

## The Fall 912

### Chapter 912: Raid

A knock echoed from the half-opened door to Zac's study, prompting him to look up from the Book of Duality.

"Already?" Zac sighed as Pretty Peak walked inside.

"Apparently, we only have around five days," Pretty nodded. "If you want enough time to figure out a solution over there, we have to make our move soon. And the sooner we get going, the more energy will be left for Gemmy."

"Thought we had just over a week," Zac grunted.

"Sorry, but we don't have a lot of options. Senior Salas' estimates aren't looking too promising. Everyone is working overtime, including the Gniveling. If we want a shot at this crooked scheme, we can't wait much longer," Pretty said with some helplessness on her face.

Zac sighed with a nod. The past two weeks had quickly turned into a struggle against time after Vai discovered some errors in Leyara's calculations. They had believed themselves to have over four weeks before they needed to finish and activate the array, but it turned out they only had three. If they waited any longer, Gemmy wouldn't have enough energy to form a stable spatial field.

"Well, I guess it doesn't make much of a difference," Zac eventually said. "I'm going to miss our sparring sessions, though."

"Likewise," Pretty smiled. "But who knows? We might just survive this and get more opportunities in the future."

The two had sparred almost daily since Zac arrived at the Kingdom of Billy, barring the days they had to recover from their wounds. Pretty had proven nearly as useless as he was for drawing the arrays, so they had been left to their own devices. Ogras, on the other hand, had been employed to help out a bit, though he still made some time to train and spar.

Upon learning about his chance to train under the tutelage of multiple Monarchs, the demon had been green with envy, and he was trying to glean something through Zac's stances. Of course, the Evolutionary and Inexorable Stances were useless to Ogras. Still, the theories and concepts that went into their formation were handy for anyone who wanted to improve their own techniques.

Right now, Ogras was relying on a mix of his clan's techniques and some strikes he'd invented himself, but he was making rapid improvements. The demon reminded Zac a bit of himself when he fought in the Big Axe Coliseum. Ogras had found a direction that was working for him, but he was somewhat lacking the foundations to move forward without falling into the same pitfalls as he had.

Still, Ogras had a fantastic battle sense and a feel for timing, something Zac had already seen when they fought together. Improving his techniques was probably a worthwhile direction for Ogras. However, he would be better off developing a style that struck fast and hard, rather than Zac's stances, which centered on seizing the momentum before whittling down the opposition.

Pretty Peak was also shocked at his skill since he hadn't shown any of that during his battle in the Tower of Eternity, but her own methods weren't anything to scoff at. This was the first time Zac had seen her fight, and her fighting style was far more in line with her bloody leather armor than her beautiful and almost dainty appearance. She was relying on her clan's battle technique when they sparred, but Zac often felt like he was fighting a beast rather than a cultivator.

She was an instinctual fighter, just like he was to a certain degree, and she refused to follow her enemy's tempo. She was full of unexpected moves, incorporating both grappling and various weapons into her repertoire. At any moment, her claws could have been replaced by two daggers or a brutal scythe, making it nigh-impossible to know what to expect.

Apparently, it was a technique developed on the battlefields, though Zac hadn't had the chance to see the real thing in action. It was devised by Pretty's ancestor, a talented captain of the Allbright Empire. He had been strong but dirt-poor, and his weapons often broke while fighting on the frontlines. So, he learned to use everything on a battlefield to his advantage in some sort of loot-and-fight-approach where he used the weapons and treasures of fallen allies and foes.

Of course, the Peak Family was no longer wanting for treasures, but they still maintained the mindset to not rely on their items. In Average's and Greatest's cases, they chose the path of pure pugilism, using their bodies as their weapon. Pretty Peak had chosen a different approach where she had mastered multiple weapons, though her primary weapons were claws and the sword.

The claws were self-explanatory; it was close to pugilism, and the Peak family had a lot of skills and techniques for that fighting style. Mastering swords was a choice of her own, but it wasn't due to some particular affinity.

Pretty had instead explained it with the high prevalence of swordfighters in Zecia. If she lost her weapons in battle, a sword would probably be the easiest to steal from her enemies. And there was always a good chance of finding better blades in places like Mystic Realms and Inheritance trials.

It was a stark difference from Zac's path where he planned on upgrading and using his treasures to the very end, but there was ultimately no right or wrong in cultivation.

"Five days, huh?" Zac sighed. "Will the array be done in time?"

"Honestly? It doesn't look too good," Pretty said as she hesitantly looked at Zac. "I hate to ask, but do you think you can help take down another tower on your way out? It would buy us another half day at least."

