

The Fall 908

Chapter 908: Preparing for the Worst

"The Kingdom Of Ra'Lashar? What the hell are they doing over there?" Zac frowned.

"Nothing good, I assume," Ogras said.

"Are you sure there's nothing left there?" Zac asked.

"Shouldn't be," Ogras said, but he didn't look too confident. "After my quest there finished, the whole thing collapsed. A Spatial Rift swallowed the central tower. I searched the area for months for anything of value before moving on to other parts of the realm. But if they found something powerful left behind by those lunatics, we're in trouble. Everything they made was extremely dangerous."

"Can you ask your guy?" Zac ventured.

The demon nodded, but Zac knew it wasn't good as his face gradually turned into a scowl.

"He says he has no idea, but I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him," the demon eventually said.

Zac looked at the black spot on the map with a frown. He wasn't convinced the Kan'Tanu's mission was related to the Ra'Lashar themselves, and neither was Ogras, judging by his expression. Between their search for the sigils of the Left Imperial Palace, their interest in the mountain range, and now the Ra'Lashar, it felt like it was connected to this Lost Plane.

Were there more seals hidden in the ruins of the goblin empire? And if there were, should they do something about it?

The trio looked at the map for a few seconds until Ogras eventually sighed and pointed at a much-closer spot on the map. "The Kingdom of Billy is around here. No matter what these invaders are up to, our first destination hasn't changed. Let's just continue on our way while we keep our eyes open."

"Give me an hour or two. I'm pushing to Peak E-grade right now," Zac said.

Zac had hoped to avoid this step and gain his levels through battle instead. The consecutive blasts of Tribulation Lightning had cleansed his body, including impurities that had gone unnoticed by his Purity of the Void. It was a shame to ruin that now, but reading the reports put Zac under a lot of pressure. He couldn't just give up a power-up that was so near at hand.

Thankfully, his pills were extremely high-quality, and there were only two nodes he needed to open. What little impurities he gained shouldn't cause any real problems when forming his Cultivator's Core. One by one, his prepared treasures were brought out, from the [Stone of Hope] to the mysterious ice that froze his soul to harden it.

The only thing he skipped was the [Chainbreaking Pills] as they weren't needed any longer since his latest Soul Reincarnation. Zac wasted no time as he chugged down four Pseudo D-grade pills in one go, eliciting a shocked gasp from Vai and a disgusted snort from Ogras. He ignored the clamor and instead focused his frozen mind on channeling everything into the 149th node in his head.

Half an hour later, Zac grunted as the node on the back of his head broke wide open. Zac drew a ragged breath before he applied some more ice. He was halfway there, and he planned on riding this wave to the end. The final node of the E-grade was located right by his glabella, and it was the last blockage in his pathways.

Waves of Radiant energies poured into the node, but it was like the mysterious swirl was a bottomless hole that couldn't be satiated. Eventually, the efficacy of his Node-breaking pills ran out, but he stubbornly ate another mouthful. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Zac knew he was right there.

His danger sense had cut through his turbid thoughts, and he reinforced his Mental Barriers as best as he could while [Stone of Hope] lit up and illuminated the room. The next moment, Zac felt like his soul was split in two as a powerful ripple burst out from his forehead. He heard surprised exclamations from the other two, but they felt distant and indistinct.

Zac was completely focused on the state of his body. Blood was running down his nose from a deep cut, and it must have looked like a third eye had formed on his forehead. Thankfully, it was just a wound rather than a mysterious mutation – an outlet Zac had opened to avoid damaging his frontal lobe. Opening the node was painful as usual, but it couldn't compare to the sense of completeness that filled him.

A surge of energy coursed through his body as Zac took a deep breath. It felt vibrant and powerful, and it wasn't just the attributes he'd just gained. With his 75 Nodes all being open, his pathways were finally completely unclogged. The energy gently circulating through his body felt natural and unconstrained. It wouldn't do much for his actual combat strength, but anything that allowed him to handle and communicate with his Cosmic Energy was a welcome thing.

The peak of the E-grade.

Less than a fraction of a fraction of all cultivators reached this step, yet he had done it as a mortal. Of course, this was just the start. He was just an ant in the grand scheme of things, but that didn't douse his excitement as he opened his eyes. Ogras and Vai were both looking at him expectantly by that point, and Zac nodded slightly with a smile.

"You done?" Ogras asked.

"Just need to fill the nodes up with energy, but we can do that on the way."

"What was that before?" Ogras asked curiously. "Why does it look like you split in two every time you open a node?"

"It's a treasure I got my hands on," Zac explained. "I don't know exactly how it works, but it's like the treasure pushes some of the damage to an alternate reality while lessening the damage to me. Why? Do you need to borrow it?"

"No, I've long since reached level 150," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "It was just interesting. I felt the phenomenon somewhat resonate with my path. Making real damage fake, huh?"

"W-wait," Vai suddenly interjected. "You're not a Hegemon either?"

