

The Fall 929

Chapter 929: Paths Diverged

There was no time to reorient himself or prepare. It was all happening too fast. One moment, Zac, Iz, and Ogras had popped out next to one of the gargantuan space stations of the Void Star. The next, Zac found himself sanding a large solemn hall, where his two companions were nowhere in sight.

It was not just the architecture that exuded a quiet dignity, but the chamber was filled with an almost deafening silence. It was like the emptiness of space had been condensed into something corporeal. It felt odd, but more than anything, it felt comfortable, like he was wrapped in a warm embrace. At the same time, he felt his very existence amplified by contrasting himself to the muted surroundings.

Zac could tell this was no dream, and neither was it a vision; his senses told him he really was there in person. He hesitated for a moment before making his way through the hallway toward a door at the other side. The only sound was the rhythmic taps of his steps, bare feet against smooth stone. But it was muted like the soundwaves were swallowed as soon as they were created.

Zac didn't bother taking out [Verun's Bite], knowing it was futile even if he were in perfect condition. Someone had whisked him out of thin air and teleported him here in an instant. The power required for something like that wasn't something he could contend with. Besides, he had a pretty good idea of what was going on and knew he shouldn't be in trouble.

The Void Priestess had summoned him.

Luckily, he had managed to confirm Leyara's story through Iz Tayn, at the cost of some light burns. There really was a huge mysterious faction named The Vigil. They were supposedly older than even the Limitless Empire, and the Void Gate was a distant branch of them. Unfortunately, Iz didn't know much about their purpose either. Their goals were not known to the public.

However, The Vigil had quickly joined hands with the Limitless Empire without a struggle during Emperor Limitless' expansive wars, and many believed they'd had a role in creating the System. However, they never joined any of the empires' campaigns. And to this day, they had still largely stayed out of the struggles of the peak factions.

As Zac walked through the hall, his gaze turned to the huge floating rocks that lined the main path. The smallest of them was the size of a soccer ball, while the largest was as tall as he was. For most people, they would have probably seemed like mundane rocks kept afloat by some array, but Zac knew the truth.

They contained Void Energy. It wasn't as condensed as the Void Cores, but it was pure and calm. Extracting energy from these stones probably wouldn't require [Void Heart] at all, but rather recover his lost energy directly. Part of him just wanted to snatch every single stone put in his path, but this wasn't a Video Game. He couldn't just ransack the house before speaking with the owner like nothing had happened.

Zac soon reached the exit at the other side of the empty hallway, but he hesitated about whether he should just walk inside.

"Enter, child," a mesmerizing voice emerged through the door, and Zac simply stepped through.

Austere. That was the best word to describe what appeared to be the Void Priestess' cultivation chamber. There was simply nothing there, a far cry from the meticulously arranged mountain of the Life Elemental he visited in the Orom World. Drab walls and two simple prayer mats. The only thing that prevented the room from feeling like a prison cell was that there was no inner wall. Instead, the room transitioned into a vast garden under a starry sky.

And in the distance, the Void Star. Judging by the size of the Void Star, Zac had to have been transported quite the distance. It was less than a third the size compared to when he first saw it from Zenith Vigil. Yet oddly enough, Zac couldn't actually see any of the four stations, or any other activity in the sky for that matter.

Were there two Void Stars? Or was it just an illusion?

It was a curious mystery, but Zac was more occupied by the woman who motionlessly sat on one of the two prayer mats in the center of the room. She was an odd paradox, where her pristine appearance demanded attention, but her aura had completely fused with the palpable silence of the surroundings.

She wore a white nun's robe that spread out like a flower around her, and her hands were hidden within two large flowing sleeves. Even her face was covered by an only partly translucent veil attached to a tiara in her long black hair.

"Come, sit," she said, slightly nodding at the mat placed a few meters away from her.

"Uh, thank you," Zac said, his voice startling himself as it seemed to come from everywhere at once.

