

The Fall 921

Chapter 921: Going With the Flow

The silence around the corrupted lake was absolute, with not one of the cultivators moving. But while the scene looked tranquil on the surface, it was anything but. The lake released powerful waves of dirty energy, creating an invisible storm on its surface that spread out along the crater's slopes. Meanwhile, the auras of the cultivators kept rising and falling in pace with the pulses of the lake.

It was almost like they had fused and become a singular organism that slowly inhaled and exhaled its corruption on its surroundings. The taint buffeted their surroundings, and Zac felt his [Void Heart] finally awaking from its slumber to consume the accumulated taint in his body.

A small settlement had been erected at the southern banks to their right. There were roughly 100 structures altogether, and their rustic design as they hugged the slopes of the crater would have made for an almost picturesque scene in another environment. But with the absolute lack of activity and the black haze that spread among the buildings, it looked like an abandoned ghost town.

"Look," Ogras whispered and pointed to the left, and Zac's eyes widened in surprise upon seeing a group of Qriz'Ul standing right next to a squad of Kan'Tanu cultivators.

"They've allied?" Zac grimaced.

"More like these fools have absorbed so much corruption the Qriz'Ul have mistaken them for their own," Ogras snorted. "What in the Heavens are they doing? Weren't they supposed to be digging for keys to the courts?"

Zac nodded in agreement. It really looked odd. There was no excavation being done, and Zac couldn't sense any hint of Ultom at all.

"Do you sense any calling for your seals?" Zac asked, and both Iz and Ogras shook their heads. "Alright, I guess we won't be able to conjure a pillar. Unless we blow up the lake somehow?"

"Not sure how we'd accomplish that," Ogras muttered. "More importantly, where is the gateway? Get the hell out here, bastard."

"Ai, what have these bastards done to my home?" a sad sigh echoed as the spectral goblin appeared next to Ogras, but he quickly turned to Iz.

"Young miss, I can see you carry great fate. If you-" K'Rav said, but his words were caught in his throat when a few small embers started to dance around Iz as she trained her eyes at him. "Ah, never mind, young mistress. I shan't take up your precious time."

"No, it's fine," Ogras grinned. "Go ahead, make your pitch."

"What do you want, you imbecile? To show me the aftermath of you blowing up the great Tower of Ra'Lashar?" K'Rav swore.

"That was mostly you, remember?" Ogras snorted. "Where is the gateway to the Lost Plane?"

"It's at the bottom of the lake, obviously," K'Rav said with disinterest. "Can't you brats tell? Those waters are not from our plane. It must have seeped out from somewhere. These children must really have cracked the whole thing wide open for physical matter to appear like this. Even we knew better than to be that greedy."

"Well, I guess it's up to you two young masters then, yeah?" Ogras said. "Unfortunately, this poor peasant's foundations are no match to a lake with that amount of corruption. I'd probably die before resurfacing."

"I... Don't think I can enter the lake either," Iz said after some hesitation. "At least not while accomplishing the mission. My bloodline will try to set the lake on fire if assaulted by that much corruption. I might even be teleported away by fatewarding treasures."

"I guess it's up to the fearsome Deviant Asura, then," Ogras nodded.

"Perfect," Zac muttered as he hesitantly looked at the bubbling lake.

It should be fine. Right?

It was hard to tell from the distance, but Zac felt he should be able to last for a short while at least. Even if the tainted waters came from the Lost Plane, they didn't contain energies that far surpassed this Mystic Realm's. It seemed to be a bit worse than the depths of the Twilight Chasm, but he had [Void Zone] now. As long as it worked against this weird energy, he would have more than enough wiggle room.

"Give me some space, please," Zac said as he took a couple of steps away from Iz before activating an Illusion Array.

Zac was somewhat certain that Iz didn't care about whatever his hidden aces were. She couldn't care less about him being both Draugr and Human. She only found it an interesting oddity. As for the Remnants, she was even less impressed. She even seemed to believe they were more trouble than they were worth, which definitely was a reasonable assessment.

But his bloodline was different. The Limitless Emperor was still a sensitive subject billions of years later. He didn't know what ramifications it would have if people from the ancient factions found out whose legacy he was carrying. Even if he wasn't killed outright, it was possible that some would want to use him for the same purpose as Leandra and the Kayar-Elu – to control the System.

And just because Iz didn't care nor mind, there were no guarantees about her elders.

Ogras and Iz looked over, but the demon shrugged and turned away upon seeing the Illusion array. Iz looked for a moment longer, but she too turned back toward the lake a moment later. Zac immediately activated [Void Zone], and the soothing sense of nothingness ensconced him.

It worked. Just like [Purity of the Void] had no problems purifying the energy of the Lost Plane and [Void Heart] had no problems absorbing it, neither did [Void Zone] have any difficulties removing any such energy from his surroundings. That was still no guarantee it would be able to completely block out the energy in the lake, but it would at the least severely weaken it.

