

The Fall 923

Chapter 923: Empty

Zac couldn't tell whether a million voices were clamoring in his head or one, but the force in voice alone was enough to give Zac's soul a jolt. He didn't know what the voice meant by 'empty', but the real problem was the source. A supersized Qriz'UI was targeting his spatial bomb, possibly from the other side through the gateway.

At least Zac assumed it was a Qriz'UI, even if its hand looked like a purple runic nebula rather than a twisted mockery of a Goblin. Meanwhile, the D-grade runic beings around him had almost finished gathering up, and Zac guessed he only had a few seconds before being attacked.

The Rampant energies of the black hole rendered the whole area unstable, and the purple crystal pillars shattered one after another. Meanwhile, the hand trying to contain the blast released torrential amounts of corruption. The clash drowned the area in the taint of the Lost Plane, and Zac was forced to quickly activate [Void Zone] to avoid being overwhelmed as well.

It soon became impossible to see what was happening inside, but Zac wasn't about to wait for the result. Scores of volatile items, from [Void Balls] to home-made Attuned Crystal-bombs, were fast joining the chaos. Anything Zac could unleash without wasting too much energy joined in on the chaos, while a fractal blade emitting an air of antiquity appeared on the edge of [Verun's Bite].

The domains of Arcadia and the Abyss entered the fray, and the lake itself was split in two from a huge spatial tear. But the straight line of delineated space started to twist as it was dragged into the confusing mesh, prompting the churning ball of utter mayhem to gain another level of intensity.

"Void... VOID!" the eldritch voice roared in Zac's head, and Zac sensed a palpable wave of hunger assailing him.

Zac prepared to unleash his second finisher as well, but he didn't get the chance before his mind screamed of danger. A barrier glimmering with mottled gold and empowered by Void Energy enclosed him, just before an enormous shockwave threw him thousands of meters away until he crashed into the side of the crater.

Qriz'UI by the dozens were reduced to floating blobs of runic soup from the blast, while Zac got away with a few scrapes and some disorientation. [Empyrean Aegis] had dealt with most of the force from his bombs exploding, while [Void Zone] weakened the intense amount of chaotic energies and corruption loaded into the shockwave.

Concussive explosions illuminated the whole center of the lake while a million enraged shrieks escaped from within the gateway. It almost looked like time had frozen, with rampant energies struggling to expand, to consume the surroundings in a fiery conflagration. But they could not push beyond an invisible event horizon, held back by an unrelenting pull from within.

Whether it was the black hole or a spatial tear, Zac couldn't tell. It had been hard to discern the situation before, but now it was downright impossible. The static explosion was over 200 meters across, and its chaotic nature rendered [Cosmic Gaze] useless. There was no denying his items had gone off like they were supposed to – the question was whether it was enough.

The area flux from the unpredictable energy and dozens of Spatial Tears turned space-time into a leaking sieve. Zac grimaced with pain upon seeing vast amounts of lake water disappearing into the Void. But that was nothing compared to the dismay upon suddenly sensing that monstrous aura from within the chaos. The creature seemed severely weakened, but it had survived.

He had to do something, anything, before the chaos died down, so Zac grit his teeth and flashed toward the heart of destruction with his movement skill. Everyone had pooled their resources to maximize the potential of the black hole, and they didn't have a lot of options in case it failed. He simply wasn't powerful enough to destroy a spatial gate with his attacks alone; Zac needed to use the opportunity the black hole created before it was too late.

The backup plan was simply to pray the black hole caused enough damage to prevent any significant amounts of energy from passing through when Gemmy activated the array. But Zac wasn't resigned to such an outcome, not while there still was some hope for success.

Another beat from [Void Heart] cleansed the large accumulation of corruption in his body, allowing Zac to save on some Void Energy as he activated [Arcadia's Judgement]. He had hoped to reserve that skill for the Kan'Tanu above-ground, but he couldn't be picky in this situation. An even better solution would be to blast the remains of that spatial core with an Annihilation Sphere, but he couldn't even reach it right now.

The huge wooden hand emerged through one of the tears in space, and its towering aura pushed the already frothing waters into a fever pitch. Zac was pelted by shrapnel and corruption, but his focus was still on his finisher. With its enormous surface, the hand was tainted by a tremendous amount of corruption in no time, which was then transferred to Zac.

The nigh-inexhaustible life-force of the wooden hand only helped somewhat against the assault, and Zac felt himself quickly losing control of the skill. Thankfully, [Arcadia's Judgement] wasn't a skill that needed to be maintained for long, and its gleaming axehead was already cutting into the seething ball of barely contained destruction.

It felt like Zac had pushed his hand into a blender as the axe entered the ball of destruction. But he pushed on, desperately controlling the gradually collapsing axe with his Branches of War Axe and Kalpataru. Just a little more. He could sense it through his skill – the cracked gateway was not far.

Blood ran down Zac's nose as he pushed his empowered soul beyond its limits, forcibly holding together the skill through sheer stubbornness and determination. It narrowly passed right by the trapped black hole, but Zac swore when a second runic hand emerged to block [Arcadia's Judgement].

