

The Fall 935

Chapter 935: Sidelined

Zac wanted to roll his eyes at Ogras and ask him what the worst that could happen was, but he reined himself in. He knew his track record wasn't the best in this regard, and it felt a bit foolhardy to tempt the Heavens just after drawing the attention of the river of fate. Instead, Zac turned his attention to his surroundings, using his Danger Sense and [Cosmic Gaze] to ensure nothing had changed in the ruins compared to their map.

"There aren't actually that many dangers unless you try to mess with the arrays," Joanna said. "But if you do, it's a crapshoot. Sometimes, the building is simply fortified beyond what any E-grade can deal with. Other times, you trigger dangerous arrays. We had one explorer caught in an illusion that lasted for thousands of years in their mind. By the time we got them out, their soul was so overdrafted they died just hours later."

"His perception was completely warped," Vilari sighed. "He believed reality a dream by the point we got him out. The poor man kept calling for 'Cassie,' who I guess was his wife in the vision."

"Poor bastard," Ogras muttered as he increased his distance from the closest building.

Zac shook his head, remembering the similar arrays back during the Hunt. Those things were no joke, but they were probably just a shadow compared to the ancient arrays spread throughout the Ensolus ruins. Thankfully, the still-intact barriers weren't too common. They had appeared in a residential district, and few of these structures were probably considered valuable enough to go through that kind of effort.

Still, that wasn't enough for Zac to lower his guard, and he vigilantly scanned every building they passed.

"What's with all the temples?" Zac eventually muttered after passing the fourth temple in under ten minutes. "Were these people so devout they needed one on every block?"

"Communal cultivation, I would guess," Ogras said. "Each temple would be equipped with a powerful gathering array and other arrays to help with cultivation, drawing the neighborhood's energy into it. That way, each person gets access to a better environment than if they just stayed in their home, and there is no competition where two neighbors fight for the same energy."

"So it's just a bunch of empty cultivation chambers with broken arrays inside?" Zac said with disappointment.

"Not necessarily," Ogras said, his eyes gleaming with greed as he looked at a shielded temple. "Depends on how wealthy this civilization was, and how well these arrays have preserved what's inside. They might have powered the arrays with valuable treasures. Or stocked them with public cultivation manuals surpassing anything we own. Parts of their heritage might be placed in these structures."

"This might have been a faith-based cultivation society as well if these ruins really are related to the Limitless Empire," Vilari added. "In some eyes, Emperor Limitless might have been considered a god of war. I've read that many powerful factions draw power through faith, overtly or passively."

That statement made Zac give the sealed temples an extra glance. What if there were statues depicting Emperor Limitless inside? Would they look like Laondio? Or Karz? Did it matter?

Zac shook his head and kept walking toward a large dome in the distance that was their first pitstop, according to the map. However, they only advanced for two minutes before Zac suddenly stopped as his Danger Sense warned him against proceeding further. Zac didn't understand what was wrong until a wave of colorful lights suddenly illuminated the path ahead, like a flash of fae fireflies.

The scene was gone as quickly as it appeared, but it was ample proof something was going on with the street.

"This is an array that has started to leak out from a neighboring building," Joanna said. "Go around or push through?"

"Let's just go around it," Zac said, not in the mood to tempt fate or risk new wounds when he had just started getting better.

In this manner, they slowly made their way toward the center of the town, guided by the ripples in Zac's mind and the map prepared by his explorers. Only five minutes passed until they were forced to reroute again to avoid another array that had crept out across the area, forming a seemingly bottomless lake.

It was an odd feeling seeing the varied phenomena. The city was dead, yet it kept reinventing itself. Of course, these aberrations would either be reined in as the array self-healed or when the arrays ran out of power. Thankfully, these were the biggest surprises they encountered until they reached their destination; a desolate square only decorated with a huge statue.

A decent number of chunks of the enormous statue were missing, but it looked like it once had depicted a 23-layered wave or rainbow, each layer made from a different type of rock. It was over 100 meters tall and half as wide, and Zac had initially thought it was a building. But at this distance, he saw the structure was only decorative.

It felt like a brutalist statement in the otherwise sparse environment. Zac didn't initially understand why he felt this region so dour, but he soon realized what made this place stand out – it lacked any vegetation that otherwise covered the Ruins. Instead, the square was caked with a layer of dust.

Even then, it didn't look like the statue was the origin of the ripples. It rather originated from a majestic temple standing at the edge of the square. Its five-meter gates were wide open, and a path of destruction had been formed from them in the shape of a cone. For some reason, the statue itself was unscathed, while everything else had presumably been turned into ash.

"This is it," Zac said. "My piece is inside that building, it looks like. See the dust? That's what happens with you if you get too close to a piece that's not fated with you."

"At least it would be painless," Rhuger said grimly while taking an extra step back.

"So, what's your plan here?" Ogras asked.

Zac looked at the eroded temple for a few seconds, feeling the pull from the seal within. Just seeing it with his own eyes was a source of great comfort. He knew himself well enough by now. If he hadn't

come here, his mind would keep coming back to it, wondering how exposed it was. Now, they just needed to seal this place up.

