

The Fall 896

Chapter 896: Another Cycle

The enormous spikes had blotted out his surroundings in no time, forming an almost perfect half-sphere. The scene reminded Zac of the chamber that contained the Dimensional Seed back in the Mystic Realm. But back then, the spikes had been pointed at the dimensional treasure. Now they were pointed at him, and the cage was shrinking. Fast.

The fifty-meter spikes appeared to be wrought from the same rusty stone as the surroundings, but they were covered with black veins that looked like obsidian. Those veins contained a terrifying amount of energy, and it felt as though thousands of [Nature's Punishment] were being unleashed at once.

Not only that, but the array of stalactites had formed some sort of barrier. Even if he somehow managed to squeeze between the spikes, he would also have to deal with the fence. Zac glanced at black-furred humanoids who had run away from him earlier. He could barely discern some of them outside the ambush, and their eyes were filled with cold hatred as they silently stared back at him.

So much for fleeing in fear of his prowess. They just didn't want to be caught inside the trap that was rapidly closing in on him. There were also hundreds of yetis left inside who were caught between a rock and a hard place. The Beast Kings had to be hell-bent on killing him since the attack would result in mass casualties among their own.

Even Zac felt tremendous pressure when he looked up at the spectacle. This was why he always rushed into a melee with Beast Kings and Hegemons. Giving them time to make use of their vast stores of energy and D-grade skills would always put him at a disadvantage. He could tell [Empyrean Aegis] would only be able to withstand a couple of hits before breaking apart, and [Void Zone] wasn't very effective against corporeal attacks.

He had to dodge it – or rather pass right through it.

Luckily, his slaughter had created some breathing room, especially with the remaining beasts escaping from the trap. And with the tremendous waves of energy the thousands of spikes were emitting, there was no way either Vai or anyone else would be able to discern what he was up to inside the trap. As such, a plan formed in his mind, and he flashed forward to the edge of the encirclement.

A hand emitting an archaic aura appeared out of nowhere, wielding the wooden axe covered in the markings of paradise. It was [Arcadia's Judgement] activated with Void Energy, which saved Zac a precious second. The cage had already halved in size in a short moment, and if not for his cheat, he wouldn't have had time to conjure the skill before getting skewered. And even if activated with Void energy, the skill still gained the boost from [Arcadian Crusade].

The enormous axe slammed down on the spikes barring his path, and the collision shook the whole valley and agitated the layer of ash on the ground. The veins of the spikes shimmered for a moment as their energy surged, but the spikes still only lasted a moment in the face of Zac's empowered strike.

With all the layered powers Zac had added to his most potent attack, the swing felt like a harbinger of the apocalypse as it destroyed everything in its path. Still, the spikes actually crumbled easier than Zac

had expected, but a sudden scream of danger forced Zac to scramble to the side. A whistling scream almost blew out his eardrum as a fist-sized shard narrowly missed his head.

Zac grimaced when he realized it wasn't just an errant shard shot in his direction by the clash. The spikes were exploding like cluster bombs along the veinlike patterns, which unleashed innumerable projectiles on the surroundings. His attack had started a chain reaction as more and more spikes exploded, and the trapped beasts were already dying by the dozens.

[Nature's Edge] couldn't compare to this kind of mayhem, whether you considered the number of projectiles or their velocity. Another shard whizzed past him like a blur right on the heels of the previous one, and Zac shuddered when he felt just how much energy it contained. A golden laurel appeared on his head as he desperately fended off dozens of splinters with his axe, and it narrowly allowed him to block four spikes that slammed into him from behind.

The golden barrier of [Empyrean Aegis] saved him from being gored, but it couldn't completely dispel the force contained in the shards after the explosions. So Zac found himself pushed in the direction of his own skill. At first, he was afraid that he would find himself attacked by the second stage of [Arcadia's Judgement], but he was surprised to see the second shockwave completely blocked and nullified by the tiles.

Only now did he realize that not so much as a mark had been left on them since the battle started, no matter if it was from his attacks or the projectiles that slammed into the ground all around him with the force of an E-grade elite's attack.

A sharp pain dragged him out of his thoughts as a shard managed to pierce through his barrier. One of the steles of [Empyrean Aegis] had already crumbled, and the cascading explosions around him were only getting worse. Zac ignored the dangers as he rushed straight into the path he had opened, trying to cover as much ground as possible.

He was constantly blasted with sharp projectiles, each one containing enough force to slam him into the ground or push him off course. But Zac was adamant about getting through this gauntlet. [Verun's Bite] turned into a blur as he parried as many projectiles as he could, and he threw out whole stacks of offensive talismans with his other hand to avert some more.

Long patches of Vivi's vines were being ripped asunder as well as the plant formed thick nets to lessen the burden on [Empyrean Aegis]. Even if he was rapidly expending energy, there was simply too much shrapnel being unleashed by the Beast Kings. He couldn't possibly block it all even if he moved as efficiently as he could following Evolutionary Stance.

