

## The Fall 927

### Chapter 927: What a Mess

Zac woke up with a start, and the slight movement unleashed a chain reaction of agony that rippled throughout his body. A blurry scene of destruction met his gaze, but there were no threats as far as he could see. It was lucky, as well. Just keeping his eyelids open was a struggle. Another fight was out of the question.

He didn't need to look to know that almost all his pathways were shattered, but he still glanced inward to assess the damage. As expected, his pathways were in utter disrepair. His head, arms, and torso had taken the worst of it, with the paths being completely gone. But the damage wasn't limited to the sections where he channeled the two attacks created with the remnants. There was visible damage all the way to the soles of his feet.

There was also damage to his foundation, like he had opened up a dozen nodes without any protection. Recovering from this would take months rather than weeks, and there would still be risks of leaving imperfections behind. Even his [Thousand Lights Avatar] had taken a hit, and reforming the broken sections would also set him back a few months.

The only thing that wasn't broken was his physical body, but the sense of hollowness in the essence of his very being explained the reason. He must have used Creation Energy subconsciously since he had lost decades' worth of lifespan. By the looks of it, his arms had been completely disintegrated by his final blast, along with a good chunk of his chest.

Thank God his years of experimenting with his Annihilation Sphere and Origin Mark had taught an important lesson that was now ingrained into his body; always remove your valuables before messing with the remnants. More than one Spatial Ring had cracked or morphed from being too close to the remnant skills, so now he always stashed them in a reinforced pouch behind Vivi's tube or Alea's Coffin.

What a mess.

Thankfully, there was some good news, though they were insufficient to balance the bad. First, there were the terrifying amounts of Kill Energy in his body, far surpassing anything he'd ever held before. In other words, the Qriz'Ul King was dead. Furthermore, the energy proved he hadn't been out of it for very long, even if the tranquility around him indicated the battle was already over. The energy would already have dissipated if he had been unconscious for a couple of hours.

Secondly, the corruption in his body wasn't that bad, considering how much had poured into him while he tried to break down that purple barrier. It was still quite a bit, and it didn't seem to carry the insights of the lake, but the voices were just weak whispers at this point. His Bloodline should have dealt with that long before he recovered.

Zac finally tried to look around for clues on what was going on, but he didn't even have time to take in his surroundings before he felt his life, or rather death, slipping away. He was utterly drained of Miasma and would soon find himself forcibly swapped over to his human side. However, transforming this crude way would take over a minute, and this was not the time to black out.

A soft tendril of Dao and energy entered his transformation skill, activating the process before it was too late. A shudder went through his body as life replaced nothingness, but the process was slow and sluggish. Thankfully, the Specialty Core was one of the few sections of his body left untouched, and the process was only slowed down rather than interrupted by damage.

Gods, what a mess.

Zac couldn't believe he had been so foolhardy, though he admittedly still didn't have any better solutions with the benefit of hindsight. Fusing his Annihilation Sphere and Origin Mark for a supreme blast was something Zac had considered before, but never had the guts or time to experiment with. Because any time he'd considered a test run, a sense of foreboding had filled his heart. And since then, everything he learned about his Daos and Duality only strengthened this impression of danger.

It wasn't necessarily impossible, but it was just too early. His Annihilation Sphere was a fusion of his Branches of War axe and Pale Seal, which then was powered with the distilled Oblivion Energy extracted from the cage in his mind. To fuse his remnant attacks would mean not only combining all three of his Daos, but also Oblivion and Creation.

He still hadn't figured out how to fuse just his Daos for his Cultivator's core, so adding Oblivion and Creation to the mix was a recipe for disaster. But at the time, it had felt like a great idea, to push a bit further on the path he was already walking on. It almost felt natural. But without the voices urging him, he understood just how ill-prepared he was to take that step.

There was no plan, no system. Zac had just slapped together two highly unstable energies he only tenuously controlled and then hoped for the best. If anything, the outcome could be considered pretty lucky, where he only lost a few limbs while the Qriz'Ul King perished. Still, it served as a poignant example of what awaited him if he failed to form a proper core. That time it wouldn't just be his hands that were blown off; it would be his whole body.

Thinking of his recently reformed hands, Zac realized he was actually holding onto something; the core of the Qriz'Ul King. That was the last item Zac would have expected to see, considering he had aimed his Chaos Ball right at this thing. If this thing was intact, how had the Goblin died?

Certainly, the core had seen better days. New cracks had appeared across its surface, and it no longer emitted any of the spatial fluctuations from before. Oddly enough, it was also a bit scorched. Had Iz helped him at the eleventh hour, or was this a result of the Goblin's odd connection to the Lost Plane's gateway?

