

The Fall 922

Chapter 922: Proving Oneself

Iz looked on as Mr. Bug, no, Zachary Atwood, dipped beneath the tainted water. Not much later, she felt him pass through her flame domain, exposing him to any discerning eyes. She froze for an instant, but she was immensely relieved to see there was no reaction from the corrupted cultivators sitting by the shoreline. She had a little bit longer.

She felt suffocated, and indecision gnawed at her. The world had always seemed so simple. Black and white. Fated and lacking fate. Even Zachary's experiences she'd seen through the lens of the Divine Mirror had felt like a series of humorous misadventures. Foolish. This was life and death. There was suffering and uncertainty. There were consequences.

Her thoughts turned back to those she had incinerated, certain in her righteousness from their lack of providence. Only now, when the ripples of consequence might reach the Tayn Clan, did she realize her shallow understanding. Even if all those people had no fate with her, did they really not have fate with others? Were her family's precepts wrong? Or was she missing something?

She knew she was sheltered from the world, but she still understood the Multiverse was a cruel place, and the struggles here on the Frontier paled in front of the wars that ravaged the heartlands. Resources were limited, and there were only so many Thrones. So many Eternal Heritages. Was the approach of her family a necessity to survive at the peaks? Perhaps, but that didn't help with her current dilemma.

She took a steadying breath, the words of Zachary Atwood mixing with that of her grandpa as he let her into the Zecia sector.

"Heart," Iz muttered.

"Ah?" the demon said to the side, her words startling him out of his vigil over the shoreline.

"Nothing," Iz sighed.

"Alright," the demon nodded. "Nothing so far."

"They are too connected to the lake," Iz said with a shake of her head. "It is only a matter of time."

"That's great," Ogras muttered. "Left to fight an army."

"I-"

"You know?" the demon said. "Zac's home planet, Earth, was integrated recently."

"I am aware," Iz nodded.

"I was leading the incursion placed next to him. Through a twist of fate, we became uneasy allies, relying on each other to survive. Eventually, we both proved ourselves to each other," Ogras said. "I lost an arm proving it, though it's regrown since. Even if it hadn't, it would have been a worthwhile sacrifice. Real companions are hard to come by in this world. People you can trust your back to in thick and thin."

Iz listened with rapt attention as the information was all new to her. The story almost allowed her to forget her current predicament.

“Later came along a wretch called Verana. She threw her lot in with Zac upon witnessing his strength, realizing the potential for profits. Zac accepted her, and everything went well for a while. But when things went awry, and the Undead Empire descended on Zac’s home, on his kin, she was nowhere to be found.

“She was afraid that her involvement would create ripples, enmities that would cause troubles for her elders back home. After all, the Undead Empire is a powerful force even here on the Frontier.”

“What happened next?” Iz asked.

“Zac returned in the nick of time, slaughtered the invaders before taking out the incursion of unliving,” Ogras shrugged. “The day was saved. But from that moment, Verana’s fate was changed. She could have been someone like me, whose fate has been swept up in his, as you called it. Now, she is just a distant business acquaintance to the Atwood Empire and will never be anything more.

“Because she could not be relied on when push came to shove. Because if it happened one time, it could happen again when the stakes became high next time. Fate is a tricky thing. Who knows what’s right and wrong? When you struggle to keep a door open, you often close another one,” the demon said as he turned to Iz with a smile.

Iz truly looked at the shade-marked demon for the first time. She had always considered him a passerby, a hanger-on. Those with powerful fates usually had a few such people hovering around them. She had always seen them as parasites, siphoning the fate of their betters. But she finally realized she was wrong on yet another front. There was more to this demon.

“So, what are you saying?” Iz asked.

“Perhaps some doors can be held open by a helping hand. How about you and I make a little deal?”

Zac slowly made his way through a narrow crack, using only his body to avoid releasing any energy ripples. Of course, he wasn’t too convinced anyone would actually notice it with him being surrounded by the extremely potent water.

Just a few seconds after submerging himself, [Purity of the Void] was completely overwhelmed. One pulse after another cleansed his body of the corruption, but even more kept pouring in. But soon enough, it was all swallowed up by a greedy [Void Heart], and the cycle started anew.

A few moments later, he reached the underground tunnel once built by the Ra’Lashar Goblins, and he could already see the exit in the distance. It was a small dot of shimmering purple, and it looked blissfully unobstructed. Zac kept moving, but a frown soon marred his face as he felt the corruption grow uncomfortably condensed in his body while [Void Heart] still digested the previous batch.

Or did it matter? A little bit of suffering in return for clarity, for power. Wasn’t that the core tenet of his path? He could already feel his confusions being swept away, replaced with ironclad certainty and possibility. And with his body having unlimited potential, wasn’t this the path?

