

The Fall 920

Chapter 920: Tainted Well

Zac regretted the words the moment he uttered them, but flames were already gathering around Iz, and she was obviously excited at the prospect of getting punched.

"I'm ready," Iz nodded.

"I was just kid-," Zac said with exasperation, but he stopped in his track when a displeased frown appeared on Iz's face.

"Do you think me too weak to bear your fate?" Iz glared at him.

"Uh, no?" Zac said.

"Then test me," Iz said as the burning field expanded around them, forming a dome the same size as the cave they'd spent over two days inside.

Zac knew there wasn't much else to do – he needed to give this fate-obsessed firebug a good wallop. Zac was pretty thankful that Ogras was the only other person around as he stepped back to create some distance. Punching someone for asking him about his feelings and opinions seemed pretty toxic, and it would drag his already frayed reputation further through the mud.

At the same time, Zac couldn't help but feel some excitement as Cosmic Energy started to course through his body. Iz Tayn had scared him half to death a couple of times by now, and he was pretty sure she had intentionally targeted his butt in the attack she had traded for intelligence on the Black Heart Sect. He could still feel flashes of pain as they walked.

This was a chance for some sanctioned retaliation.

Four thick streams of Mental Energy traveled along the framework of [Thousand Lights Avatar] into his arm as the muscles in his legs tensed. A moment later, Zac shot forward like an arrow released from its bow, leaving huge cracks in the ground from where he pushed off. Simultaneously, two streams of Kalpataru and War Axe entered his prepared Mental Energy-Braid before gathering in his fist.

His hand released a ferocious aura of primal life, and his body naturally moved according to his Evolutionary Stance. The air twisted around him as he released a vibrant and deadly Dao Field, like an apex predator pouncing on its prey. Zac's eyes met with Iz's, and he saw a small smile spread across her face before a wall of flames separated them.

If this were a real fight, Zac would most likely have released a staggered attack to first break the barrier before delivering the real strike, but this was just a friendly clash. There was no need to complicate things, so when Zac appeared in front of Iz, his hand was already shooting toward the barrier in a monstrous right hook.

Every muscle, every cell in Zac's body was in perfect harmony, and all his momentum and force were gathered into one spot. His fist slammed into the shield with enough power to disintegrate a small mountain, yet there was only a subdued thud. All force in Zac's attack was directed inward, yet Iz's barrier had somehow managed to absorb most of it.

Only a trickle of Cosmic Energy and his Dao managed to pass through the fiery barrier, but Zac couldn't just give up like that. Even if he hadn't put everything into the punch, it would be too embarrassing if a lazily erected barrier completely nullified his attack. So Zac took control and roused the lingering energies before they scattered, and a smaller wave lept toward Iz's left temple in a final blaze of glory.

But just as Zac's attack was about to reach Iz's actual body, a finger gently tapped the ball of energy. Zac's felt a flash of heat before losing his connection to his attack. Shortly after, the flame wall dispersed, and Zac looked at Iz with some helplessness. So close, yet so far away.

"You have a novel approach to Dao Braiding," Iz said with a smile as four streams of flames appeared around her hand. Two of them shifted colors into a darker hue, and Zac looked on with a sense of defeat as they formed a perfect copy of his crude Dao Braid.

"Well," Zac shrugged. "You have to play with the cards you are dealt."

"Cards?" Iz said with confusion.

"Just an expression," Zac said. "To make do with what you have."

"Oh," Iz nodded. "It evens out, provided you are fated. The paths of those coming from humble beginnings are generally sturdier than those from powerful factions. By the time they defend their Dao, they are often more powerful. Forged through adversity. And in your case, your disadvantages seem to be wholly exaggerated."

"Tell me about it," Ogras muttered to the side.

"So, your answer?" Iz said.

"What?" Zac said with confusion until he remembered why they'd fought in the first place. "I guess I think it's fun, for the most part? I like the feeling of discovery. The feeling of pushing past your previous boundaries. I kind of wish I'd have some periods of calm, though. Where I could just cultivate for the sake of it, rather than to avoid getting hunted down by some old monster or die in a war forced down my throat."

"But then you'd be without purpose. Without those Karmic Links that push you forward."

"That's fine, isn't it?" Zac smiled. "I can always find a purpose if I lack one."

"Find a purpose?" Iz asked.

"Yeah," Zac nodded. "Like if I reached a point all my enemies were gone, and I wasn't rushing toward anything, I could look for purpose elsewhere. Like pick up hobbies. Improve the lives of the people on my planet. I don't know, start a family. I was already a teenager when my dad was my age."

"My uncle said that it is inadvisable to start a family before closing in on your limits," Iz said. "Your heart will become split between the Dao and your progeny, hampering progress. You also risk getting entangled with someone whose fate cannot match up to yours."