Zac considered it for a moment before he hesitantly nodded. "We could take one down, but the original plan has to change."

This would be the seventh and final raid in which Gemmy opened small breaches to let them out for a blitz attack. The first outing had been a rousing success, where they had formed three parties that targeted sections with fewer or weaker Hegemons. One group was Zac and Ogras, with another being Billy, Leyara, Pretty, and a Defensive Templar Hegemon. The last group consisted of four more Templar Hegemons and twenty support staff.

The sudden attack had left 12 enemy Hegemons dead or crippled and destroyed a siege tower, drastically weakening their capabilities. The most significant contributors had been the Templars, who took down seven of the enemies by using a series of expensive talismans provided for Leyara's safety. Ogras and he had taken out another three before they were forced to retreat, while Billy's team had taken care of the last two.

The second attempt worked out quite nicely as well, as they infiltrated a series of tunnels the invaders had dug in an effort to enter the fort from below. The third raid was a sobering experience, though, with three of their own Hegemons falling while Billy's party was almost wiped out. If not for the defensive Templar sacrificing himself, then Billy and Pretty wouldn't only have gotten out with nasty wounds.

Those losses and the new deadline were the beginning of the vicious circle that had forced them to fight the Kan'Tanu army another three times. Six out of their eleven Hegemons had already lost their lives by now. Another one had actually deserted them as well by using a raid to escape. How he was planning to survive was beyond Zac, but judging by the seething anger in Leyara's and the other Templars' eyes, he would probably have to join the invaders if he wanted a shot at survival.

Even Ogras had been forced to sit out the two last raids because of wounds, and three raid parties had been reduced to two as Zac joined the Templars instead of going at it alone. It had lessened the damage they did each battle, but they had no better options. After all, the demon needed to be in tip-top shape for this one.

"You're right, we're abandoning the diversion. We'll all join you for this final battle instead," Pretty agreed. "I'm actually a bit excited to finally see your exploits up-close. Some of the Templars swear that you must be a Hegemon in hiding."

"I wish," Zac wryly smiled as he got to his feet. "Give me three hours; I need to quickly enter seclusion."

"Alright," Pretty nodded as she turned toward the door. "I'll get everything sorted."

Just as she was about to leave, she turned around again.

"You know, the real Deviant Asura is a lot better than the rumors," she said, as a smile spread across her face. "But perhaps not as interesting."

"I'm fine with being called boring if those rumors just die down," Zac muttered.

"Doubtful. The Tsarun Clan is working much too hard to ruin your image and alienate you," Pretty laughed. "Of course, it can all be swept away by deeds. My Grandpa says there will be rankings and contributions stores like most for this war. As long as you prove yourself, no one will care about those rumors. Those who spread them might even face a backlash."

"Looking forward to it," Zac smiled. "Is there anything else?"

Pretty hesitated a bit more before she spoke up. "Is... there really nothing you can tell me that can help me with Average and our soldiers?" Pretty asked. "I can feel it – how it's all related to the events here."

It had been a shock to hear that both Average and his old acquaintance Galau had gone missing under mysterious circumstances. An enormous planet in the depths of the Million Gates Territory had just up

and disappeared with them on it, and the event had released enough energy to be sensed all the way to the Allbright Empire.

The Peak Family didn't believe that anyone in their sector had the strength to do something like that, and they thought it was related to the Limitless Empire. That was the original reason Pretty had been sent to the Void Gate, though the infiltration of the Void Star had taken precedence.

"What you've described is completely different from what I know," Zac said with a shake of his head. "From what I've seen, there are only two outcomes from encountering... that. You either gain the opportunity, or you die. There are no disappearances, especially not whole planets. It might be related, but I am just guessing here as well."

Zac wasn't lying. If the scarred planet disappearing was related to the Limitless Empire, then it was probably associated with the Left Imperial Palace. But as for how and why, Zac didn't have the faintest idea.

"Alright," Pretty sighed. "Well, keep your eyes open, will you?"

"Of course," Zac nodded. "I'll see you soon."

Zac led Pretty out of his quarters before he sealed it shut. From there, Zac didn't walk over to his cultivation chamber but rather to his closet. He pushed against a wall, and a hidden chute opened up. Zac jumped inside, falling hundreds of meters until he landed in a pitch-black room.

These sections were once part of the hive's incubator, and only a few hidden pathways connected it with the rest of the hive. Here, the queen would store and slowly nurture the eggs until warriors came crawling out from the chutes. These sections were long since discovered and cleansed by Billy and Ogras and had been refitted into secret cultivation chambers or secret shelters.