There was something odd about this environment, some sort of field he couldn't make sense of. But it energized him, and it felt like it healed his foundations, even. It made sense. No matter how puritanical a cultivation chamber looked, a figure like the Void Priestess was bound to have some pretty amazing arrays in their rooms.

"I am Perala Janodrok, though most know me as the Void Priestess."

"I'm Zac," Zac simply said as he sat down on the mat. "Can I ask why you have summoned me here?"

"Can't it just be because I am curious?" Perala said, and Zac thought he could see a vague smile behind the veil. "About the young man who has turned this sector upside down in ten short years. First the Tower of Eternity, and now my Void Star. I even heard a story from an old friend, about a young troublemaker who unwittingly helped his ascent."

"That's..." Zac coughed.

The Void Priestess knew the Eveningtide Asura? Zac had never heard anything about that, though he knew that Alvod never targeted the Void Gate during his rampage. But was Perala Janodrok really alive back then? If that was the case, she was much older than everyone thought.

"And now, I hear even the Undead Empire is leaving no stone unturned in their search of you," the Void Priestess Continued. "So would it be so odd if I just wanted to see the man behind all the mayhem?"

"The Undead Empire?" Zac said with surprise. "What do they want with me?"

"You'd have to ask them, but I do not think they are hostile. Most likely, they want to make a deal with you, and I think you can understand why," Perala said. "Your most recent actions have already created ripples."

Zac slowly nodded as he thoughtfully looked at the Void Star in the distance. Had the Undead Empire somehow figured out he was a Flamebearer, or at least connected to Ultom? If so, it made sense they wanted to get in touch with him, especially if they knew about his connection to Catheya. Who knew, had she perhaps returned to Zecia? They hadn't planned for something like that, but an event like Ultom could change many things.

It would be pretty convenient if true. Powerful factions had probably already set their sights on Ultom, and he might be swept up in this mess, whether he wanted to or not. Getting a powerful backer like the Undead Empire was one way to give a lifeline to himself and his people. After all, the Undead Empire was already at war with all living beings, and if they were reaching out like this, they probably didn't care about offending the other factions.

Still, was that the right move? To have his fate depend on some ancient unliving monsters he had never even met? It wasn't long ago he received an all-too-real lesson in the dangers of dealing with the peak factions of the Multiverse. What if the Undead Empire targeted him like the crazy monks did with the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation]?

"You are wounded," the Void Priestess suddenly added, which dragged Zac out of his thoughts. "It seems breaking off the Stellar Ladder and exiling the Kan'Tanu did not come without some hardship."

"Uh, that's—" Zac hesitated.

Had the Void Priestess seen his actions somehow? Was this why she had brought him here, to thank him? After all, he had not only solved the mess she had created by letting the infiltrators into the Void Star, but he might even have saved the life of her disciple. Looking back at it now, there was simply no way Leyara would have been able to deal with that Qriz'Ul King and close the gateway on her own.

"I will still not heal you. This is not a meeting with an elder imparting gifts and valuable lessons."

Zac's mouth opened for a few seconds before closing again, not knowing how to respond. Leyara's master was a bit of a jerk.

"Such are the rules. You have been chosen, and I cannot unduly interfere with your fate. If you get pulled under by the river, that simply means you cannot carry the weight of responsibility of Ultom."

"I understand," Zac grunted. "The others, are they fine?"

"Your demon friend and the young miss of the Tayn Clan are fine. My disciple and the others emerged a few minutes before you, and three Monarchs of the Void Gate are helping stabilize the portable realm. We will soon send in armies to deal with the invaders of both the portable realm and the Void Star."

"Now you're willing to deal with them?" Zac said, not without some exasperation.

"Fate stirred when you arrived, and the competition for candidacy began. Until now, there have been open slots, meaning I had to stay my hand. But no more. There was still one hidden in the depths of the

realm, but it was thrown back into the Million Gates Territory when you destroyed the Stellar Ladder and millennia of work.”

Zac weakly smiled upon sensing the mild irritation in Perala’s voice. She had already said it wasn’t a gift-giving meeting. Had he been dragged here to be chastised?