Zac shuddered as the waters around him dimmed, while the sweet whispers in his mind quieted down to a muted white noise. The change came from Zac activating [Void Zone], which removed any spirituality from the surrounding waters while suppressing the taint that had already entered his body.

It had just been a short test to see how well he could withstand the corruption, but it quickly became a lesson in the importance of a steady heart. He had been awash with endless possibilities, and he had seen glimpses of promising alterations to everything from his skills to his pathways. It was similar to how he felt when using Creation Energy.

But instead of being consumed and drained by the endless hunger of Creation, he had felt himself gradually being nudged in a certain direction. A little change here, and a small addition there. A suggestion to look at things differently. But out of little acorns grow huge oaks. Those small changes would eventually turn into a complete transformation.

The corruption of the Lost Plane wanted to reform him into an image of itself, both in spirit and flesh. Was that what had happened to the Qriz'Ul? Had they once been living, breathing beings, only to find them gradually twisted until they were no more than accumulations of twisted energy? There was no way to tell, but one thing was for certain. Those Cultivators at the surface were in trouble.

Their paths had probably been subverted already, and Zac doubted they'd even recognize themselves if they found a moment of clarity. Still, that was not Zac's problem. Just like K'Rav said, they were the ones who had cracked open the pathway to the Lost Plane, probably without proper preparation or understanding of the situation.

A thud echoed out from his heart, and he stopped in place with anticipation as [Void Heart] spat out a burst of energy. A few more passages were quickly deciphered, adding to his already impressive understanding of the nature of Duality. The moment the purified energy was expended, Zac turned off [Void Zone] again, and thousands of tendrils immediately started burrowing into his body.

The process continued for another minute until [Void Heart] was satiated, and Zac reactivated his nullification domain. In a perfect world, Zac would have secluded himself in this corrupted tunnel, staying years if need be to consume the whole lake. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible with the collapse of the realm looming over their shoulders.

So Zac gradually made his way toward the exit, careful to even make any move except for the occasional push to help him keep floating forward. By this point, he was halfway through the tunnel, and some of the cultists were possibly sitting right above his head. He was no longer protected by Iz's candle either and was instead relying on the stealth cowl to prevent anyone from detecting him.

His eyes and senses were peeled for any sign of having been discovered, but there were no spikes of Cosmic Energy being released above his head. Zac felt flush with success as he reached the mouth of the tunnel, but that sense of victory was doused upon witnessing the scene outside.

Qriz'Ul. Hundreds of them, some over ten meters large and emitting powerful fluctuations.

Zac froze in place, staring at the scene with wide eyes. It looked like his worst fear had come true. They had discussed this very scenario. After all, where else would the current generation of Qriz'Ul have come from but this tainted soup? Most of them seemed to be in an almost comatose state where they had turned into blobs that drifted along the currents.

However, those around the cave exit had stopped in place as they started to contract, and Zac could tell they felt something was amiss. Did they sense his [Void Zone]? He couldn't be sure, but he knew he'd be discovered soon enough unless something changed.

Zac quickly deactivated his domain, and the waters around him returned to normal. The same thing happened with the corruption that had already accumulated in his body, which would hopefully mean he'd look like the cultivators above-water to these creatures. And it worked. The Qriz'UI relaxed and returned to their spread-out form before drifting away in the waters. Only a ten-meter Qriz'UI stayed a bit longer, but it too floated away soon enough.

Zac returned further into the tunnel before activating [Void Zone] as he considered his options. It really looked like his domain was the issue here. It probably wasn't the Void Energy that Qriz'UI reacted to, but rather the lack of corruption in a spot. That didn't help him, though; it put him in quite a bind.

He needed the [Void Zone] to stay in the waters indefinitely, but using it would get him exposed. And even if he found a way around it, there were no guarantees he'd be safe from the Qriz'UI when entering the lake proper, even if he let the corruption spread through his body. What could he do in this situation? Should he go back and discuss it with the others?

No, Iz had already said she didn't have any invisibility treasures apart from the candle, and neither did she have any methods to traverse this kind of taint. She simply hadn't prepared for this kind of mission. Ogras couldn't help in this situation either, so he could only rely on himself. Besides, the longer they stayed in this region, the higher the risk of something going wrong.

Zac waited for another couple minutes until the next burst of inspiration pushed his insights further. Having a newly-cleansed body, Zac immediately started swimming toward the cave mouth once more, and he deactivated the domain the moment he got close.

There was one Qriz'UI not too far from Zac, but it didn't seem to react to his presence, allowing him to creep out from the cave mouth and swim downward. With corruption rapidly pouring into his body, he couldn't maintain a slow and steady pace out of fear of being discovered by the cultivators above. Besides, with hundreds of Qriz'UI floating about in the lake's depths, his movements shouldn't be cause for suspicion.

He descended over a hundred meters in a few short moments until he found another tunnel. Zac swam inside and activated [Void Zone] before the nefarious whispers returned. None of the Qriz'UI seemed to react as long as he was hidden in the darkness of the tunnel. In fact, they didn't bother with the tunnels at all.