"All good, Mr. Secretive?" Ogras asked with a raised brow when Zac returned.

"All good. I'll deal wit-," Zac nodded, but he suddenly froze as [Void Heart] suddenly spat out a trickle of refined energy.

Suddenly, Zac understood a passage from the Book of Duality that had stumped him five days ago. A moment later, both the flash of inspiration and the refined energy were gone, but Zac was still frozen solid. It didn't come close to the lights of the seals, but what he'd just felt was definitely in the same category.

[Void Heart] could refine and distill the insights of the Lost Plane.

Zac's eyes were veritably burning as he turned back to the lake. It no longer looked like a putrid pond of corruption that needed to be incinerated. It looked like a treasure mountain. One round of refinement from [Void Heart] might only have helped him deduce one passage of the Book of Duality, but what if he had a whole lake's worth of fuel for inspiration?

Altogether, it might even match up to a full piece of the seal. Just the thought of it made his breath ragged, and he could definitely understand why the Ra'Lashar held onto the Lost Plane until their very demise. The possibilities almost felt endless.

"Uh, you okay there?" Ogras coughed. "You look like Barghest in heat."

"You seem to have come up with a... creative... idea," Iz added with an excited sparkle in her eyes.

"Ah? What? Oh, never mind," Zac coughed. "I said I'll deal with the gateway. But do you guys have any better ideas than me just making a run for it? There are no guarantees these guys won't follow me into the lake. I'm not sure I can deal with a bunch of corrupted Kan'Tanu and the portal simultaneously."

"We can create a diversion?" Ogras offered. "But it's hard to tell how these guys will react. It almost feels like they have fused with the lake. They may ignore us if they feel the lake threatened."

"There were vast tunnel networks beneath the Tower of Ra'Lashar," K'Rav suddenly said. "Many should have flooded or collapsed, but some might be intact. If you can find one, you can either walk or swim beneath those glassy-eyed fools."

"Can you tell us where they are?" Zac asked.

"Everything's different by now, hard to tell," K'Rav shrugged. "Besides, why would I help you after you tried to kill me?"

"I'll deal with it," Ogras said as he took out the [Shadewar Flag].

The next moment, five specters that both looked and felt like the Qriz'Ul creatures appeared within the domain.

"These guys should be able to move about undetected, unless the infiltrators really have learned to communicate with the monsters of the Lost Plane," Ogras said. "I can just send them through the ground until I find a path."

"Do it," Zac nodded, and the creatures quickly sank into the ground.

“Hopefully, I can catch a few new ones while we’re here,” Ogras muttered. “Who knows what kind of creatures this thing can accept.”

“That flag is problematic,” Iz said. “It takes without giving back, defying the Law of Balance. But the universe always exacts its price. You will have to carry the weight of every soul you capture. Eventually, they will drag you under.”

“Well, I have this guy to keep my head above water,” Ogras smiled as he nodded at Zac. “Besides, this thing is just a stopgap until my strength has improved.”

“That’s what we said about the Lost Plane,” K’Rav snickered before he flew back into the flag.

“He’s right, you know,” Zac said. “That thing is trouble.”

“I know,” Ogras said as he fastened a few more homemade talismans on the unorthodox treasure. “But I’m working on it, with the help of the epiphanies. I think it’s solvable.”

Zac nodded in understanding before turning back toward the cultivators in the distance. He wasn’t surprised to hear Ogras was focusing on fixing the problems of the flag, even if he personally felt it was a waste of an epiphany. At the same time, there were limits to what the lights of Ultom could help with.

Ogras’ body-tempering manual wasn’t in need to be fixed like his was, and the demon had told him he was planning on discarding his Cultivation Manual altogether at the D-grade. It simply didn’t hold up even at Peak E-grade. And between the manual being incomplete and Ogras’ path having shifted, it would be easier to create a new manual from scratch than to improve upon the shaky foundations of the old method.

Apparently, many elites started to work on that in the D-grades in either case. They either created a Cultivation Manual to perfectly fit their path or adjusted their current one to remove any mismatch.

The minutes passed as the trio kept watch over the stoic cultivators, but none seemed to notice the search going on underground. Eventually, Ogras perked up and turned to the small settlement at the other shore.

“One of the buildings over there has a pool of tainted water. It seems to be connected to the lake through one of the tunnels. The other pathways I’ve found are quite far underground, and we’d have to dig through at least fifty meters of stone to reach it.”

“The vibrations would carry through the stone and spread outside my domain,” Iz said. “We might be discovered.”

“Is there anyone inside the buildings?” Zac asked.

“None in the one with the pond, though there are two people standing in the neighboring structure. They are staring at some diagram, but I’m unsure if they’re mentally present.”

“What do you guys think?” Zac asked.

“I think it’s our best shot,” Ogras slowly said. “We’ll stay at the surface. If we see the cultivators react, we’ll ambush and distract them.”