“Altogether, quite a lot of chaos for one E-grade cultivator. Then again, isn’t that your calling card?” Perala said, but there was thankfully some amusement in her voice. “Mr. Deviant Asura?”

“Uh, those rumors are exaggerated,” Zac coughed.

“I still don’t like the idea of my little disciple getting swept up with a troublemaker like you, so keep it in your pants,” the Void Priestess said, and Zac shuddered upon feeling space around him constrict. “Even stealing her underwear!”

“What! That was a gift,” Zac croaked as he felt his bones groan. “No, I mean, I didn’t-“

Perala laughed at that, and the pressure thankfully went away. “In either case. Focus on your cultivation. Now, I’m sure you’re wondering why I actually summoned you here.”

‘Well, apparently not to heal me,’ Zac inwardly complained, but he only had the guts to nod. Next time, she might try to crush him for real.

“Imbalance.”

“What’s that?” Zac said.

“Two fates converged, and one could say you were shortchanged,” the Void Priestess said. “We were not the cause, and it is not within my power to right the imbalance, but I still wish to see if I can alleviate the deficiency a bit.”

“I thought you people wouldn’t get involved?” Zac said.

“Nothing is perfect, and I am just doing what needs to be done,” Perala sighed.

Zac didn’t understand what prompted this level of candor from the Void Priestess, but it was a huge opportunity. There were so many lingering questions, many of which Iz didn’t even know the answer to. And this time, he didn’t even need to eat an attack to get the answers. So Zac quickly reorganized his thoughts before speaking up.

“Two fates converged? Mine?” Zac asked.

“Over the eons, purposes become muddled and paths slowly diverge,” Perala said as she turned her head toward the Void Star. “The Left Imperial Palace chose you as a candidate, but something stirred the System into action. It forcibly broadened the scope and put its finger on the scale. This is different from what’s expected. Different from the previous ascents.”

So it was the Left Imperial Palace that was connected to him, after all? Then what about his Void Energy and the Qriz’UI? Still, there was a more pressing issue.

“Previous Ascents?” Zac probed.

"It is not the first pillar to emerge," Leyara nodded. "It has happened more than once before. In fact, this is the fifth."

"What happened when the previous ones appeared?" Zac asked, though he had a sinking feeling he already knew the answer.

"War of unprecedented proportions. Wars to decide the direction of our Era."

"Four pillars? The direction of the Era?" Zac slowly said before his eyes widened. "The Apostates?"

As far as Zac knew, there were a total of five Apostates. However, The First Defier was an anomaly that no one seemed able to explain. He had appeared out of nowhere and was gone before anyone had time to react. He was like a rocket that had shot straight through the Heavens, leaving chaos and confusion in his wake.

Meanwhile, the other four were more similar. They were all peak figures in their own rights, who ultimately left a mark on the System related to their path. But how does one add something to the System, and why hadn't anyone else done the same over the billions of years? Was it because only four Pillars had emerged so far?

However, Zac's theory was killed as quickly as it was born.

"No, that is different," Perala said with a shake of her head. "Only one of the pillars was involved in an Apostatic Ascent. The wars involved something else. Nothing good will come from you knowing the details right now. But suffice to say, there are opposing camps to an ancient struggle while the Vigil is a neutral party."

"So you just... look?" Zac said.

"Not quite. We have one important task; to keep the Heavens out of the equation. Fate must be decided by men, not by the Dao," the Void Priestess said. "Most factions are quite happy to help us out in that regard, as they want to seize the future for themselves."

"If you can't tell me what this is all about, then what can you tell me?" Zac asked.

"Don't worry. Those things might matter to you if you ever close in on the peaks. Until then, they are only a distraction," Perala said. "What I can tell you would rather help you in the short run."

"Can you help me find the rest of the pieces?" Zac asked hopefully.

"No, I cannot get directly involved like that," Perala smiled. "Besides, I have no idea."

"Then what?"

"As I said, the System has intervened and enforced some rules," Perala said. "Much is still in flux, but I can tell you a few things with certainty. These are things the other participants already know, or will soon come to find out, so it can barely be counted as an intervention."