"I don't know. Does it have to be that cut-and-dry?" Zac said. "Can't family be another sort of fuel for your cultivation? Like you work harder because you have something important to protect, something

more important than your own life. As for fate, I don't really believe in something like that. Fate is malleable. If it doesn't suit you, you change it."

"Fate is malleable?" Iz said with glimmering eyes. "Perhaps you are right."

"I don't want to interrupt... whatever the two of you are doing," Ogras suddenly interjected. "But we have company."

Zac looked over with surprise, his gaze following in the direction Ogras pointed at. Far in the distance, he could vaguely make out a handful of moving dots. They were neither moving at a fast nor a slow pace, and the dots would cut past their current position in ten minutes or so.

"Cultivators or beasts?" Zac hesitated, feeling a bit hamstrung after not having Vai and her bowl accompany him.

"Cultivators," Ogras said. "They look like invaders. But it's odd..."

"They carry the taint," Iz calmly said after glancing at the distant dots. "A lot of it."

"So I'm the only one without any farsight abilities?" Zac muttered. "Well, let's get a bit closer. Iz, are you sure this domain won't be discovered, even by scouts?"

"It is both an isolation field and a Karmic Partition. They have no fate with anything within these flames. As such, they cannot react to it," Iz said before glancing at Zac with an inscrutable look. "Of course, there are no guarantees if fate is malleable."

Zac nodded, and the three moved over to an outcropping that should allow them to get a better look at these cultivators. Not long after, the small party was close enough for Zac to properly scan them with [Cosmic Gaze], and his brows furrowed in consternation. Iz wasn't kidding around.

A palpable aura of corruption surrounded the group of warriors as they ran through the wasteland. The sinister undulations from their Heart Curses were still there, but it was now mixed with the taint of the Lost Plane. The eyes of the cultivators felt a bit muddled as well, but Zac saw how two of the cultivators exchanged a couple of words as they ran.

In other words, they hadn't become vessels of mindless aggression like the Qriz'Ul Ogras had described.

"Looks like these fools have drunk from a tainted well," Ogras snorted after the party was gone. "Like they didn't have enough problems with those disgusting curses in their chests."

"That can't end well for them," Zac agreed.

"Should we follow them?" Iz ventured.

"They're not moving in the direction of our destination," Zac said after some thought. "Let's just leave them be. Who knows if taking them out will alert the others."

"Proper scouting units would always carry life tablets," Iz nodded. "Some carry deadly poisons to use if they find themselves cornered. Better dead than captured, as their deaths would serve as an early warning."

The trio set out again, but they stopped just twenty minutes later after reaching the crest of a hill. On the other side, a seemingly endless city stretched across the horizon. Only the foundations of a 20-meter-thick wall remained, and the structures inside weren't any better off.

Only the occasional building retained all of its walls, and there was a palpable sense of gloom covering the ruins. The sky was completely black, and a purple haze covered large sections of the city.

"The Ra'Lashar Capital," Ogras explained as he looked at the city with mixed emotions. "Took me the better part of a year to deal with the netherblasted rune goblins over there. I can't believe I'm back in this cursed place."

"Does it look any different?" Zac asked.

"Well, it doesn't look like the Qriz'Ul have multiplied, at least. But the environment is far worse than when I was here," Ogras grimaced as he crushed a Nexus Crystal to release some pure energy around him. "Back then, the corruption wasn't this palpable."

"That's better," the demon sighed before turning to Zac. "Not sure if I can go all-out if we have to fight in the depths of the cit. A bunch of corruption will sneak into my body if I'm not careful. What about you?"

"I'm fine," Zac shrugged. "Looks like I'm immune to the taint at these levels."

Zac had already noticed it some time ago. There was something else mixed into the Cosmic Energy in the wastelands, though it was barely noticeable. It was a sticky and stubborn energy that snuck into his body and seemingly wanted to glom onto his pathways. The energy was unlike anything Zac had encountered before, except for that enormous pillar blasting into the sky.

Back then, the energy of the Lost Plane had been contained by the nine sigils, and Zac couldn't observe its true nature. But even when it had infiltrated his body, Zac didn't quite know what to make of it. It didn't feel like attuned energy at all. In fact, Zac wasn't even sure it was comparable to Cosmic Energy.

Was this because the energy possibly stemmed from an Eternal Heritage? Was the fundamental energy of the previous eras different than the Cosmic Energy they used now? Thankfully, his [Purity of the Void] quickly dealt with the infiltration all the same, and it never had time to become a problem. The situation hadn't even gotten to the point where his [Void Heart] needed to activate like in the Twilight Ocean.

"My flames are naturally purging the corruption," Iz added.

"Forget I asked," Ogras muttered under his breath. "Travelling with a buncha monsters."

A smile tugged at Zac's mouth, which made Iz look over with confusion.

"You take pleasure in your friend's lacking foundations?" Iz asked curiously.

"Hey—" Ogras interjected, but he just shrugged in defeat and dropped the matter after looking at the monstrously powerful scion.

"More in the faces he makes when he gets jealous, I think?" Zac said after some thought.