“Does that work with you?” Zac asked as he looked at Iz.

Iz didn’t immediately answer, with her gaze instead turning to the enthralled Kan’Tanu. Zac didn’t want to rush her, but he’d be lying to say if he wasn’t a bit worried. From the beginning, Iz had been flighty about what kind of role she envisioned for herself in this upcoming mission. Whether she was even willing to fight the Black Heart Sect. Then again, her participation wasn’t something they had originally planned for, and she had already helped a lot by providing intelligence and using her domain-creating candle.

Of course, if she could also test the fate of a couple of infiltrators, that would be even better.

“This is war,” Ogras added. “Besides, they are unorthodox cultivators shunned by the heavens. Killing them will not bring fell karma.”

“But it will bring about Karma,” Iz said with her brows furrowed. “It is unclear how our actions will affect the river of fate. These are just some guards, but they are part of a larger tapestry related to Ultom. I don’t know how it will affect my trajectory in life. If the ripples might even affect my family. I don’t-”

Zac looked at Iz’s troubled face, and he thought he had a pretty good idea of what was troubling her. Iz Tayn was almost his opposite. He was thrown right into the world of cultivation completely blind, and he was still trying to unravel the mysteries of his origin. Meanwhile, Iz came from an ancient faction, and all of her life had probably been carefully planned out.

Every decision Zac had made since reuniting with humanity on Earth had real-life implications. People lived and died depending on his choices, and the very fate of his planet had hung in the balance more than once. Iz had probably never been placed in such a situation, and she was only now truly realizing how much a decision could weigh on your soul.

Zac glanced at Ogras, who helplessly looked back. “Try not to get discovered?”

“Stealth is my middle name,” Zac smiled, which elicited a derisive snort from the demon.

Zac turned to Iz next, who hesitantly looked back. “You don’t need to make a decision right now. I haven’t been caught yet. I know it can feel tough, and I’m too much of a hillbilly to know what’s the right choice for someone like you. I guess, just act according to your heart and conscience? That way, you can at least face yourself in the mirror, knowing you did your best even if things went wrong.”

“... Thank you,” Iz nodded.

“Alright, no time to waste. The longer we stick around, the more variables we’ll have to deal with,” Zac said, and the three started to make their way around the crater toward the small settlement.

The occasional Qriz’Ul kept popping up among the ruins, which forced Iz to tighten the fiery domain around them. Even then, they had only narrowly avoided having a few unwelcome visitors ambling into their isolated domain. Twenty minutes later, they reached the edge of the temporary settlement.

It was an odd feeling, walking through a ghost-town while invisible. It was like you were a ghost traveling through the ruins of another fallen civilization. But the feeling didn’t last long as there were only a couple rows of houses, and they soon reached the building they were looking for.

Through the slit in the neighboring door, Zac saw the two infiltrators Ogras mentioned. Their auras were gentle and refined, meaning they were probably non-combat classes. If Zac had to guess, they were Array Masters, judging by the large tapestry they were blankly staring at.

Just like Ogras said, it was an incredibly complex array. It was painted in red and blue, with each color using a different script. The blue runes seemed like a mix of the nine subordinate sigils of the Left Imperial Palace and the unfamiliar marks on the bodies of the Qriz'Ul. Meanwhile, the red ones were the script the Kan'Tanu used, which wasn't all that different from the System Standard Script.

Together, the two systems formed a complex swirl that Zac could only guess was related to the pathway leading to the Lost Plane. But the array was obviously incomplete, with some sections missing runes while other areas were completely blank. It made Zac wonder just what had happened here.

Had an experiment gone awry, or had they been too eager to crack open the pathway to the Lost Plane, accidentally releasing the purple lake? Because what they were seeing here didn't seem to match the original plan the lipless Hegemon had hinted at.

"Can you snatch that array when things go down?" Zac asked, and Ogras nodded as though it was a matter of course.

From there, they walked over to the neighboring structure, where the five-meter-wide pool was. This close to the water, the ambient corruption was a lot stronger. Zac cursed the fact he didn't know how to turn off [Purity of the Void], and he could only watch on with helplessness as his purification node destroyed most of the tainted insights.

It was impossible to make any hard plans when they didn't know what would happen going forward, but Ogras and Zac spent the next ten minutes coming up with some flexible plans depending on how things went. Finally, there was nothing else to do, and Zac stepped into the pond, carefully controlling his movements to avoid creating any ripples.

"Alright, have fun out here," Zac said as he slowly lowered himself into the waters.

Zac barely managed to stifle a groan as a steady stream of corruption started to burrow into his body through all of his pores. But it was well within what he could handle, and he nodded in confirmation to the other two as he sunk further down. When the tainted water had reached his shoulders, he turned to Iz Tayn one final time.

"Don't worry too much; just go with the flow," Zac smiled as his head started to become submerged. "Things tend to work out. When they don't blow up."