"First, you will have to contend with others for your claim. You should already know that much. Their ages are limited to 100 years, which puts you at less of a disadvantage. Any older, and they will not be able to find any of the keys."

Zac's brows rose in surprise. It actually looked like the System had done him a solid there. People below 100 years were all part of the young generation, and it beat competing against old monsters who had lived for millions of years.

Of course, a century was still a long time, especially for someone like Zac, who had only cultivated for just over a decade. Progress slowed down the further you went, but 100 years should be enough to reach at least Middle D-grade for a young elite. Probably even Late D-grade if you had both the talent and resources.

"Secondly, you will not be able to complete your seal through fate and serendipity," Perala continued. "The System will not allow it."

"What?!" Zac exclaimed.

Was this why he failed to sense any more pieces while both Ogras and Iz had found theirs? If so, it was a huge blow. Many of his plans hinged on him finding the seals to the Left Imperial Palace, even if he had just gotten his hand on a decent substitute.

"It is not just for you. The inheritance of Ultom has been integrated with the upcoming war, and the right to participate will depend on your contribution," Perala said. "I do not know how close you are to gaining access to the inheritance, but the final piece is already in the System's hands."

"Integrated with the war? What does that mean?" Zac frowned. "I have to buy the last pieces with war credits?"

"Something in that regard. Or perhaps the pieces will be moved to key battlefields," Perala said. "I am not sure about the exact details. We will find out more once the war officially starts."

"Do you know when the war will officially start?" Zac asked.

"Four years," the Void Priestess said. "It was supposed to take longer, but I fear the fusion of these two events changed the timeline."

"And these outside factions will send their own people to join the war?" Zac frowned.

"It appears that way. Some have already arrived, like the descendant of the Empyrean Throne you seem to know somehow. Luckily for Zecia, there are some safeguards in place. This is a test of fate, and the System is preventing our little sector from being overrun by outside combatants," Perala explained.

"But there will be scions of peak factions joining the war, on both sides probably? Bringing their elders and bodyguards?" Zac frowned.

"Most likely," Perala nodded.

"A lot of locals will die if forced to face something like that," Zac sighed.

"The strong devour the weak, as it has always been," Perala said with equanimity.

Zac didn't immediately answer but instead went over his plans regarding the new information. Four years was a bit shorter than he could have hoped, but it wasn't a worst-case scenario. The biggest

problem was the fourth piece of rubble, where Zac found himself in a Catch-22. He needed those pieces to break through before the war, but he had to wait until the war to get the pieces.

It put him under a lot more pressure. Not only did he have to find the third piece quickly, but he had to find a solution to his blueprint with that piece alone. There would be no backup unless he was willing to join the war as an E-grade warrior. And he wasn't, especially not after learning about these outsiders who would participate like it was some sort of limited trial. He refused to see his people become contribution points to some rich asshole from the Multiverse Heartlands.

Besides, with the System controlling the events, it was extremely likely would be set at a collision course with the other candidates. If he stayed as an E-grade cultivator in the face of such a threat, he'd be slaughtered. If he broke through, he'd at least have a fighting chance.

"This is what I wanted to tell you," Perala eventually said. "Work hard these coming years. The stronger you become, the more you will have to say about Zecia's fate. Now, I'll send you back to your people."

Zac's eyes widened in surprise. Already? He had just been here for a few minutes, and there were still a lot of things he needed to find out. But he already felt space twist around him, prompting him to blurt out the first thing that came to mind.

"Wait," Zac urgently said. "Can you tell me the real name of Emperor Limitless?"

"His name?" Perala said with surprise. "He went by his Dao Name for most of his life, but his true name was Laondio Evrodok."

Zac's heart clenched with shock, but the next moment he was gone, leaving the Void Priestess alone in her chambers. Blood started to run down Perala's nose as cracks spread across her skin, but she didn't care.

"This is all I can do for you, my child," she said with a soft gaze as she turned toward the sky. "This guy is a troublemaker, but he might be the key."