the System, meaning it came from the Limitless Empire or one of the factions it warred against. Emily wasn’t very surprised, considering what she’d seen in the vision. That was definitely something belonging to a tyrannical force like the Limitless Empire, and not some little border faction.

Of course, neither she nor Kan’Kalo explicitly said what kind of opportunities they’d encountered inside the castle. Such were the rules of the Coliseum – if you found it, it’s yours. They only detailed the traps and environmental dangers they had seen, though Emily doubted it would matter. The pathway had already collapsed behind them, meaning it was lost to the Void forever.

“I’ll have to talk with the others,” Warsong slowly said after they’d recounted their experience. “It might be important. You people return to the Eyrie, we’ll take things from here.”

Five days later, Emily was called to her master’s quarters and she frowned when she saw him still covered in wounds.

“Are you really okay?” Emily asked.

“Some beasts found the energy released by the pathway alluring,” Warsong shrugged as he looked at Emily with a smile. “You did well. What are your plans going forward? Because of the delay, we have decided to split up. Some will return to the War Fort, others will keep going. What do you want to do?”

“I-” Emily hesitated.

She wasn’t sure. She had been gone from Earth for a long time by now. She hadn’t had any news at all since she entered the Million Gates Territory three years ago. Had Zac returned by now? Had they also come here to get a head-start on this mess?

At the same time, she was hesitant to return now. The quest in her status screen beckoned her. This was her shot. An opportunity grasped with her own two hands, rather than something handed to her by Zac or Teacher. Could she just go home now that she finally had found her path?

“You don’t have to choose right now. We depart in two days.”

“No need,” Emily said with determination. “I’ll keep going. I’ll see this through to the end.”

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“So much Mara,” Golden Bell sighed.

Three Virtues nodded in agreement as the group looked down on the sprawling world in front of them. No matter where they turned their eyes, there was evil and suffering. Men fought like beasts in their twisted pursuit of power, and blood flowed like rivers. It was an inherited madness, suffering perpetuated through generations.

“This continent truly needs the love of Buddha to start healing,” Peaceful Way said with a shake of her head.

“This poor monk can sense this realm is on the cusp of integration,” Golden Bell ventured. “With a few seeds sown and a couple of temples erected...”

“For now, it will have to wait,” Three Virtues said. “Our seniors paid no small price to find this realm and send us all this way.”

“To think there was a third option,” Peaceful Way said. “Lord Blessed Fate truly is a master of the Dharma.”

“Still, this Goldblade Continent is vast,” Golden Bell hesitated as he looked around. “Finding the path in this confusing mix of fell Karma will take time.”

“Amitabha. A guide is waiting for us,” Three Virtues smiled as he took out a low-quality spatial ring. “She will lead the way.”

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One step brought him to the Anolan Plains, where the Stalk Sages communed with nature as they followed the ancient paths imprinted by the cosmos itself. Today, the billions of rivers had dried up, and the endless sea of emerald grass was replaced by festering pools of blight. Creatures twisted by the

Heavens shrunk back into their dwellings as he passed by, unable to comprehend why they had just felt a pang of mortal danger.

This time, he didn't leave a path of destruction in his wake. What was the point?

Another step brought him to the towering peaks of the Pasho. Once, the whole mountain range would have sung from the Pasho'Har Bells, their cadence forming a universe through music. But the Pasho were long gone, as were the marvels they created. The Keeper of the Note had been known throughout all creation, but innumerable civilizations had turned to dust since her songs were lost to the river of time.

Eternity – was there even such a thing?

And if this was it, what was the point? Wal'Zo's heart broke all over again upon seeing his fallen world. These small sections were moved here to honor those who sacrificed everything, yet they had become mockeries of their previous masters. Wal'Zo was even thankful it would soon all be over. He, too, would sink into the river of time, taking this twisted reality with him.

Another step brought him home, and the connection was erected anew. Wal'Zo slowly made his way back through the hallowed halls, the lingering corruption on his body wilting away with every step. Still, two more hallways had been tainted since he left. A few more Eras at most before their undertaking would finally crumble, and that was if their power wasn't drawn upon any further.

Another wave of reluctance filled his heart as his mind wandered back to that distant past. To those who said no to the Terminus, and set about changing the course of history. To the Eternal, who sacrificed herself to keep the flicker of hope alive when all else failed. Soon enough he reached the First Garden, where the withered remains of Sal'Sun basked in the sunlight.

Next to it, the red pot stood. Inside was a small tree, still no more than a sapling even after billions of years. The gift from that inscrutable man.

"I've seen it now. Your masterpiece," Wal'Zo smiled as he sat down next to the small tree. "I wonder what you would think if you saw it today. It is truly something. But it seems to have diverged from what you described to us old things. Or is this still within your calculations? I could never tell where your depths lay. I guess that's why I went along with it. You reminded me of the Eternal."

"Would you still think the price was worth it? The sacrifice?"

"I even saw that man's son. I bet you didn't expect to hear that, huh?" Wal'Zo laughed. "Some things even you can't control. Ripples on the lake. I would have given him a shot, but he actually took it on his own. So it will ultimately be up to him to prove himself more than a link in the chain. As it has always been."

His gaze turned to the false sky, his eyes flickering with thought.

"Fate is gathering. Ultom is rising from the depths. Us old things cannot hold on much longer. The inevitable looms closer."

Another hallway collapsed, and Wal'Zo sighed as he caressed the sapling.

"Laondio, I hope you were right."