One piece of rock after another broke through the barrier, leaving him with deep wounds and infusions of chaotic energies. Zac knew he would have to eat even more strikes than this if he wanted to reach the barrier outside. But no matter how dangerous his plan was, it was nothing compared to the meatgrinder behind him. If he waited around until all the spikes exploded, not even scraps of him would remain.

Each step was a battle, but he finally believed he had pushed himself far enough. Ancient trees sprouted atop the tiles all around him, though most of them were ripped apart the moment they appeared. Zac didn't care – he only needed the effect of [Ancestral Woods] for a short moment.

Hundreds of scenes entered his mind, and Zac breathed out in relief. He hadn't miscalculated the distance in all the chaos – he was just two hundred meters away from the barrier meant to trap him in this hellscape. The shield looked extremely sturdy, and it didn't so much as shudder after getting hit by hundreds of shards every second. Breaking through it by force would probably take a while.

Unfortunately for them, Zac had other means. If Vai had seen the trees of [Ancestral Woods] right now, she would have realized they truly lived up to their name today as they emitted an unusually primordial aura. Zac had activated the skill with Void Energy, which allowed for a unique advantage with this particular skill.

He had already confirmed that Void Energy worked differently and could simply ignore most types of seals. He had used that to kill the cultists back in the Mystic Realm, but [Ancestral Woods] provided a different kind of use – escape. The forest covered quite a big area, so a few of them appeared outside the barrier.

The Beast Kings realized something was wrong and moved to destroy them, but they weren't quick enough. Zac had already suddenly emerged from one of them like a bloody specter, with an axe keening for vengeance in his hand. Zac could tell Verun wanted to come out and fight these Yeti Kings, but he held the Tool Spirit back as he rushed forward.

Behind him, the rumble kept growing louder as the cage descended into utter chaos, and the cries from the trapped yeti had already been cut short. His heart shuddered as he pictured himself being stuck inside that grinder, but he quickly turned that fear into speed. The gate to the temple was only a few hundred meters away, with only a single Beast King barring his path.

"Bastards," Zac growled as the muscles in his right arm bunched up, and the golden runes on his face suddenly shone brighter as he closed in on the five-meter-tall Humanoid Beast King.

Zac unleashed a herculean swing at the incoming swipe, and the clash kicked up an enormous cloud of dust from the piles accumulated around the entrance. Zac was pushed back a step and worsened some of his wounds while the five-meter Yeti King was thrown over twenty meters away with a severed arm and a deep wound its chest, showing just how terrifying Zac's Strength was for an E-grade cultivator.

His arm hurt, but there was no time to think. Zac regained his footing and lept forward, flying straight toward the arched gate before the other Beast Kings could catch up. Even if things had gotten a bit hectic, he knew all-too-well how dangerous this was, and he wasn't thinking about the yeti outside.

An instant later, he passed through the gate and landed inside the temple's courtyard, his heart beating like a drum as his eyes were trained on the small prayer hall inside. It was from there the signal came, and the response was immediate. A powerful pulse rippled out from within the ruin, and Zac urgently activated [Void Zone] and covered his whole body with Void Energy.

Zac still didn't really know if that was what had saved him last time, but it was better than just getting his extremities turned to ash again. It was also because of this pulse he hadn't dared let Verun out. Last time, all his belongings survived. In contrast, anything he didn't touch had been destroyed, such as the Spatial Treasure and gear of the scout.

The pulse passed through him until it reached the edge of the courtyard, where it simply stopped. Zac stood frozen in place for a second before he breathed out in relief. It looked like he had been accepted.

A second later, a furious burst of energy drew his attention, and Zac turned around to see an enraged group of Yeti Kings stomping outside.

Even if Zac had survived, they didn't dare to take as much as one step inside the courtyard, proving they knew just how dangerous this place was. Still, it was a bit distracting to have them scowl at him and cause a scene. Luckily, there was a simple solution since the stone gate remained intact.

"You guys should probably leave if you don't want to get killed," Zac muttered as he closed the doors. "Things will only get worse from here on out."

Zac wanted to rush inside and get the second part of the seal, but his body was a mess. He hadn't expected to be pushed this far by the beasts outside, so he reluctantly spent the next hour at the edge of the courtyard, restoring his body and energy while recovering from [Arcadian Crusade] 's backlash. It would be a colossal waste to squander the opportunity because of exhaustion.

After ten minutes, the commotion outside died down, giving Zac some peace and quiet. Even better, the temple seemed content to wait around as well, in contrast to the rubble that had essentially attacked him like a heat-seeking missile. After what felt like an eternity, Zac got back on his feet and walked toward the prayer hall with a mix of trepidation and anticipation.

