

The Fall 917

Chapter 917: Alava'Har

Bastard.

Ogras watched the two social outcasts walk in pace, and it was hard to tell who was more uncomfortable. Zac wore it plainly on his face, but Ogras could almost hear the gears turning in the head of that sheltered lass. They looked like a teenage couple full of hormones and awkward love. Double-bastard.

He'd spent ten years in this godforsaken realm with not a woman as far as the eye could see. All the while, this guy was living it up while pretending otherwise. The more he heard, the more Ogras' teeth itched. The Peak lass, Leyara, even that little doe-eyed researcher who kept throwing him long looks. Ibtep that lunatic had even created a wildly inaccurate rumor, only for millions of maidens to take him seriously. According to Pretty Peak, there were massive bounties from lonely singles for the contact details of the Deviant Asura.

And now, this celestial fairy had fallen right into this useless guy's lap? A woman who had broken Ogras' understanding of the limits of beauty. And who apparently was carrying around supreme treasures tailored for that dullard. Ogras had no idea what that ominous-looking stone was, but Zac was almost drooling when he saw it. So it had to be something good.

Triple-bastard.

Iz Tayn reminded Ogras of Alava'Har from the stories he'd read growing up. A princess of the divine realm descended to the mortal plains in search of love and purpose. Rich, naïve, and bored. It only took Ogras a single glance to figure out this Iz Tayn was the same; a sheltered rose of a terrifyingly powerful origin.

Who knew? This might be the first time she left the safety of her family's domains. No doubt surrounded by servants since birth, but lacking proper connections, to the point that a simple curse thrown her way had become an obsession.

Luckily, Iz Tayn had been easy enough to wrangle, even if he had been forced to throw his face a bit. But what was face worth in front of life? Those flames were just too terrifying. It almost felt like the shadows that made up his body would collapse when she looked in his direction. So he would sing his song and dance a little dance until the young empress was satisfied.

She would join in on their 'adventure' and then return to the divine realm with her elders. Iz had clearly relegated him to a servant-type shortly after they set off, but that was fine with him. It was just like the lass said, too much excitement, and he'd get himself killed. Someone like Iz Tayn undoubtedly had enough suitors to drown him in spit if they thought him getting too close to their target.

But this useless guy was blowing it. They needed to entertain, damnit! And in return, they would feed on her scraps, be they information, treasures, or knowledge. He desperately tried to send the message with his glances, but that idiot was walking along looking like a martyr about to sacrifice himself against a beast tide.

Perhaps these two were too socially inept to walk and talk simultaneously?

Iz glanced at the unusually mutated demon, who smiled and nodded obsequiously in return. The scene was off-putting. It reminded her of those empty smiles that followed wherever she traveled with her uncle. The smile of those who tried to benefit from the vast wealth or influence of the Tayn family. Part of her wanted to just release her flames and test his fate then and there.

But she couldn't. Mr. Bug was still unhappy about the arrangement, even after she had shown the [Stone of the Void] like her uncle had suggested. Was it because their sparring session had been delayed? Uncle had explained that real friendships were forged through battle.

Only when you had withstood your opponent's Dao could you truly understand who they were. The Dao was the road to the heart. But now, everything was left on an uncertain note.

She didn't know what to make of this silent but palpable sense of rejection. She had always been welcomed with open arms no matter where she went before. Even ancestors emerged from their sealed chambers to greet her and provide some small gifts of goodwill. To have someone be so overtly annoyed by her presence was a first.

It was almost liberating in a twisted sort of way. Because his opinions of her were based on their encounters rather than on her surname. Certainly, Mr. Bug knew some of it. But to someone like him, any established family must seem like an unfathomable mountain. He didn't know what a throne represented or who her grandparents were.

Still, while Iz felt this atmosphere was novel, it wasn't what she had envisioned. She remembered those scenes from the graded trial Mr. Bug joined. Of how he'd joked around with that other Draugr or the excitement they felt upon exploring their first shared Trove. The camaraderie created by a shared adversary when the two found themselves beneath that stream.

But how was she supposed to break the tension in this situation? Iz had no idea. She was increasingly realizing that she wasn't very equipped or prepared to set out on her own. Realizing that were many types of strengths she lacked, strengths that couldn't be gained through her grandpa's meticulous preparations for her cultivation.

She couldn't bring up Mr. Bug's adventures either, even though she really wanted to know what happened between a few of her viewing sessions. Or when he had consumed the previous set of remnants. She only knew he had been headed toward a place called the 'City of Ancients', followed by a long bout of aggravating static.

But Grandpa had told her that she absolutely couldn't tell any outsider about the existence of the Divine Mirror. It was a supreme treasure from a previous Era. Her Grandma had found it long ago in some ruins of the Limitless Empire, and it was a treasure that would drive certain clans mad with desire. Not only that, but her uncle had told her that it would ruin her chance at a friendship if she told Mr. Bug, even if Iz didn't understand why.

Thousands of her family's servants had observed her every breath since she was born, which had no impact on her daily life. But she trusted uncle Valderak knew what he was talking about. Even if she hadn't found much use for his two weeks of friendship tutoring so far.

