

## The Fall 919

### Chapter 919: Testing Fate

"Alright, let's do it," Zac grunted as he cracked his neck.

His Spirit Tool robes had already been placed to the side and covered in Nexus Crystals to aid its recovery, and Zac instead wore three layers of mish-mashed E-grade armors he had picked up from some random cultists. Iz's flames had simply proven too potent, and any more tests of fate would probably ruin the clothes altogether.

"You can do it, buddy," Ogras hollered from the distance, his voice dripping with schadenfreude.

They were standing in a large cave deep underground that Ogras had found with his shadows, which then had been further sealed off by Iz. A thin film of golden flames covered everything from floor to ceiling, but they didn't actually feel hot to the touch. The flames emanated from a candle Iz had placed on a random stone. According to her, not even Peak Hegemons would sense any energy fluctuations from within the candle's domain.

Iz, who had spent the last hour in silent meditation, opened her eyes and looked over at Zac with confusion. "What are you wearing?"

"Have to wear something after you ruined my poor robes," Zac muttered.

"I understand. But those pieces of armor would melt onto your skin," Iz said, and Zac groaned when there was a small hint of excitement in her voice.

It had become painfully obvious that Iz really enjoyed blasting him with her flames, and she used different types of flames every time he had asked a question over the past two days. It almost felt like she was experimenting which kind of fire would toast him the best. Iz had even been so disappointed upon learning that Zac couldn't take any more punishment, that she had provided a bottle of healing pills.

At first, Zac thought it wouldn't change things, but that was only until he sensed the monstrous amount of medicinal energy crammed into the pills. Not only that, but in the bottle of 10 pills, every single pill contained a Pill Spirit. This was the first time he'd owned a Spiritual Pill since stumbling onto one back in the hunt, and it was shocking to see ten of them at one go.

Ten pills whose spirits were all far stronger than the one in the [Four Gates Pill].

Such pills didn't grow on trees. Not only did the pill itself have to be of Supreme Quality to have even a small chance of gaining spirituality, but it had to absorb the truths of the universe for a long time to evolve. They were exceedingly rare even in more affluent places like the Twilight Harbor. A few occasionally popped up at auction, but there was no steady supply.

Some factions had Gathering Arrays for their Pill cauldrons and left batches stewing for millennia in hopes of evolving a few pills. And even then, there were no guarantees. So ultimately, most didn't bother. The increase in efficacy simply couldn't make up for the effort and luck required to concoct those kinds of pills.

But it looked like this basic logic didn't have any sway with Iz Tayn's faction. Perhaps top-tier alchemists had ways to guarantee Pill Spirits awakening, but it was still odd to see it on normal Healing Pills. It was a bit like crafting a Peak-Quality Spirit Tool for a toothbrush or paperweight.

Still, Zac wasn't about to complain about such a windfall. It had not only helped him and Ogras save a day of recuperation, but it had allowed them to gain some vital intelligence. For instance, they'd learned these Kan'Tanu were actually related to the Black Heart Sect, a massive unorthodox force with actual Supremacies in charge. That explained how they dared to negotiate with peak factions when selling opportunities for the Left Imperial Palace.

More importantly, it spelled bad news for Zecia. It was already a problem when Zecia's enemies was one unified force against their fragmented sector. Now it also turned out they had connections to an A-grade force. In other words, they were like the Void Gate. Even if they were just a distant offshoot, their heritage was bound to be deeper than the shallow foundations you'd normally see in a Frontier Sector.

"If armor doesn't work, just go naked?" Ogras grinned. "Your hide is thicker than a Barghest's in either case."

"That would lead to less damage," Iz agreed. "Or mortal clothes that can be properly disintegrated."

"I can't go around naked," Zac said with exasperation as he started removing his layers of armor. "Your elders would probably burn me alive if they found out."

To say that they had gotten close to Iz over the past day would be an overstatement, but Zac had started to understand her personality a bit better. She wasn't actually haughty or arrogant like some powerful scions. It was just her penchant for burning things and people that had left Zac with a bad impression. But she wouldn't take offense to some random words, nor did she act overbearing with either him or Ogras.

Iz undeniably had some odd social blindspots though, and Zac figured she was a bit of a cultivation idiot like himself. However, while he had only started cultivating when he was 29, she had probably done so from birth. That had left her personality incredibly lopsided, though it seemed like she was working on that.

"Oh, you're right," Iz nodded as though it was a matter of course. "Then, let's skip it. Instead, tell me of your experiences in the Twilight Harbor."

"How do you know about that?" Zac asked.

"That was where your signal led for a long time, until you suddenly disappeared through the interference of Chaos," Iz said. "By the time I left for the frontier, the Twilight Harbor had long since been destroyed."

"What happened to the people living there?" Zac hesitated.

"Most weren't fated," Iz said. "Around a third of the platforms survived. But without an energy source or a World Core, the environment is doomed to decline until it is barely habitable."