Now that he stood within the temple and things had calmed down, he could feel an intense sense of antiquity emanating from the dilapidated ruins. There was also a sense of undying conviction ingrained into the very foundations he walked on. But it didn't carry the aggressive aura of the Left Imperial Palace, the kind of fierceness that dared to go against the Heavens themselves.

It was solemn, and Zac felt it was somehow focused on a singular task. Suddenly, Zac stopped and turned his head, but only an empty courtyard met his confused gaze. For a moment, Zac had felt like he saw someone in the corner of his eye, silently looking at him. Just as he thought he imagined things, another shape suddenly appeared, walking right past him toward the prayer hall.

The moment he saw the body, Zac found himself collapsing onto the ground, and he was unable to so much as lift his head in front of its worldending aura. Thankfully, the immense pressure disappeared as quickly as it arrived, and by the time Zac looked up, the figure was gone. Were these imprints left by mighty people back when this place was still in use? But who could leave such powerful impressions, like he was in the presence of a deity?

Supremacies. Not even the powerful Autarch he had met had exuded that kind of divinity, and this was just some lingering impression in a dilapidated ruin.

The odd encounter didn't scare Zac off. Instead, his anticipation grew as he ascended the seven steps of the temple and walked inside. If this little temple was visited by a Supremacy once upon a time, there might actually be more treasures than just a second piece of the rubble waiting in this place.

Unfortunately, there weren't any piles of treasure waiting for him as he entered the prayer hall. Instead, it was simple and unadorned. The room was essentially empty except for a white altar and eight faded scrolls hanging behind it. The rock from which the altar was made was highly weathered, and if there had ever been any inscriptions on it, they were long gone. The same was true for the scrolls.

They might have been made from some high-grade paper once upon a time, but they had long lost their spirituality. Only one of the eight was still intact, while the others had broken off completely. But even the best-preserved scroll was chapped and cracked to the point it was impossible to make out what had once been written on it.

The signal didn't come from the altar, nor did it come from any of the tapestries. Instead, it came from a statuette standing on the edge of the altar. It was roughly a twenty-centimeter tall stone figurine, presumably depicting a man pointing toward the sky. Zac couldn't be sure since it was also highly eroded, and the raised arm had been broken off at its elbow.

The statue didn't look like an original part of the decoration. Contrasting the figurine and the rest of the ruins, it felt like someone had just placed it there after this place had already been abandoned. It was clearly ancient, but it didn't share the same focused aura as the rest of the temple.

It didn't emit a smidgeon of energy. Just like with the piece of rubble last time, Zac wouldn't have given it a second glance if not for the strong signal it emitted. The statue also had three white lines covering its otherwise dark-grey surface, proving it was the item he had come for. The scene was odd, prompting Zac to stop just inside the prayer hall entrance.

The piece of rubble had looked like something that had been knocked off from the Left Imperial Palace, a piece of debris in the true sense of the word. That obviously wasn't the case with this figurine. It had been placed here by someone rather than having randomly appeared in this valley through a wormhole.

The difference seemed to carry some significance, some hidden implications he lacked the details to decipher. Had it been placed here by the figure he glimpsed outside? Zac stood frozen in thought for a minute until he eventually released a pent-up breath and walked forward. The answers would come to him sooner or later. Or perhaps they wouldn't; Zac was okay with that as well, even if he was curious.

But any stray thoughts were swept away the moment he came within ten meters of the statue. No longer did it seem like a harmless piece of antiquity. Instead, Zac was drowned by a towering aura so powerful he was almost pushed to his knees again.

Hatred. Irreconciliation. Frustration. Longing.

A confusing mix of emotions barraged Zac's mind, and he felt like a leaf swept up in a furious hurricane. No matter if it was his strengthened soul or his recent inroads into Heart Cultivation, they were far insufficient to deal with the sentiments contained within the small statuette. This was a hatred that had turned into a force of nature, holding the power to destroy everything.

Zac knew the only reason his soul hadn't instantly shattered was that the anger wasn't directed at him; it was directed at the Heavens themselves. If anything, it felt like the statue was angry for him, or rather for all beings. Just latent hatred was enough to drench Zac in sweat, and he hesitated on how to proceed.

Eventually, Zac gritted his teeth and took another step forward. He didn't know why this seal was different from the previous one. He also didn't understand why he was almost pushed away by the statuette this time when he couldn't avoid the piece of rubble even after trying. Zac only knew that his opportunity was within arm's reach, and some lingering resentment wouldn't stop him now.

One step, two steps. Zac slowly pushed forward, subduing the primal voice in his mind that urged him to run away from this pressure. After what felt like an eternity, he found himself right in front of the altar, his whole body once again covered in blood. It wasn't from his wounds reopening but rather an effect of walking through this palpable anger.

Zac was eternally thankful the domain hadn't grown any stronger as he got closer. He was already teetering on the edge of collapse as he touched the figurine with a shaking hand. At first, there was no response, but then Zac heard something.

A sigh.

"Another cycle, another Flamebearer. Will you break the chains or become another link?"