"If I were a Hegemon, I would just have flown myself and the two of you over this place, no?" Ogras said with a grin as the shadows started to flicker around him.

"But you're so powerful," Vai said with wide eyes.

"Well, at least someone has an eye for talent," Ogras grinned, obviously satisfied with the reaction.

"Don't stroke his ego," Zac snorted. "Give me another hour before we set out, I just have to recover a bit more from opening the nodes."

"Do you have more Soul Crystals?" Ogras asked. "I used up the two in the ring you gave me."

"Be careful with those," Zac said as he threw over another one. "They are almost impossible to restock."

"You're the one who wants me to use my domain every time the lass sees a bright light in the bowl," Ogras grinned as the crystal disappeared into the sleeves of his robes.

Zac spent the next hour redrawing his pathways until they were in workable order. He would still be a bit weakened for another week, but Ogras had already said it would take them at least three to reach the Kingdom of Billy at their pace. It should be enough time not only to recover, but to push his level to 150.

The moment Zac felt able to fight without accidentally damaging his pathways, the group set out, heading deeper and deeper into the Badlands. Ogras became the primary combatant over the following days while Zac let his nodes stabilize. Zac simply became bait and a meat shield while the demon did the killing.

To expedite his level, Zac constantly held onto Peak Quality Nexus Crystals as they ran, and torrents of energy poured into his Nodes. Not only that, but Zac also absorbed energy from Beast Crystals he'd hidden within his robes. The messy energy was swallowed by [Void Heart] and spat out as malleable energy that became a second river to speed up his progress.

After a week passed, Zac resumed fighting as well, and Ogras helped organize things so that Zac delivered all the killing blows on beasts above Late E-grade. It turned to a third source of energy, yet it still took two weeks before Zac had managed to fill all three nodes. The group took the opportunity for a brief stop to rest up before reaching Billy's place, and Zac opened his Status screen to check what his level brought.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

150

Class

[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

Race

[D] Human – Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

Titles

[...] Grand Fate, Blooddrenched Baron, Connate Conqueror, The Second Step, Singular Specialist

Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star – 14th, The Final Twilight, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao

Branch of the War Axe – Early, Branch of the Kalpataru – Early, Branch of the Pale Seal – Early

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

20876 [Increase: 143%. Efficiency: 287%]

Dexterity

8674 [Increase: 103%. Efficiency: 206%]

Endurance

15727 [Increase: 134%. Efficiency: 287%]

Vitality

14192 [Increase: 127%. Efficiency: 273%]

Intelligence

3763 [Increase: 97%. Efficiency: 206%]

Wisdom

6940 [Increase: 104%. Efficiency: 216%]

Luck

712 [Increase: 121%. Efficiency: 229%]

Free Points

250

Nexus Coins

[D] 933 647

A single glance at his status screen confirmed what he'd already learned; a full 250 Free Attribute Points were waiting for him rather than just the ten. It was an even greater boon than the 20 Attribute Points he got when reaching level 75. And that was just the start. Not only did peak E-grade provide a full 250 Free Points, but also a new title called The Second Step. There was even a second title waiting for him, one that Zac hadn't been able to confirm but had hoped for.

[The Second Step: Reach the peak of E-grade Reward: All Stats +10, Base stats +90]

[Singular Specialist: Reach 20,000 points in a single attribute before reaching D-grade. Reward: All Stats +10, Strength +5%, All Attributes +5%.]

As expected, it was related to the old 'Promising Specialist'-title Zac got when reaching 1,000 Endurance in F-grade. He hadn't gotten anything when reaching 10,000 Strength, but he had learned Ogras got one during his stay in this Mystic Realm. The mention had made him wonder if it was a tiered title, and his status screen proved it was.

The combination of hitting level 150 and the title that came with it had narrowly pushed him over 20,000 Attribute Points, double the level of the first checkpoint of the skill. A quick check confirmed Promising Specialist was gone, replaced with the new title rather than him having both. It was a bit of a disappointment, but the old title had only provided +5 All Attributes and +5% Endurance. So the new one was a pure upgrade, especially for his Strength.

Still, it made Zac wonder if there was actually an Apex title as well, one that would provide Attribute Efficiency. Perhaps if you reached your attribute limit?

Since he had already passed 20,000 Strength and gotten the title to match, Zac poured all of his free points into Dexterity. Altogether, the three levels had given him almost a 5% increase in his attribute pool, and they were mainly targeted at Strength and Dexterity. That was exactly what Zac wanted – anything that would allow him to hit a bit harder and a bit faster at this stage was a welcome addition.

It was a shame he didn't have a quick way to gain the last five levels to his undead side as well, but the boost still gave Zac some confidence when the trio set out again six hours later. Of course, he still hoped he wouldn't find himself face-to-face with a whole army of infiltrators, possibly led by hundreds of Hegemons. A few levels and titles wouldn't help against that.

But some things were simply unavoidable.