“We’ll begin with setting up a protective barrier around this square and temple,” Zac said. “Later, we’ll station some trusted warriors in some of the ruins here to ensure no one tries to sneak inside.”

Zac took out the series of prepared array flags, each looking like a one-meter-spike hanging from a tripod. The cobblestones were too durable to break apart, but the relentless river of time had given them an opening through all the vegetation. There were gaps all over, and one spike after another sunk into the ground, forming a perimeter roughly 100 meters away from the temple and the square.

The work hit some snags because of two still-active arrays in the vicinity, but Zac had more than enough flags prepared. Soon enough, an invisible fence had been erected. It wouldn’t keep out a determined Peak E-grade cultivator forever, but it was more than enough for reinforcements to arrive.

With that, Zac saw no reason to stay, considering he had done what he could to share the quest. He wasn’t in any state to properly explore these ruins, and he would recover faster back in his cave. However, it looked like only Ogras would follow him back to Earth.

“We’re staying here for the time being,” Vilari said after sharing a look with Rhuger and Joanna. “We’ll explore this place and search for any clues to the inheritance. We have been here before, but now we know which runes to look out for.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll deal with the guards as well,” Joanna added.

“Alright,” Zac nodded. “But try to return to Port Atwood in three months at the latest. And don’t overdo it; fate can’t be forced. Most of the seals are waiting in the Million Gates Territory, so it’s not the end of the world even if you don’t find anything here. And try to send a message first in case you plan on entering any sort of ruins. We don’t want another Janos situation on our hands.”

Ideally, Zac would have wanted to get some life tablets as well, but tablets strong enough to track E-grade cultivators across any significant distances were pretty difficult to make. Besides, few bothered crafting them, at least in Zecia. After all, E-grade cultivators generally stayed within the confines of their clans or traveled with their elders. What was the point of tracking them with an expensive tablet?

“Of course,” Vilari said. “Don’t worry about us. Focus on your recovery and let the others deal with the day-to-day.”

“Good luck,” Zac smiled, giving the brooding temple one last look before turning away.

Now, it was up to fate whether the others could find the key to the courts. If not, Zac would have to figure out another way to get a couple of followers from the outside to fill up the numbers. Luckily, he had a pretty good solution for that – Catheya and the Undead Empire. They would probably be more than happy to send some competent followers his way in exchange for access to the Left Imperial Palace.

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Catheya ran her hand through the dense clouds of death that danced in the fountains, and she took a calming breath as she looked up at the familiar architecture of her kin. She had to admit it was a

welcome change from the wretched environment she and her guardian had stayed in during the past months.

Even with beacons holding life at bay on an unawakened planet, it felt like you were trapped in a small bubble, and the whole universe was bearing down on you. It was an unwelcome reminder of how limited her sky was, yet Catheya couldn't help but want to go back.

"Is it really alright to leave that man to his own devices?" Catheya asked with worry as they walked toward the teleportation chamber. "He might do something foolish."

"Who? The Dreamer or the brat?" Enis asked.

"Well, both, I guess, but I was thinking of the Dreamer," Catheya said.

"He should understand his place by now," Enis answered without care. "If that Dreamer tries to break the restriction, only an early awakening awaits him. Besides, he is incredibly meek by nature. I would guess it will take years before he dares so much as nudge that that mark with his Mental Energy."

"But our line of communication--"

"Can be reinstated through another proxy if need be," Enis concluded. "Now, remember to mind your manners. Your irreverence cannot be allowed to cause any friction or problems. Don't forget; this mission even has the Heart's attention."

"I know," Catheya said with a roll of her eyes. "Just doesn't sit right with me. This was our mission, and suddenly we're sidelined? And they won't even tell us any real details."

Enis didn't immediately answer, but Catheya could tell there was a hint of annoyance between her brows. It was no wonder. She was a competent warrior of Clan Umbri'Zi, but she held no real political sway in her clan. This mission, one ordered by the Abyssal Lake and the Umbri'Zi Ancestor herself, was a chance for Enis to accrue enough credit to take up a better role and accumulate more resources.

Perhaps even gain a spot at the Abyssal Shores, which would drastically improve her chances of confirming her Dao.

But now, just as they finally had managed to contact that troublemaker, they were sent back home, ordered to assist some newcomer in an undertaking of great import. One that their own target was apparently part of.

Catheya felt a wave of reluctance as they entered the enormous hall reserved for exalted visitors, almost regretting she had shared her method of contact with the Undead Empire. Before, it felt like everything had clicked into place, and she could confidently say she had upheld her promise. She even held onto some sort of farfetched conviction that Zac would manage to break the convention of Edgewalkers, allowing him to stay on as he were.

Now? Who was to say what would happen?

But Catheya knew one thing – when 'matters of great import' were being discussed, people became expendable in the face of goals and benefits. Especially outsiders without any proper backing. Like Zac. Clan Umbri'Zi might have claimed him as their own to gobble up some of the rewards, but they would

just as quickly discard him if the benefits from this undertaking eclipsed those of a Draugr Edgewalker with a possibly lost bloodline.

