

The Fall 916

Chapter 916: Subverted Fate

The familiar voice felt like a cold shower, if that cold shower was made from scorching flames. Zac prayed he'd gone mad and it was just an auditory hallucination, but the excitement from the flames still burning within his body wasn't a great sign. The next moment, the embers actually poured out from his cells, while the same thing happened to Ogras.

They all flew toward the same destination; the woman who calmly stood just ten meters behind them in front of a backdrop of primordial flames. Iz Tayn. The embers danced around her for a moment before rushing into the fiery curtain like moths drawn to the flame. Iz looked at the embers' final journey before the curtain closed, and her attention returned to them.

Standing in front of Iz Tayn was a sobering reminder that while he had made enormous strides over this past year, he had in no shape or form reached the very limits of the E-grade. Iz's aura clearly eclipsed his own, and possibly even that of the Lipless Hegemon. Even then, Zac was certain she was still in the E-grade like him because her aura was almost impossibly condensed.

And impossibly rife with meaning.

Part of it was undoubtedly the lingering Dao of the powerful flames that had just winked out, but standing in front of Iz reminded Zac of standing in the Dao Chamber when they cracked open the Dao Funnel all those years ago. Except that the only Dao he could sense right now was the Dao of Fire. Her very being exuded the truth of flames, to a degree Zac didn't think possible in the E-grade.

It almost seemed like her flames encompassed all Daos, though Zac knew that was impossible at her level. In a sense, it was almost like looking at the opposite of himself. Her flames encompassed all while he embodied the Void.

Zac's instincts told him someone like this was rare even among the peak factions of the Multiverse. Uona Noz'Valadir was the strongest E-grade Cultivator he'd fought thus far, but Zac knew she couldn't hold a candle to Iz. Certainly, Uona did by no means represent the peak of the Undead Empire, but Zac doubted they had anyone who could match Iz Tayn level for level. Unless the Primo had direct descendants running around, perhaps.

Taking in Iz's unparalleled appearance or unfathomable aura was an experience on its own, but Zac's belly was still full of grievances as he looked for solutions to their predicament. Why did his escape treasure have to be fire-attributed? Couldn't Yrial have found one based on ice instead? He didn't know if Iz somehow caught a ride through the stream of flames, or if she had methods to follow it with a treasure on her own.

What was clear, though, was that she hadn't been harmed at all by the journey, while neither Zac nor Ogras were in the best of conditions. And he was out of tricks. [Flashfire Flourish] needed time to recharge, and he wasn't sure his body would be able to take another jump anyway. His escape bangle was out of commission as well, and there were no motes of Chaos to make the impossible possible.

The good news was that Zac couldn't sense any killing intent coming from Iz Tayn, nor was she circulating Cosmic Energy. She just stood there on a patch of ground singed clean by her flames. Neither had that weird junior golem managed to follow her by the looks of it, leaving her alone.

Of course, that didn't help skew things in their favor if it came to blows. Zac's instincts told him that Iz alone was enough to deal with both of them even if they were in perfect condition, and that was based on her aura alone. If you included whatever protective and offensive treasures a supreme genius from a peak faction carried, it was pretty much hopeless.

His only hope for victory was to hit her with an Annihilation Sphere or Origin Mark, but would he even get the opportunity to conjure them if they fought? Besides, killing her was out of the question. He wouldn't dare, even if he somehow found a chance to take her out. Iz's faction knew of him, and they knew how to find him seemingly anywhere.

It was game over for him and Earth if she came to harm. Perhaps for all of the Zecia sector.

These remote places weren't valuable enough for even B-grade factions like the Radiant Temple to bother with. They just snatched up the occasional talent that emerged, and extracted some resources on the cheap. A faction that had Peak Autarchs as Dao Guardians for their young might simply eradicate the whole sector in retaliation.

And while the System's shroud protected Earth from people like the Great Redeemer, he didn't hold much hope it would do the same against a determined Supremacy.

This left him in an extremely awkward situation, where he didn't know what to do. But since Iz wasn't saying anything, he'd have to be the one to speak up.

"Alright, you have hunted me down halfway across the multiverse," Zac said with some helplessness. "You caught me. Is all of this because of what I said over ten years ago?"

"Over ten years?" Ogras blurted with a raspy voice, but he quickly shrunk back when Iz turned her gaze to him.

"Your fate has been swept up in his, and something mundane has become unordinary," Iz said as she looked at Ogras, primordial flames flickering in her eyes. "But can you withstand the river on your own? If not, you will be dragged under, like so many before you."

Zac's eyes widened in alarm when he felt the scorching heat in Iz's gaze, and he remembered all-too-well the unlucky few who had been placed too close to this firebug in the Battle of Fates. Ogras was clearly worse off than he from the teleportation, and his skills had proven ineffective against Iz's flames.