Four days after his breakthrough, Ogras had proclaimed they were within the official borders of the Kingdom of Billy. They had already left the Badlands behind, and had now entered a much more familiar type of environment – large tree groves with grassy plains between them.

There were also signs of human intervention – enormous but simple trenches and traps designed to deal with beast tides. However, just as the group was about to pass the battlements, Vai suddenly stilled.

"Enemies!" Vai whispered, and the air around them started to glimmer as Ogras powered up his domain before they jumped into the trench and dug a temporary hideout.

"How many?" Zac frowned after they'd erected an isolation array.

"Thirty, they are moving fast," Vai said. "Looks like a scouting party."

"Do you think it's Billy's people? Those Gnivelings you mentioned?" Zac asked.

"Doubtful," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "Billy doesn't need any scouts. The Realm Spirit is more effective than any scouting unit."

"If there are scouting parties this close..." Vai hesitated.

"Then they definitely know about the Kingdom of Billy," Zac sighed. "We might be in for a fight. Do you want to stay here?"

"N-No," Vai said with a shake of her head as she gripped her bowl tighter. "I am coming with. I can still help, we are days away from the settlement, and you need a scout."

"She's right," Ogras shrugged. "I can't guarantee my methods will work against all types of scouts, and it just takes one set of sharp eyes to expose us."

"Alright, we'll keep going like this," Zac agreed. "We avoid enemy squads as long as possible until we figure out Billy's situation. He might have relocated already."

The three waited an hour for the scouting party to leave the area before they set out again, but they met another group just three hours later and a third scouting party after another five. Even Ogras had a somber expression by that point. There was still a chance for it to be a coincidence with one group. With three, it was all but certain the infiltrators were carrying out some big operation in the area.

And that operation was definitely related to the Kingdom of Billy.

Not only that, but the infiltrators seemed to be expecting trouble judging by the parties, but the three still managed to creep closer and closer to their destination over the next three days. Until Vai's bowl almost lit up like a bonfire, prompting both Zac and Ogras to look over with confusion.

"S-Signals," Vai stuttered. "So many. Thousands."

"Shit," Ogras said. "Billy's castle is not far from here."

"Let's go," Zac said with a frown, and they kept moving until a powerful energy wave swept past them.

"There's a battle," Zac said with relief.

"The brute is actually holding out against an army?" Ogras added, confusion written all over his face.

"How is that possible?"

"The Void Gate," Vai said, her eyes glimmering. "I bet they are here fighting against the bad guys. Where else would they have gone but here?"

Zac finally understood why Vai was so adamant about joining them for this final stretch. She believed there was a good chance the elite Void Gate warriors would be found with Billy. And perhaps she was right. Twenty minutes later, they managed to sneak a peek at the battlefield.

A lonesome Mountain peak stood within a barricaded crater. The whole cavity was protected by a bubble that reeked of powerful spatial energies, and outside, a mighty army was laying siege. Over thirty enormous towers had been erected, and Zac could sense how they were accumulating power. If he had to guess, the earlier outburst came from these things firing simultaneously.

“What are we supposed to do now ?” Ogras sighed. “Fight our way inside? The castle is sealed shut – they are not fighting back at all. I don’t know if we’d even manage to get through the barrier. And if we do, then what? We’d be stuck inside just like Billy.”

Zac wasn’t sure what to do either. Eventually, he turned to Vai, who looked at the scene wide-eyed. “How many Hegemons are there?”

By this point, E-grade cultivators didn’t really matter to him. The only difference between fighting ten and a thousand was how long it would take to win. The problem was the Hegemons hidden within their ranks. A defensive Hegemon could almost completely nullify his attacks, while offensive ones could unleash powerful barrages at him.

So if there were too many, there was simply no chance he could take on all these people himself.

“Over eighty,” Vai grimaced. “Eighty Hegemons.”

“Impossible,” Ogras resolutely said with a shake of his head. “There is no way I’m fighting that. I’m not dying like this after I finally have a shot at getting out of here.”

“How about we send a distress beacon to the Void Gate to confirm if they are inside?” Zac hesitated, but he froze when there was a sudden change.

A substantial spatial bubble had started to grow on the barrier in the distance. In just a moment, it was half as big as the barrier itself, while the shield seemed to have lost some of its luster. The new bubble bulged out ominously toward a flank of the infiltrator army, who immediately started to run for their lives. But it was too late. The bubble popped, and over a hundred cultivators were torn apart as a beam of spatial chaos shot out.

Right toward them.

“Hurry, Gemmy is making a path!” a childish voice echoed in their ears just as Zac was about to turn tail and run for his life.

Zac glanced at Ogras, who looked positively nauseated. But it was clear he recognized the voice, so it was obvious to Zac who it belonged to. There was no hesitation as he grabbed Ogras with his left hand and Vai with a vine as he rushed straight toward the incoming chaos.

“I knew it,” the demon groaned. “I knew there’d be trouble when I heard that voice.”