Edge and palm collided, and Zac shuddered as the connection to his skill broke. It had failed, but it wasn't an abject failure. The ball of destruction grew to twice its original size before rapidly shrinking to no more than five meters across. But just as Zac thought it would wink out, a huge shape shattered the lingering flames before pouncing at Zac.

"EMPTY!"

The ghastly Qriz'Ul reached more than fifty meters, though it didn't seem to have any solid features. The hands that had blocked out Zac's attempts were gone, replaced by what almost looked like a comet's

dust tail. But it did have one familiar marker – its decidedly goblin face. A huge, sharp nose the size of a speedboat pointed right at Zac, and its wide mouth was locked in a perpetual sneer.

However, there were some differences to this thing compared to the normal goblinoid Qriz'Ul. First, it seemed less corporeal to its smaller brethren, even if its energy surpassed anyone Zac had seen so far. It had also taken on some features you wouldn't see on the Ra'Lashar Goblins. Its mouth was filled with three layers of runic teeth, and its chin had been replaced by a bony hook that almost touched its snout.

The creature also had four sets of eyes that glared at Zac with hunger, while a ninth and larger eye sat between them on its oversized forehead. The ninth eye contained such powerful corruption that it made Zac's soul shudder, but that wasn't the important thing. It was made from the broken-off half of the gateway itself.

The sphere had seen better days. Less than half its mass remained. It now looked like a jagged crescent half-moon with cracks covering its surface, while only eight purple tendrils remained attached to it. Unfortunately, the broken gateway still seemed to remain somewhat functional. Weak spatial fluctuations were coming from the crystal, which seemed to provide the Qriz'Ul with a steady stream of dirty energy.

But a weak pulse of spatial energy from within the shuddering ball of destruction in the distance made Zac's eyes widen in comprehension. He had been completely wrong. That sphere was this wretched creature rather than the bridge to the Lost Plane. It must have planted itself at the mouth of the gateway to enjoy the massive amounts of condensed corruption.

Or perhaps the two were connected somehow, since the crystal on the creature's forehead rippled with energy in harmony with the pulse.

This wasn't part of the calculations. The gateway refused to break down even after being blasted by the black hole. Was it this creature that allowed it to hang on? Did Zac need to kill the oversized goblin for the gateway to collapse altogether? Or was this creature immortal until he managed to close the pathway?

There was no time to figure out the details. The goblin had almost reached him, and it shuddered with energy far beyond the lipless Hegemon's. So Zac activated [Ancient Forest] and slipped away, avoiding the approaching horror. His domain skill was rapidly falling apart in this toxic environment, but he only needed one jump.

Unfortunately, things didn't always go according to plan, and Zac felt resistance just as he was about to teleport right next to the original spot of the gateway. He could only course-correct and quickly pick another tree before pushing off from its crumbling trunk with [Earthstrider]. His surroundings were fraught with spatial tears and purple crystal debris, but he pushed straight toward the epicenter as Oblivion was extracted from his soul.

Zac didn't know the relation between monster and gateway, but he knew the window of opportunity was fast closing on the latter. Chaotic energies ran rampant in the area, and space itself was exhausted to the limit of collapse. But while his surroundings were dangerous, they weren't impassable any longer. He needed to use this chance to add to the damage. That would hopefully be the straw that broke the camel's back and closed the thing.

A pang of danger warned him of incoming calamity, but there was no time to respond. The goblin was impossibly fast – it was like he was fighting the lake itself. The moment Zac had entered the tree, the thing had turned into a stream of runes and caught up with him. Zac could only urge on his Annihilation Sphere while he unleashed a storm of Fractal Leaves from [Nature's Edge].

The Qriz'Ul was cut through dozens of times over, but Zac knew it was a failure. He had hoped to cause some real damage with his Daos, but he didn't even manage to delay it. A few dozen runes had been destroyed, but what was that to a giant with tens of thousands of them? He could only make one final gambit, and most of his remaining Cosmic Energy was almost instantly absorbed by a shimmering talisman hidden within his sleeves.

A wave of starlight shot out from the Early D-grade talisman while a tennis-ball-sized Annihilation Sphere formed between Zac's hands. It was much smaller than Zac had hoped and not nearly the limits of his stockpiled energy, but he was out of time. Zac felt [Empyrean Aegis] finally collapse from the clash between talisman and goblin, but his eyes never left the small flickering disk of a slightly darker purple.

It was almost invisible and just the size of a plate. A small discoloration that could easily be mistaken for a shadow. But his body could feel it. The power that slumbered on the other side. Infinite, incomprehensible power. The Lost Plane. But power or not, Zac wasn't moved. It wasn't true. At least not for him.

The Annihilation Sphere bit into the window, and a good chunk of it simply disappeared. But Zac saw a shocking sight when he had managed to close just over half of the gate. Somehow, the enormous goblin had appeared beneath him, and it stared at him hatefully with glowing eyes.

"NOTHING!" the voices screamed, and the whole lake exploded.