The original idea was to lay low for a day or two and let the pills nurture them back to the point they could fight unencumbered. But a battle now might worsen the damage even further, especially for Ogras, who didn't have an unnaturally sturdy constitution to fall back on.

"You came here for me, right?" Zac frowned as he stepped in front of Ogras.

"I'll... uh... let the two of you talk, alright?" Ogras whispered before retreating a few hundred meters away, though Zac noticed one of the shadows by the hills release a small flicker. He was ready to fight in case they were left with no choice.

That left a frazzled Zac standing nervously in front of Iz Tayn. He didn't dare take out [Verun's Bite] at the moment, afraid she'd take that as a threat or insult. At the same time, he didn't know what to say. How do you lose someone who had already followed you across half the Multiverse?

He had to make this lunatic leave on her own somehow, but Zac didn't even know what she wanted. Neither could she glean any hints from her expressionless face, and Zac found himself coming up short when trying to figure out what to say.

"Do you believe those words?" Iz eventually said.

Zac grimaced. There it was. He had called her a god-damned lunatic right before escaping, and now she had come to collect. Could he simply apologize and pray she'd drop the matter without trying to incinerate him and Ogras? However, the next words out of Iz Tayn threw him for a loop.

"The words in the poem you left behind?"

"Poem?" Zac said with a sinking feeling. "What poem?"

Flames appeared out of nowhere between them, and Zac looked on with growing unease as they formed a field of roses. It was one thing if he got himself in trouble because of his big mouth – he only had himself to blame. But if Yrial's warped desire to fuse beauty and function had caused even more trouble for him, he didn't know what he would do.

Sure enough, he saw the same bastardized version of himself, though the following scene differed slightly from the first. Zac saw himself turn away, and the rose field was replaced by a short poem. The more Zac read, the bigger the pit in his stomach grew. This was not just a problem of taunting Iz Tayn. It certainly wouldn't help with his already tarnished reputation.

After all, that golem guardian must have seen the text as well, as had those in the Fort. He had warned about the odd feature of [Flashfire Flourish], but he wasn't sure how much that would help in front of such a scene. The flames soon dispersed, and Zac found himself lacking for words.

"Do you believe the road toward the Terminus is a solitary one? That Karmic Threads tie one down on the road to power?"

Zac looked at Iz suspiciously, but it didn't seem like she was joking or messing around. Her face was completely earnest as she waited for an answer. She had hunted him possibly for ten years, and this was what she wanted to discuss?

"Uh... It wasn't me who wrote that poem. I don't have any backing, and this is the Frontier," Zac slowly said. "I have to make do with whatever treasures I get my hands on, even if they have weird side effects."

Iz's lips curved upward at that, and her smiling visage almost made Zac blank out. Living breathing beings had no business being this good-looking. How were others to compete?

"That doesn't answer my question."

Zac looked at Iz with exasperation, not knowing what she wanted from him. It almost felt like she didn't know herself, but he supposed having a chat beat getting blasted by flames.

"Some aspects of cultivation are ultimately up to yourself, but I don't think it's a solitary road. I wouldn't be here without the help from a lot of people, and I'm pretty sure the same is true for you. And even if I somehow reached the peak all on my own, what would be the point of such an empty existence? Where I just sit alone on some mountain peak, churning with power? It's the Karmic links you mention that give me purpose, that allow me to keep pushing myself."

Iz considered his words a few seconds before nodding. "... Thank you. Still, I have come all this way, so I will have to test your fate with my fire. It is not just a matter of your insult anymore. You will have to prove fate strong enough to carry the title of a Flamebearer. Otherwise, the other contenders will consume you, and I will have to fight an uphill battle for the inheritance for nothing."

"That's...!" Zac exclaimed with wide eyes.

Zac's heart shuddered when his fears were realized. Iz Tayn was really a Flamebearer. He should have guessed it the moment she appeared inside the Void Star. Going by the name alone, she might be the most suitable person in the younger generation.

The fact that he would be pitted against someone like her for the inheritance felt like an almost insurmountable wall, but that wasn't his real worry. Ultimately, Zac didn't hold much hope of seizing Ultom for himself after learning that the knowledge of the Left Imperial Palace was already widespread. As long as he got a few more pieces of the sigils and their epiphanies, he'd be happy. If he managed to get a small portion of the real inheritance, it'd be a huge windfall.

He was more worried about the implications of Iz's mention of other contenders. She had essentially confirmed others would be fighting for the same slot. And if one scion from the heartlands had already joined the fray just months after he got the quest, did that mean others were already here? Or was she just lucky to stumble onto this opportunity while looking for him? Had he accidentally brought trouble on their head by leading Iz here?