Had the Qriz'Ul transported its core away to avoid getting blasted by the unstable Chaos Bomb, only for it to be engulfed by whatever Iz had given Ogras to blow up the lake?

No matter how things worked, it was a welcome surprise. The core probably contained incredibly condensed corruption, which might be even more useful than the diluted taint in the lake. More importantly, this thing could absorb his Void Energy, which might mean it was useful for his Bloodline down the road. Right now, his body didn't react to the thing, but his Bloodline was also fully satiated at the moment.

His connection to the Qriz'Ul was another mystery Zac couldn't explain. Why had this Qriz'Ul wanted his Void Energy? Come to think of it, all of the Qriz'Ul in the lake had reacted to the energy his Bloodline

created. At the time, Zac had believed they responded to a spot of water suddenly drained of corruption, but it didn't seem to be the case.

Was the Void Emperor-bloodline somehow related to the Lost Plane, or perhaps to the Ultom Courts?

Zac had mostly been working under the assumption that his visions came from the Left Imperial Palace rather than Ultom, and that idea had only been reinforced after his talk with Leyara. Emperor Limitless had seized at least eight Eternal Heritages and then built immense Array Palaces around them to create the System. It wouldn't be too surprising if he had a karmic connection to these places.

But how did the Void, the Lost Plane, and the Dao-bereft insights of Ultom fit into the picture? Perhaps, this core could help shed some light on the connection between these things and possibly even his Bloodline. It also seemed like a promising material for his Cultivator's Core down the road.

A couple of shuffling steps made Zac look up with alarm, but he relaxed upon seeing two familiar figures standing at the edge of the crater he found himself in.

"Uh, you okay over there?" Ogras hesitated.

"I've been better," Zac grimaced as he put away the Qriz'Ul Core. "What about you? Is everything dealt with?"

"The gateway is closed," Ogras nodded. "And the infiltrators are all dead. The young miss dealt with them for us."

"All of them?" Zac said with surprise.

"They fused into one entity," Iz said calmly.

Zac sighed in relief. He didn't have another fight in him at the moment.

"So you're going to stay in the puddle, or?" Ogras asked.

"Oh, right," Zac said as he started to make his way out of the crater.

It was slow. Excruciatingly slow. Zac felt weaker than back before the integration, and he nearly stumbled a couple of times on his way to the edge. But finally, he got there, though every step had felt like getting stabbed.

"You weren't kidding," Ogras sighed. "Well, knowing your monstrous constitution, you'll be up and about in no time. I can't believe you're able to regrow limbs at will. To accomplish that, I had to find a bunch of treasures and fuse with shadow creatures."

"Borrowed Creation," Iz said as she gave Zac a deep look. "The price is steep."

"I try to avoid using it, but trouble keeps finding me," Zac weakly smiled.

"The burden of fate," Iz nodded as she took out a small vial. "Use this. It will recover some of what you lost."

Zac curiously looked at the shimmering drops inside the vial, and he was shocked at the explosive vitality they contained. Each drop gave off radiant light like a sun, and even through the densely inscribed

casing, Zac could tell they contained incredible amounts of life force. These things couldn't even be put in the same category as the other Longevity Treasures he'd encountered so far.

Uzu's Fire-attuned Longevity Pearl, which had since joined Zac's treasure pile, might as well be trash in front of these drops. But that meant these things were incredibly rare. And rare meant expensive.

"I'm not sure if I'm in any condition to get myself blasted with a fireball at the moment," Zac hesitated.

"You can owe me one," Iz said with a small smile.

Zac didn't know how he felt about mooching off of Iz like this. They had gotten somewhat close over the past days, and she had proven herself a trustworthy ally, but she had been right before about balance. It wasn't right for him to just take and take without giving anything back. But at the same time, he really needed this thing.

"More importantly, didn't you want that lake water?" Ogras interjected when Zac didn't move for a few seconds.

"Ah? What?" Zac perked up. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Well, the bottom of the lake is full of Spatial Tears since we blew a hole in the Mystic Realm," Ogras shrugged. "It's leaking."

"What!" Zac screamed as he started running toward the lake.

Or at least he tried to. The sudden burst of movement set his whole body on fire, and when he tried to correct himself, his legs felt like lead.

"You're in no state to use skills," Iz said from the side.

"I can't, I have to- ah, crap," Zac groaned before stumbling, faceplanting straight into the ground.