Should she just give him the stone and see if that helped?

Zac surreptitiously glanced at the woman who walked in pace with them, but her calm face gave no clues as to what she was thinking. Everything about her was confusing. She had employed god-knows-what kind of high-grade methods to find him, and even used a peak Autarch to ferry her over to the Frontier.

But when she had finally caught up with him, she readily agreed to postpone her duel. Since then, she had barely spoken a word. Iz seemed mostly content with walking in silence, while he had a lot on his mind. Ogras had occasionally tried making some small talk with Iz, but she either answered in single syllables or not at all. By now, the silence had almost grown oppressive.

Suddenly, Zac felt Iz's gaze upon him once more. But before he had a chance to see if something was wrong, Ogras had stopped in his tracks just ahead of them.

"There is a hidden cave not far from here," Ogras said. "Our original plan was to hide for a day and recover. How about we check out that place? During that time, we can also discuss the upcoming battle."

Zac glanced at Iz, who slightly nodded in agreement.

"Let's go," Zac nodded, and Ogras gave him another pointed look before turning away.

Zac knew what the demon wanted; he was not so dense that he couldn't understand the opportunistic gleam in Ogras' eyes. The demon wanted him to befriend Iz and possibly extract advantages from her. But things were not that simple, and he was still digesting the whole situation. Having gone over the events over the past half-hour, Zac had come to a few conclusions.

He should already have realized that Iz already knew of his two secrets. Even if he hadn't expected Iz to witness the whole chain of events in the Battle of Fates, he had spoken with her in his Draugr form. The next time they met, he was a human, yet she recognized him as plain as day. The remnants were even less of a mystery. He had used what he called a Bronze Flash in the Tower of Eternity, and the next time he had just swallowed the remnants and was teeming with their energy.

But that didn't explain how Iz had the [Stone of Celestial Void].

He hadn't actually seen that item before, but it perfectly matched the description in the listing back in the Orom World. More importantly, only two people knew about it; he and a store clerk. The only time he had said its name out aloud was when he asked the clerk if the treasure could be brought out for inspection. After having been rejected, Zac never mentioned the item again.

So how did Iz know he wanted it? Even the Orom wouldn't know, considering how little it cared about the day-to-day inside its body. Just what had happened after he fled the Orom? Or did she have some way to spy on him? The thoughts kept gnawing at him, making him unable to focus on anything else. Eventually, it reached a tipping point, and Zac turned to Iz with a determined expression.

"How did you know I need that item?"

Iz didn't seem surprised by the question, but she still looked at Zac thoughtfully for a few seconds until her eyes lit up. "My family set up some rules for me when visiting the frontier. All actions have consequences, and forming karmic debts should be avoided when possible. If you want me to divulge secrets that would normally be out of your reach, then you must prove you are fated with that knowledge."

"How would I prove something like that?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Withstand my flames."

"Are you just making up an excuse to beat me up?" Zac asked, his eyes thinning with suspicion.

Iz's mouth curved up a bit at that, but she quickly regained her poise. "If you want to know, you would have to take a strike from me."

Ogras had already stopped as well, and he looked at the proceedings with interest.

"Just go with it," the demon urged. "If there's one thing you're good at, it's taking a beating. So what's the harm?"

"Easy for you to say," Zac glared, but he still readied himself.

There was no way she was planning on going all out at this point, and Zac felt confident he should at least be able to deal with a normal attack without too much issue. A creaking sound echoed out as Vivi's vines formed a thick barrier, and [Verun's Bite] appeared in his hands.

"Go ahead," Zac as he jumped back fifty meters to give himself some berth.

Iz nodded and held up her hand. A small fireball appeared in her palm, exuberantly releasing small bursts of golden embers. Zac relaxed a bit since it just looked like a fancy version of a common [Fireball] attack. However, Zac's eyes widened in alarm when it shot out from Iz's hand.

Suddenly, it felt like a whole sun was bearing down on him. The little ball contained an immense amount of truths, to the point it created illusions all around him. At least Zac hoped it was an illusion since the whole area had been set ablaze, even the air. Zac felt a weak exclamation of pain from Vivi, and he realized her vines were rapidly drying out, their powerful lifeforce unable to compete with the scorching heat.

Zac could only cut off the twinned and dried-out vines with a swing of his axe, and the symbiotic plant almost fully retreated back into its pocket domain. That left him with one less layer of defense, just as the deceptive little fireball suddenly doubled its momentum while gaining an intense golden hue. Space was being incinerated in its wake, and Zac felt like hot pokers were being stabbed into the still-tender burns across his body.

"Holy-!" Zac swore as he urgently activated [Empyrean Aegis].

Two different hues of gold clashed for supremacy in the area as the ball of utmost flames slammed into his hastily-erected barrier. The fireball burned its way straight through with a sizzling sound, leaving Zac gobsmacked. It might have expended a good chunk of its force by that point, but what remained was still more than enough to cause alarm.