Zac groaned from the impact as his surroundings became a blur. He hadn't been thrown into the wall this time, but he found himself thrown straight into the air, far from the frayed gateway. Things went from bad to worse when Zac sensed dozens of massive energy signatures above, proving the Kan'Tanu were already awake.

And that was still not the most immediate of his problems. It felt like a volcano had erupted at the bottom of the lake, and a terrifying wave of energy was quickly catching up with him. But instead of molten-hot magma, it was a geyser of corruption with the face of a goblin closing in.

Its advance was a calamity, and the smaller Qriz'Ul were shredded and absorbed by the monstrous force. It almost felt like the whole lake was being pushed to the sky from the goblin's furious pursuit. And then, the world of purple was showered with a golden radiance as Zac was thrown into the air.

The world spun too fast to make sense of the situation, but a sudden appearance of a massive maw made Zac scream with surprise. Zac knew he was out of cards – in this form, that is. He had expended them all on the gateway, yet both the gate and his enemies remained. He would have to take the risk.

The final charges of [Earthstrider] were rapidly expended to create some distance, at which point his body was flooded with the sweet kiss of Death.

For minutes, nothing happened, yet every second seemed to stretch longer than the one before it. The lake was only so big. Even if treading carefully, it could only take so long until Zachary reached the bottom, where the gateway was supposed to be.

Then it came. A weak pulse of spatial Dao made the surface of the lake shudder. Just a moment later, it looked like the whole lake had been set to a boil, and even the demon could sense the enormous eruption of power beneath the surface.

The change had not gone unnoticed to the stoic cultivators sitting at the shores, and it looked like someone had kicked up a hornet's nest as they all sprung to action at once.

"Well, I guess that's me," Ogras sighed before shadows consumed him.

Iz could sense how he was rapidly moving toward two Hegemons whose energy was already churning. But he wouldn't be enough. There were nearly 30 Hegemons altogether, supported by over a thousand E-grade fodder. Those foot soldiers were inconsequential when it came to individual strength, but they would together be able to forge barriers powerful enough to slow down any opposition.

Even then, the real problem was the Hegemons. One of them was seemingly at the very peak of what this Mystic Realm could contain. Another eight could be considered elites in the frontier. And that wasn't even considering the twisted energy creatures, some of which also emitted D-grade energy signatures.

Not even Iz was certain she'd be able to deal with such an army before reaching her limits and having one of her fatewarding treasures whisk her away. For Ogras Azh'Rezak to contain them all was hopeless. Yet he rushed forward as a storm of shadows swallowed the southern shores. When push came to shove, he showed up, putting his life on the line.

"Follow my heart," Iz whispered as she looked to the sky.

She didn't want to be a betrayer, a person that couldn't be counted on. She hated the thought of the demon describing her actions in the future like he described those of that Verana woman. Her help was needed, and she would show up. And if someone had a problem with that in the future, she would just test their fate.

The slumbering ember in her chest erupted into a roaring fire, making Iz look inward with surprise. It raged with greater ferocity than ever before, and she suddenly remembered her grandfather's words – that any flame needed fuel to burn, no matter if it was the fires of life or the Empyrean Flames of her bloodline. A fuel named purpose.

A smile spread across her face as six false wings sprung from her back. It felt like she had been given the blessing of her ancestors as she rose to the air, and the sky greeted her ascent by gaining a golden hue.

"[World's End], how fitting," she smiled as she sacrificed a third of her Cosmic Energy. "Come."

The world cried as a 100-meter orb of purest flames appeared beneath her feet, and her Fatebound guardian appeared behind her back.

Hundreds of fiery motes broke off from the nine flames hovering in her soul aperture, and streaks of truth were left in their wake. Their dance rapidly formed one sigil after another, until three sets of 243 runes formed her family's exclusive Dao Array – [Empyrean Flame].

The Branches of Primal Starlight, Scorching Abyss, and Golden Sun were filtered and amplified through its intricate network as her guardian formed multiple sigils with her hands. Her veins were fire, her blood was flames, and she carried the apocalypse in her heart.

And with a nudge, Iz released the gates.

Nine streams of realm-breaking heat shot out from the prepared arrays, all fueled by the truths exclusive to the Tayns. The settlement and its lingering occupants were erased, their fate unable to withstand the proximity. The streams spread out, each one targeting one of the nine superlative Hegemons before they could unleash their strikes against the lake.

But it failed.

"Hm?" Iz muttered, her mind blanking out by the unexpected scene.

She wasn't surprised that the leader managed to survive her attack, but five of them? Odd barriers had blocked out her spells, and Iz sensed an anomalous resonance completely unfamiliar to her.

"They're connected somehow! With each other and the lake!" a pained scream echoed from the shadows, but Iz had no time to react before things changed again.

A distant wail echoed through the area as a familiar figure was flung into the air like a ragdoll, and Iz couldn't help herself as she started to laugh at the scene. That guy really couldn't stop himself from creating a spectacle.

Where had Mr. Bug found himself a mountain-sized goblin to fight?