But his surroundings were suddenly swallowed by shadows, and he found himself right at the shores, which were growing longer by the second. Seeing the water within arm's reach, Zac ignored the pain and limped into the muck as he eagerly took out two canteens.

"I wonder what your devout followers would say if they saw this sorry sight," Ogras sighed. "So many crushed hearts."

"Just help me collect the water," Zac grunted.

"Alright, alright," Ogras grunted as he appeared next to Zac.

The next moment, a set of shadows lifted Zac up and returned him to the shore.

"I'll deal with this. Just sit there and recover, alright? You look like you're about to fall apart into 1000 little pieces," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "I need you to be in speaking condition when we get out of here."

"Alright, thank you," Zac nodded before taking out a few more containers. "Get as much as possible, but don't risk your life for it."

"Too late for that," Ogras snorted as he started to collect the water.

By this point, Iz had caught up to them, and she held out the small vial in his direction once more. This time, Zac didn't reject.

"... Thank you," Zac nodded. "I'll make it up to you somehow."

"I'm sure," Iz said with a small smile. "The longer you wait, the worse the effect will be. Place a drop on your forehead."

Zac nodded before following Iz's instructions. He wasn't worried Iz was lying to him at all. For one, he could sense the immense surge of life within the drop. Also, he was completely vulnerable in his current condition. If she wanted to deal with him, she wouldn't need to use deception. She could just pick him up and bring him home like a piece of luggage.

The drop landed against his glabella, and Zac's eyes suddenly opened wide. For a moment, it felt like he had opened his mind's eye where the drop touched his skin, connecting him to the other side of the cosmos. There, Zac saw an enormous tree, far surpassing the Worldtree in his old visions. It stretched far beyond what Zac could comprehend, its sheer mass an assault on his sanity. Each of its leaves was a world unto itself, nurtured by the endless vitality of its creator.

But just like that, the vision was gone, replaced by a warm feeling that had already spread throughout his body. The sense of hollowness was partly alleviated, and Zac could even feel his foundations had recovered a bit. He still wouldn't be able to use his Cosmic Energy, but he should at least not be as weak as a baby bird.

Still, the medical efficacy paled to the vision he'd just seen. Was that tree real?

"What... Was that?" Zac said with shock.

"Don't think about it too much," Iz said. "How do you feel?"

"Tired," Zac grimaced. "But a lot better now."

"Do you regret it?" Iz asked as she looked at him with an uncomfortably intense stare. "You have the talisman to escape this realm. You could have given up and either fled through a Spatial Tear or waited for the realm to collapse. But you still fought to the point of almost crippling yourself."

"Well, I didn't really think things through," Zac coughed. "Had a lot of voices screaming in my head at the time. But no, I don't regret it. How could I back down when people depend on me when I still hadn't done everything in my power to accomplish what I promised?"

"But your lifeforce," Iz said.

"Well, you helped me recover some of it, and I'll get more of it when I break through," Zac shrugged.

"It is not that simple," Iz said as she looked out across the dwindling lake. "It is not just a matter of days and years. It is providence. It is potential. The more you hollow yourself out, the harder you will find your climb in the future. You are creating a negative spiral, where you will need to take more and more risks to continue progressing."

"I know," Zac sighed. "Sometimes, you just have to keep going and have faith things will work out."

Iz slowly nodded, and the two sat in silence for a few minutes as Ogras filled one canteen after another.

“What are you doing after this?” Iz eventually asked.

Zac didn’t immediately answer. Not because he felt the need to keep it a secret, but more because he didn’t actually know. The original plan was for his visit to the Void Star to be a quick outing where he picked up a Ferric Worldeater. After that, he’d head out to the Million Gates Territory, where he would look for Ogras while racking up some early contributions.

Now, more than half a year had passed, and things had grown infinitely more complicated. He had also stumbled onto Ogras and Billy somehow, which had been the main reason for him to enter the lawless zone at the edge of the Allbright Empire. Not only that, but he should also have already racked up a massive amount of contribution from his actions here, far more than he could have by hunting down some advance squads.

Still, he probably had to head to the Million Gates Territory anyways, if only to find the next piece of rubble. The Qriz’Ul Core and Lake Water would probably let him digest the whole Book of Duality in a couple of months, but that didn’t mean he was guaranteed to figure out a working blueprint for his core. If it failed, he might still need another burst of Ultom’s inspiration before heading to the Perennial Vastness.

“I-“Zac hesitated, but a deep rumble cut him off.

The clouds roiled and heaved until an enormous crack split the whole sky in two.

‘Owie Owie,’ a distant voice echoed out. ‘Good job, Smelly Guy! Gemmy is leaving now. Try not to die.’