Normally, Zac would have used the brief window bought by his barrier to move out of the way, but Iz had demanded to withstand the flame, not survive the strike. So he could only grit his teeth as he unleashed a herculean swing infused with his Branches of War axe and Pale Seal. He normally didn't use the second Dao in his human form, but he figured it was more effective at snuffing out flames than a life-attuned one.

A primal roar of defiance echoed through the scorched wastelands as Verun bit straight through the golden ball of primordial flames. Zac felt his Daos being rapidly whittled down by the unrelenting flames, but his powerful soul churned as he infused more and more of it to combat the drain. The fireball didn't enjoy the same treatment; soon after, it was completely ripped apart.

However, Zac's relief was short-lived as the ball's destruction released a splatter of flames in every direction like a Dao-infused Molotov Cocktail. A few of them managed to reach his body, and his robes immediately became a tattered mess. A searing pain soon followed as parcels of fiery Dao dug into his body. It was almost as though the flames were alive, in a tangible way that was completely different from the fire left behind by [Flashfire Flourish].

These little flames were connected with the boundless universe.

Sensing them with his soul felt like looking at the primordial soup from which the Big Bang created the universe. It was a fire of endless possibility, almost reminding him of one aspect of Creation. At the same time, it held the ability to reduce anything to ashes, leaving nothing in its wake but utter destruction. A facet of Oblivion.

Was this Iz's Dao? Her vision of a supreme Dao of Fire that was one with all?

A deep and angry thud from the depths of his chest brought him out from his reverie as [Void Heart] woke up, and it started to drag the wayward embers toward its maws. But the flames were unwilling to go quietly into the night, and they desperately struggled against the pull. The Hidden Node managed to swallow a few, but most embers made their way out of Zac's body, leaving a second scorch mark behind before returning to Iz's side.

The apocalyptic surroundings died down a moment later, confirming it was indeed not real but an effect brought by the Dao infused into the attack. Ogras was just fine, even though it looked like the flames had consumed him for a moment, and he was looking at Iz with wide eyes.

"Well?" Zac grimaced as he looked down at his ruined clothes with dismay.

It looked like he had returned to his roots, where he looked like a mix of a burn victim and a homeless person.

"I am very curious just what your Bloodline is. It is the first time I've seen someone dare consume the flames of my family," Iz said with interest. "Or at least succeed in doing so."

Her words made Zac pause. It looked like she didn't know quite everything about him, at least.

"Well, there's always a first," Zac eventually grunted as he walked over. "The stone?"

"I left a mark on you during our first meeting," Iz said, and Zac wasn't surprised.

Zac remembered the flame touching his chest but not actually harming him. He had long since guessed it was a tracking mark, but he hadn't been overly worried about it since she came from a different part of the Multiverse. So much for that theory.

"You managed to destroy it, but I had an elder bring it back and reinforce it," Iz said, making both Ogras and Zac looked at her with alarm. Just how powerful did you have to be to bring back a destroyed tracking mark on someone across half the Multiverse? "It is through that mark I've been able to find you."

"Well, that explains some of it, but it doesn't explain how you know about the stone?" Zac said, putting the matter of her elder aside.

"The mark can create a lingering resonance in weaker cultivators that would let my family identify them," Iz nodded. "That would allow us to do all kinds of things. Such as finding the clerks you had been in contact with while living in the mutated Voidcatcher."

Zac looked at Iz suspiciously. It was as plausible as anything else, but he worried it wasn't the whole truth.

"In either case, the brand barely works by now," Iz continued. "It would have to get bolstered by my elder again since you weakened it when you conjured Chaos."

"How do I know you're not just making things up?" Zac asked.

"Every word I've said was true," Iz said, but she looked a bit hesitant. Eventually, she spoke up again. "The price for the knowledge might be off. Do you want to know anything else?"

"How about you remove the mark instead?" Zac said. "After all, you've already found me."

"Impossible," Iz said with a shake of her head. "Even if damaged, it has been bolstered by my elder. It's not something that I can remove."

"Alright," Zac grunted. "Then can you tell me if a bunch of Autarchs, or even stronger beings, will come to Zecia to contend for the inheritance? You should know that's not something a small frontier sector can withstand."

"Oh, you do not need to worry about that," Iz said. "The Boundless Heavens has shielded this sector. My elder believes this inheritance is targeted at the younger generation, and the Heavens do not want undue interference. When we entered, only a Middle Monarch could be sent through."

Zac and Ogras shared a glance, the relief evident in their eyes. This was their biggest worry, but it looked like the System had already dealt with the problem for them. Of course, Monarchs from the outside were difficult to deal with, but they were nothing compared to Supremacies.

"Ask her something else," Ogras urged as a grin spread across his face.

"You ask her, bastard," Zac swore as he looked down at his charred body. "I'm about well done over here. If I get any more toasty, you'll have to fight the next battle yourself."

"Fine," Ogras sighed. "We'll talk more after we've rested."

“I know many things,” Iz added as she hopefully looked at Zac.

“Isn’t that great,” Zac muttered. “Now, where is that cave?”