The two found Tassar Kavriel and his most-promising descendant already standing at attention in front of the platform when they arrived. The old man turned to them when they arrived, but his eyes kept shifting to the teleportation array, waiting for the new arrivals to appear.

"Mistress, young miss," Tassar said with a nod.

"Lady Umbri'Zi, Lady Sharva'Zi," Rezo Kavriel followed up with a much-deeper bow.

"Hello," Catheya said with a nod. "Uncle, have you heard anything?"

Tassar Kavriel had taken care of her since she and her master arrived in Zecia the first time around. And with Va Tapek immediately entering seclusion, or rather leaving to search for some item as Catheya found out later, this old Monarch and his descendants had been the ones to accompany her most of the time.

Tassar's ancestor was an illegitimate mixed-blood son of one of the supreme elders of the Umbri'Zi. Since his talent was quite good, a pureblooded Draugr had been arranged as a Dao Partner, and they had then been sent off to manage this newly integrated sector. Millions of years had passed since then, and the Kavriel clan was almost completely detached from the Umbri'Zi.

As far as Catheya could tell, that was fine with Tassar. His position was extremely secure thanks to his heritage, and no factions were powerful enough to shake the Undead Empire in Zecia. No one from above pushed him to expand faster either, so he simply waged the occasional war to satisfy the commandments.

Apart from the lacking materials, it was really a cushy life. But now, chaos was knocking at his door, and Catheya could see the new lines of worry had appeared on the face of the kindly old man.

"Nothing yet," Tassar said with a shake of his head. "But it shouldn't be long now."

No one was in the mood to talk, and they stood in silence for 30 minutes until the array hummed to life. A moment later, eight new people appeared in a flash of spatial death. They all seemed extremely powerful, but two drew more attention than the others for natural reasons. They were Izh'Rak Reavers, each one attended by a Revenant.

The Reaver standing in the back was most likely a Monarch. They emitted no aura, but a sense of unfathomable momentum was locked within their frame. The other one was a Hegemon, and their monstrously condensed aura was on full display. Catheya felt her vision swim for a moment as she was drowned in murderous intent, while Rezo gasped and was forced to take a step back.

"Sorry, sorry," the younger Reaver laughed as he stepped off the platform, his attention surprisingly on Rezo. "Didn't even puke. Not bad. Join my squad later, yeah?"

"I- ah?" Rezo hesitated, his eyes unsurprisingly darting toward the other half of the group.

They were two pureblooded Draugr, flanked by a Revenant and Corpselord. Just like with the other part of the contingent, it looked like they were two Monarchs accompanying two Hegemons. Catheya

couldn't fathom the price paid to force not one but four Monarchs through the seal that surrounded Zecia.

"Enough, Kator," the other Reaver said. "The elders have already decided on the rules for the formation of your battalions."

Cathey and Enis shared a look. Battalions?

"Welcome," Enis said while Tassar was content to take on a background role in front of these powerful guests. "I am Enis Umbri'Zi, and my ward here is Cathey Sharva'Zi. I pray your long journey was not too taxing."

Enis's displeasure had only increased after seeing these new arrivals judging by the small frown on her face. After all, these two Draugr were unfamiliar faces, and even Cathey could tell they weren't part of the Zi bloodline, even if they kept their auras in check.

"Thank you," the older Draugr, he too a Monarch, said with a curt nod. "Laz Tem'Zul."

Cathey looked at the man curiously. Zul was a branch on the rise, and Tem'Zul was one of the most powerful clans of that surname. They essentially enjoyed a similar position as the Umbri'Zi, which only increased Cathey's confusion. Why had someone from the Zul been sent to Zecia, when this was technically the domain of the Zi?

After all, the Umbri'Zi already had Monarchs stuck outside the sector seal. Why forcibly grant these people entry while keeping the Zi out? Were there some conflicts brewing between the factions of the Abyssal Shores? And who was this woman who hadn't deigned to speak up, even if she was clearly just a Hegemon like the Reaver?

"And young miss is...?" Cathey hesitated after getting a pointed glance from Enis.

"Tavza An'Azol," the annoyingly beautiful woman said, her face remaining impassive.

Cathey's eyes widened in shock, and she hurriedly curtsied. Even Enis was alarmed by that surname, and her small frown quickly transformed into a somewhat strained smile. Cathey couldn't fault her guardian for putting on such a fake façade.

What else could you do when a direct descendant of an Abyssal Prince stood in front of you?

However, a thought suddenly struck Cathey, and she glanced at the Izh'Rak Reaver. He had already retracted his overwhelming aura, but Cathey still remembered its terror. Considering his almost unfathomable accumulations and how he showed no deference to a Descendant of An'Azol, his origin couldn't be simple either.

"Hey lass, I'm Kator. That there is Brigadier Toss. We're from the White Sky Phalanx," Kator said. "The other two are Pavina and Umbar."

Cathey shuddered as she curtsied again. As expected. These people came from one of the three Royal Phalanxes of the Izh'Rak Reavers. This was big. Too big, to the point Cathey almost felt suffocated. The already frayed realm of certainty was fast collapsing around her, and the next words out of the Reaver's skull only made the matter worse.

“Now, where is this half-dreaming native who holds the key to the castle?”