A perfect spot for Zac to accomplish some things far from prying eyes.

There was only so much he could do to improve his strength in the short run. The best would have been to upgrade his Branch of the War Axe, but he was still somewhat lacking. The raids hadn't provided enough inspiration either, even if the fighting had been hard.

That left him with his second option – his undead side.

Having traveled with Vai for half a year, there hadn't been any good opportunities to fill his already opened nodes with Miasma. Thankfully, the downtime between raids had helped him out a lot. After every battle, he had hurried down to these catacombs to use the Kill Energy to gain levels. Just filling them up required a lot less energy than breaking nodes open, and he had made a lot of progress in the past two weeks.

Even then, he was not quite there. His Draugr form was still level 148, just two levels shy of the noticeable Attribute Boost at 150. With time running out, Zac decided to finish the process with leveling pills. Typically, he wouldn't have eaten pills when absorbing energy from Miasma Crystals would do the trick, but he was under a lot of pressure from the upcoming mission.

This time, he didn't just have his own life to worry about. If he failed to close the pathway to the Lost Plane, then Gemmy would fail her transition to a Portable Realm, and most people here would probably perish. He needed every advantage he could get, even if he had to take on a little bit more Pill Toxins.

Zac sat down at his usual spot, and a bottle of the Leveling Pills he'd bought inside the Orom World appeared in his hand. The [Aethergate Pills] he bought back in the Twilight Harbour were used up already, but these weren't that much worse. More than enough for his purposes. Deathly waves of Miasma coursed through his body, and the transition was complete less than a second later, thanks to his upgraded transformation skill.

Two pills were swallowed without preamble, and it felt like a frigid star had appeared in his stomach. Zac directed the energy toward the empty nodes in his mind, and it poured into the first one like a surging river. The process went without any issues or surprises, and just two hours later, it was done.

Now, all 75 of his nodes formed deathly swirls as they formed a perfect system, each feeling like a gateway into the Abyss. He opened his status screen, and a smile spread across his face upon seeing another 260 Free Points added to his pool. With five levels worth of attribute boosts, he had gained a couple of thousand attribute points these last five levels of his Fetters of Desolation-class.

As usual, he put the free points into Dexterity, pushing the attribute to 9,770 points. It still felt odd pouring all his free points into the same attribute. But with two classes and three Dao Branches that mainly provided Strength, Endurance, and Vitality, he didn't have much choice. Even his Wisdom would eventually pass his Dexterity if he didn't manually remedy the situation.

Zac didn't gain any new quest this time either, and neither did he get another title. He was mostly tapped out in that regard, unless he managed to create a skill from scratch before breaking through. Still, the basic prerequisites for his attempt at Hegemony were finally complete, and in just a decade at that.

Just reaching this point thwarted all but a select few mortals, and his journey was completely different from Galvarion's struggles. The maritime Monarch had spent centuries in the E-grade, each step and every node a perilous journey. Of course, the most challenging part remained; figuring out a blueprint for his Cultivator's Core. This step couldn't compare with Galvarion's, considering he had pretty shallow foundations and an Uncommon E-grade Class.

There was also the matter of shoring up his foundations, but that was mostly just a matter of time. But for now, Zac was happy with the results, and he climbed out of the chute. There was still some time left before he needed to meet up with Pretty and the others, which was perfect. There was one more thing he needed to do before he set off for the Ra'Lashar Kingdom.

"Gemmy, are you there?" Zac asked into thin air.

"You smell bad again," Gemmy's voice echoed through his empty chamber.

"Remember, our little secret," Zac smiled and got a giggle in response.

Hopefully, that meant she agreed. Billy already knew about the situation since the first time Zac transformed, though Zac wasn't sure he actually understood he had two Races. It rather seemed like

Billy considered it like his own Titanic transformation. Still, he had promised he wouldn't tell anyone, and Zac trusted him to stay true to his word.

"Okay, Hungry Guy, Gemmy promises," the Dimensional Seed agreed.

"Where is Slow Girl right now?" Zac asked.

"She is in her room, looking at the pattern," Gemmy answered.

"Is she alone?"

"Yep!"

"Perfect, thank you," Zac said as he walked out of his room and flashed over to another section of the hive.

Zac knocked at the door, which swung open by itself.

"I thought you would come over," Leyara smiled as Zac closed the door behind him.

"It's time you and I have a little chat," Zac said. "About the Limitless Empire and the Left Imperial Palace."