"Must be hell on earth there by now," Ogras muttered. "Those places will run dry of resources quickly. A lot of people would have to kill and steal to afford a ticket out of there."

Zac sighed and said another silent prayer for Nala, the half-blood Draugr who had guided him when he visited.

“So you just want me to tell you what happened in Twilight Harbor?” Zac asked to confirm. “And you won’t suddenly blast me with a fireball?”

“...No.” Iz said after an entirely too-long pause.

Zac didn’t even need to deliberate before he started to retell his experiences in Twilight Harbor and the Twilight Ascent. Almost any price would beat getting incinerated by Iz’s terrifying flames again. Even Verun had lost its vigor by now in front of her skills, and the Tool Spirit had released a subdued whimper after the last test of fate. If it had to endure any more, Zac worried it might actually mutiny.

Iz listened on with interest as Zac narrated the events, occasionally asking for clarifications. But it wasn’t for stuff like one expected, like lucky encounters or powerful beasts he’d fought. She rather asked about mundane stuff, such as what the unique Twilight Water felt and tasted like, or whether the water in the Twilight Chasm was colder.

She was also delighted when he took out a few of the corals he had collected in the Coral Forest, or the puppet Catheya got him. In contrast, she didn’t care much about the powerful scions he had fought.

“The Eidolon and the Blood Clan. To think they both so easily fell prey to the destructive corruption of the Remnants,” Iz commented.

“Blood Clan? You mean the Eternal Clan?” Zac asked.

“They do not have the qualifications to speak of Eternity,” Iz said with equanimity. “Then what happened?”

Zac shrugged and continued the story, with the collapse of the Mystic Realm and how he had jumped into a spatial tear to survive the battle outside.

“You truly are an unkillable Mr. Bug,” Iz said with a small smile. “What do you want to know?”

“What can you tell us about this Lost Plane and its connection to... that place? Would conventional means cut off the connection to that place, or do we need to prepare something more than spatial destabilizers?”

“I find it curious you are unable to say Ultom without fate shifting,” Iz said. “Is it because you are the first Candidate?”

Zac could only helplessly shrug in response. It was not like he had any idea.

“I don’t know this Lost Plane you’ve mentioned, and I don’t recognize the taint in this world. But if you say the temples come from there, it’s most likely a pocket world connected to the Eternal Heritage itself. Most of them contain vast realms,” Iz said after some thought. “It is a bit odd though. Those worlds are always mirrors of the heritage they reside within, but Ultom does not carry this taint. I cannot explain that, so I might be wrong.”

“Alright,” Zac frowned. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to pray our preparations work.”

"I'm sorry wasn't of more help," Iz said. "I couldn't answer your question, so ask me something else."

Zac thought for a few moments, but he didn't know what else to ask. She had already hinted that she wouldn't divulge her background, and she had already told them most of what she knew about the situation with Ultom and the Kan'Tanu. But there was something else he was curious about.

"Then, how did you arrive at the frontier so quickly? Could I use that method to reach the Six Profundity Empire?" Zac asked.

His strength was far from reaching the point where he felt confident in saving Kenzie, but opportunities like this were rare. Who knew when he'd meet someone like Iz the next time, someone who had actually traveled from the heartlands to the frontier?

"The Six Profundity Empire?" Iz said with surprise. "What do you want to do there? Your heritage doesn't seem to have any relation to them."

"Humor me," Zac smiled.

"This is a real scenario? Where you are just you?" Iz asked.

"I'm just me," Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

"A few people owed my family favors and helped my uncle reach this sector, so you wouldn't be able to use our method," Iz said.

"So what can I do?"

"The Six Profundity Empire is very far from here. You are poor, so you can't get a Cosmic Vessel fast enough," Iz said, her brows scrunched together like she was trying to figure out a riddle. "And you have no connections that can assist you. There are no gateways in the frontier either... Hmm..."

"It's impossible?" Zac grimaced.

"No, I can think of two solutions," Iz eventually said. "The first is to reach the closest A-grade force. They should have access to some allies, and you might be able to pay for passage through their long-distance teleporter. That way, you can gradually jump closer and closer to your destination."

"What would something like that cost?" Zac hesitated.

"Transfer between two forces?" Iz said. "I don't know? I hear it's rarely counted in Nexus Coins. Factions like that have little use for System Currency. You rather need to provide rare treasures for them to activate the long-range teleporters. You should know, the energy required for such a jump would drain a couple of C-grade factions."

"So a jump would beggar a Peak Monarch, and one would have to make multiple jumps?" Ogras said with a scrunched-up face.

"If the factions will even allow you to use them. They are strategic resources, and they are incredibly difficult to both operate and maintain. Some might not want to risk their platforms, since it is one of their lifelines in case of emergency," Iz said. "And if they've broken down, they might take millennia to repair. Dozens of millennia if they need to send for Spatial Array Masters."

“What’s the other option?” Zac sighed.