"You are free to use either your Human or Draugr form. But if you use those remnants you keep locked away in your mind, I will use means of similar potency," Iz Tayn continued.

Zac was already reeling from her first proclamation, but that was nothing compared to having two of his biggest secrets exposed like it was common knowledge. It felt like his world had been upended, and he looked at Iz with incomprehension. How did she know all that? And what else did she know?

"Did you not think I saw you back then? How the descendant of the Ignus Clan nearly destroyed your soul, but you turned calamity into opportunity to force a breakthrough? How you transformed into a Draugr and fought the Red Hand Society assassin?" Iz said when upon seeing Zac's confusion. "Why did you think I called for you?"

"I, uh," Zac stuttered, his mind still a mess as he found himself in the very situation he had so desperately tried to prevent for so long.

"And did you not think my uncle would recognize the remnants from the Heart of Oblivion and the Spark of Creation? But he was quite impressed how you managed to fuse their energies into a rudimentary expression of Chaos. He said he had never heard of anyone doing that before," Iz continued with equanimity. "Now, pick your form."

"Ah, young mistress," a hesitant voice drifted over from a distance, where Ogras' head was sticking out from behind a boulder. "I don't think you want to fight right now."

"As I said, fate will not be subverted," Iz said without even looking over.

"Of course, of course," Ogras eagerly nodded. "Nor should it. But I am sure that young mistress hasn't waited for years to right this wrong, only for your target to be unable to battle in his optimal state? Look at how wretched he is, how half his hair is gone and burn marks cover his hands and face. I can assure you, the situation within our bodies is even worse, even with you so graciously removing the lingering flames."

Iz frowned as she thoughtfully looked between Ogras and Zac, who could only push down his embarrassment and look as pathetic as possible to sell Ogras' lie. Well, it wasn't a lie, really. Between him using up most of his skills just moments ago, and the damage from [Flashfire Flourish], he definitely wasn't in the best shape.

"And that's not the only thing, young mistress! And you would want to hear this!" Ogras continued, prompting her to look over curiously. "We are actually on an important mission! To fight evil unorthodox cultivators, destroy a pathway to a cursed universe, and save the day. If we don't accomplish our task in a few days, then our lives are all forfeit."

Zac once more wondered if something was wrong with Iz's brain since her eyes lit up at Ogras' proclamation. It looked like she couldn't be happier at the prospect of their lives hanging by a thread. She even looked over to Zac, obviously hoping for confirmation.

"It's true," Zac reluctantly nodded. "If we don't blow up that pathway, this whole realm will be flooded with tainted energy. The realm will collapse, and we all die."

Iz Tayn looked like she had hit the jackpot, and a slight flush appeared on her cheeks. However, she soon realized Zac was looking at her weirdly, and she quickly regained her impassive expression. She then nodded slightly, like the news was nothing unexpected.

There were no two ways about it; there was something off with this girl.

"We shall postpone our battle," Iz eventually agreed.

"I can see this young mistress has a righteous heart," Ogras continued. "We would be doubly blessed if you joined us in this endeavor. To thwart evil and protect our world."

Iz glanced at Zac, who tried to look enthused by the idea. He had to admit that Ogras' plan was solid. Not only would this net them an extremely powerful helper, but it would give them a breather to figure out a long-term solution to this Iz problem. "You're welcome to join us."

"Then I shall accompany you," Iz nodded.

"Of course, it would be our pleasure," Ogras readily agreed as he bounded over. "This lowly one is Ogras Azh'Rezak, at your service."

"... Iz Tayn," Iz said, once more looking at Zac.

"Zac Atwood," Zac said, wholly uncomfortable under her stares.

“Great, great,” Ogras nodded. “Now that we’re all friends, can we expect your... uh... hand to join us? Its strength could definitely be helpful.”

“Kvalk has no interest in fighting against the Black Heart Sect,” Iz said. “He is more likely to test the fate of you two. It should take him around three or four days to reach this area if you are interested in battling him as well.”

“The ruins of the Ra’Lashar Kingdom are right this way,” Ogras immediately said as he started walking. “Treasures and mystery await.”

Zac didn’t know what else to do, so he simply followed in tow.

“As I said, our battle is only delayed. I will find you after this is dealt with,” Iz added as she floated over to his side. “But I can see you are not enthused at the idea, so I am willing to offer this treasure as long as you don’t disappoint.”

The word ‘treasure’ could deal with most problems, and Zac looked over at the thing that had appeared in Iz’s hand. Ogras looked over with gleaming eyes, and Zac could understand the sentiment.

Who wouldn’t be curious what kind of treasures someone like Iz Tayn could take out?