They either seemed content slowly floating in a circle around the lake, with the occasional creature moving toward the surface. Perhaps that was an opportunity in itself? The energies in the lake had to be powerful enough to hide his actions. Zac hesitated a moment before taking out an inscribed canister and pushing it into a crack in the wall.

By briefly deactivating his Bloodline Talent and infusing a tiny hint of Cosmic Energy, the canister started to drag the tainted waters into its subspace. It created a weak current, but there was no reaction even after a minute, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief. Eventually, the bottle was full, and Zac's body was cleansed from any lingering corruption.

Having accomplished his goal, Zac deactivated [Void Zone] and continued on his way, the bottle full of lake water safely stowed away. It was a backup plan in case the whole lake was dragged into the Void before he could get any, and one bottle after another joined the first as Zac jumped between tunnels and deep cracks as he made his way toward the bottom.

And with the lake only being so big, he reached his target soon enough, though he found himself surrounded by six huge slumbering Qriz'Ul.

The gateway – at least Zac assumed it was the gateway – reminded Zac a bit of the Spatial Nexus that blew up. It appeared to be a hollow construct roughly 50 meters across, made from beams of crystal or purple glass. Together, they formed something like a dodecahedron that kept shifting in a disorienting way.

One moment it looked like a cube, the next it had a hundred edges in an incredibly complex tangle. Vai had long since explained it was a result of two realities with a different number of dimensions sharing the same space. Technically, the pillars didn't transform or shift about. It was just his vantage that kept changing.

What stayed constant were the dense scripts that covered the crystal pillars, scripts that followed the unfamiliar ruleset of the Qriz'Ul. Zac couldn't tell if this thing was something the Ra'Lashar had created or if it had formed naturally. He was pretty certain that it wasn't the work of Kan'Tanu, though, since the beams felt too old and powerful.

Zac also couldn't tell whether the crystal pillars were responsible for sealing the gateway, or if they were there to stabilize and strengthen it. As for the actual pathway to the Lost Plane, it hovered in the center of the shifting construct.

The similarity between the ominous swirl and the array he'd just seen in the infiltrator's lab was palpable. The thing didn't really look like a Spatial Tear. Instead, it looked like a pitch-black sphere the size of a beach ball, with two dozen deep purple strings attached. The item slowly rotated in place, prompting the strings to form a ten-meter-wide spiral that undulated with intensely condensed corruption and spatial energy.

In a perfect world, Zac would have spent a few minutes studying the thing, but there was no way he could do that. The taint was far more concentrated this close to the source, and he wouldn't last much longer without [Void Zone]. And with the big guys slumbering nearby, activating it would mean immediately getting exposed.

So Zac steadied his mind as he went through the procedure Leandra had imparted. The moment he made his move, he would probably be exposed. The spatial bomb that the experts of the Void Gate had prepared and then improved with some of Zac's materials was something that would drive the Ishiate Tinkerers wild.

It was volatile, unpredictable, and powerful. Just like how they liked their weapons.

A few seconds later, the construct reverted into one of its simpler forms, and Zac shot forward. This time, he even used Cosmic Energy to cover the remaining distance instantly, and he felt multiple powerful auras accumulate around him. Zac ignored the burgeoning pressure as a radiant cube appeared in his hand.

High-grade materials and inscriptions reinforced its glass walls, but Zac's heart still shuddered as he felt the chaotic spatial fluctuations trapped inside. How couldn't he be nervous? He was essentially holding an artificial miniature black hole in his hands. The sooner he could get away from it, the better.

Cosmic Energy surged through his body as Zac activated the main array of the bomb, and he immediately hurled it toward the black ball in the heart of the structure. The cube started to twist and bend as it entered the odd domain within the pillars, but a pulse from within stabilized it. Cracks rapidly spread across the bomb, and the energy it leaked was enough to eradicate space around it.

Finally, the bomb reached the core, and reality buckled as a hole of utmost darkness appeared. It wasn't too big and it didn't release a speck of energy, but Zac's Danger Sense told him in no uncertain terms that touching that thing would mean instant death. It was a true black hole that swallowed space, time, and energy – the most sure-fire solution to destroy the pathway that Leyara could come up with.

Space collapsed, and the twisted spiral was rapidly consumed. Zac could even feel how the corruption around was quickly decreasing. But just as Zac thought the mission a success and planned to deal with the fallout, a powerful consciousness descend on the area. Zac didn't even have time to react before a huge runic hand emerged from the remaining half of the sphere.

It grasped the black hole and squeezed, like the scene where the mysterious being crushed the Heart of Oblivion. Simultaneously, Zac felt a powerful consciousness slam into his, and his hair stood on end upon hearing an eldritch voice.

“Em...pty... Empty... EMPTY!”