“Enter the Endless Storm and find a wormhole,” Iz said.

“Enter the what now?” Zac asked, and a glance confirmed Ogras knew as little as he did.

“You two live at the Frontier but don’t know about the Endless Storm?” Iz asked, her head cocked to the side. “How is that possible? It would be like living by the lake but not knowing what water is.”

Zac and Ogras shared a helpless look. He knew Iz wasn’t trying to be rude, but that perhaps made her comments even worse. This wasn’t the first time she had been confused by their ignorance of what she thought was common knowledge.

“It’s the region beyond the Frontier?” Zac ventured.

“Yes,” Iz nodded. “Beyond the Frontiers is the Endless Storm. You can actually see a calm corner of it in this sector; the Million Gates Territory.”

“That chaotic place is a calm corner?” Zac grimaced.

“I hear there are Solar Storms in the depths of the Endless Storm that would destroy even Supremacies,” Iz said. “But it’s not all dangerous. It’s called a storm, but there are decently safe regions, some of which are larger than whole empires.”

“Where would one find a Wormhole then?” Zac asked.

“Usually in the actual storms,” Iz said. “The System’s expansion has pushed back the storm for billions of years, and it has resulted in some interesting phenomena. There are gateways, some of them incredibly stable, that can take you across half of the cosmos in an instant. The Space Gate the Black Heart Sect uses is an example of this, though their sector most likely is quite close to Zecia. Those that can take you across all reality need a stronger storm to be born.

“These tunnels are the most convenient methods of travel, but they are extremely rare in integrated space. No one has ever managed to replicate them either, except for Lord Stillsun and later the System itself.”

“So I should just head into this storm and hope for the best?” Zac grimaced. “Seems like finding a needle in a haystack.”

“Without a guide, it would be nigh-hopeless,” Iz agreed. “There are factions who live inside the storm, who know of hidden wormholes or are able to find them. In this regard, the Technocrats are unsurpassed. “

Zac tried to keep his face impassive, but his heartbeat sped up. Iz had just unknowingly provided him with a huge lead. What if Leandra didn’t choose the Six Profundity Empire because she had a special connection to it? What if she just wanted to go to any random A-grade Empire, and she happened to know of a nearby wormhole that led there?

If so, perhaps he could find a way to trace her steps into the Eternal Storm after getting his hands on a Cosmic Vessel. Going there early might be preferable anyway, since he would probably be able to grow

quicker in such a place than here in Zecia. And it would be a good way to disappear, in case the situation with Ultom became too complicated.

Various plans started to crop up in Zac's mind, but he eventually put the matter aside. No matter if it was actually viable or not, it would have to wait. There were a lot of things he needed to deal with in Zecia before he sailed off into some cosmic storm in search of magical portals.

"Alright, thank you," Zac nodded before turning to Ogras. "How do you feel?"

"A lot better than I thought possible one day ago," Ogras shrugged. "I'm good to go."

"Let's head out, then? The quicker we deal with this mess, the more energy Gemmy will have for her transformation," Zac ventured. "Also, I don't want that golem to catch up. No offense."

"That's okay," Iz nodded. "That hand is just an expendable clone. It dying will have no bearing on Kvalk."

"That's not wh—" Zac said. "Well, never mind."

The three once more set out in the direction of the Ra'Lashar Kingdom. Ogras was still leading the way, but it honestly wasn't necessary. The sky was a pitch-black curtain to the east, and even Zac could feel the ominous energy churning inside the clouds. You'd almost have to be blind to miss it.

Ogras didn't have to expend any energy concealing their approach either. Iz simply infused some energy into the candle, and it floated into the air and followed her as they traveled. Around them, a ten-meter domain was erected, and both Ogras and he confirmed they were completely invisible within.

Seeing how Iz was taking care of everything, Zac chose to squeeze in some cultivation time while he walked. Most of his methods couldn't be trained while on the move, but he could make some progress on [Thousand Lights Avatar] if he didn't need to focus on his surroundings. It was almost like making candles, where he covered his Spiritual Framework with his Mental Energy over and over.

Each time, a little bit was left behind and thickened the avatar, though the change wouldn't be discernible to the naked eye. Progress was slow, but Zac still kept at it. It was actually because of a suggestion from Iz. She had told him that a powerful Soul could help stabilize one's breakthrough into Hegemony.

Zac didn't have any actual method to accomplish something like that, but he had an idea. If he could form a proper avatar around his Specialty Core, he might be able to erect powerful Spiritual Barriers like the ones he used when he opened the last nodes in his head. That meant he had one more thing he needed to accomplish before reaching Hegemony, so he couldn't just slack off and enjoy the view.

"Do... You think it's fun? Cultivation," Iz suddenly asked after an hour of silence, prompting Zac to startle awake from his semi-comatose state.

"If it's fun?" Zac asked as a small smile crept up his face. "You'd have to eat my punch if you want to know."