“Hmm,” Iz hummed before turning to Ogras, who looked back at her vigilantly. “When I left for the Frontier, my elder gave me 10 B-grade Nexus Coins for pocket money.”

The demon tried to keep his face impassive, but the shades of gray on his face gained a hint of green, and it looked like he was about to become physically ill.

“That’s... Nice,” Ogras squeezed through grit teeth before turning around and walking away to the edge of the barrier.

“You were right,” Iz smiled. “It is a bit amusing.”

“You have to take pleasure in the little things,” Zac nodded while desperately trying to hide his own jealousy.

Iz looked at Zac for an uncomfortable amount of time until her mouth slowly curved up. “To improve my Luck upon reaching E-grade, I bathed in the diluted dew from a two-million-year-old [Fateweave Orchid]. It also helped cleanse my marrow of some Natal Impurities.”

Zac’s stomach churned as he unwittingly remembered his most recent experience with improving his Luck. It almost felt like he could smell the unbearable stench from the [Celestial Clay] for a moment, and he was forced to take a steadying breath to stop himself from gagging.

“Let’s hurry and close that portal,” Zac grunted as he quickly walked over to Ogras, realizing he might have made a horrible mistake upon hearing a small laugh from behind.

Thankfully, Iz didn’t continue bragging about her financial prowess, much to the relief of both Zac and Ogras. Even then, her two little comments had painted a painfully clear picture that his so-called fortune wasn’t worth much in the grand scheme of things.

Seeing how they were approaching the city proper, Ogras took out a talisman that Pretty Peak had provided. It was a top-quality detection talisman that had proven to work against the Kan’Tanu’s arrays, and the air started to shudder a bit after the demon infused some energy into it.

As they got closer, nothing changed until they reached the very edge of the crumbled wall. It was barely visible, but the vibrations had gotten stronger, forming a thin film halfway through the thick wall.

“They’ve really installed a detection array,” Ogras frowned.

“My flames don’t work if they’re allowed to touch the barrier,” Iz said.

“Alright, let’s pass through using our means and then reignite the flame?” Zac said.

Iz nodded, and the floating candle swinked out. That exposed the three to the surroundings, but Ogras worked quickly as he took out a small array disk. Two flickering gateways appeared; one right in front of them and the other a hundred meters into the ruins. The three wordlessly passed through, and the array disk disintegrated to black ash behind them.

Such a short-range teleportation array wouldn’t work against an actual barrier with spatial isolation, but it worked fine against large-scale detection arrays. Iz’s candle reignited, and the three set off deeper into the capital. The three continued for another five hours at a rapid pace before slowing down.

During this time, they encountered two more detection arrays and even a couple of traps, but they passed them without much issue. Still, it was a clear sign the Kan'Tanu expected trouble, and Zac started to fear their chances of detonating the pathway before slipping away unnoticed were pretty slim.

The three also encountered a couple of Qriz'Ul on their way. To their surprise, not all of them looked like corrupted goblins. They had seen two who looked surprisingly similar to Ogras, while others had taken human form. Still, the vast majority looked like goblins, covered in runes unlike any Zac had ever seen. Iz didn't recognize them either, and she didn't even believe they were a derivation of the Apostate of Order's codification of the Dao.

By this point, the corruption was so strong it had created a dark haze all around them, and they couldn't see further than a few hundred meters. Ogras had been forced to completely seal his pores, and he had fastened over twenty Nexus Crystals across his body with his shadows to combat the corruption. Even Zac felt that [Purity of the Void] was reaching its limits, while Iz remained unphased.

"We're close now," the demon said as he pointed at an inner wall. "This was the fifth of seven layers that sealed the Ra'Lashar Kingdom. The seventh layer was just the central tower, which should still be one big crater. Still, the portal should be over there."

"No wonder those scouts were marked by the taint," Zac muttered. "I can't believe they dare stay in this kind of environment."

"K'Rav said the whispers of the Lost Plane are insidious," Ogras shrugged. "The Ra'Lashar never really realized they were running straight toward their doom. The gifts of the Lost Plane were like saltwater; the more they drank, the thirstier they got."

"Well, let's get on with it," Zac said as he readied himself. "The sooner we can get out of this disgusting place, the better."

"So you want to destroy the pathway first?" Iz confirmed.

"If possible," Zac nodded. "As long as we destroy that place, we've won. We don't even need to fight the Kan'Tanu if we don't have to. This whole region will collapse when the Realm Spirit activates the Portable Realm array; there's no way the infiltrators survive that without some means to escape the Void."

The three made their way through yet another detection array, this time by carefully calculating things so that they appeared in one of the few still-standing buildings in the last layer. From there, they crept closer and closer to the heart of the city until they finally discovered what they were dealing with.

The crater Ogras had described was gone. It had been replaced by a purple lake teeming with corruption. And on its shores, a thousand cultivators sat in silent meditation.