

The Fall 913

Chapter 913: Vigil

"The Left Imperial Palace?" Leyara said with large sorrowful eyes. "And here I thought you had finally come to profess your love before riding off into battle. What a disappointment."

"Be serious," Zac said.

This was a long-overdue discussion. The two of them had danced around the subject for weeks, but Zac needed some clarity before setting off for the Ra'Lashar Kingdom.

"Who said I wasn't?" Leyara winked, but her expression soon returned to normal. "I know you have a lot of questions, but I don't have a lot of answers to give you."

"You clearly know at least some of it, and you would have me use your escape treasure to get sent right into the hands of the Void Gate," Zac said. "You should understand the risk that would place us in."

This was Zac's primary concern. Using Leyara's Spatial Anchor would supposedly drag them right back to the Void Gate. If they wanted the opportunity for themselves, then he and Ogras would be delivering themselves to the slaughter. He and Ogras had even discussed fleeing in the opposite direction instead – into the Stellar Ladder and the Million Gates Territory.

Obviously, Zac wanted to avoid that solution if possible. They didn't even have any Cosmic Vessel, and his escape bangle was still on its cooldown for another nine years. He would be able to set up a Teleportation Array, but those didn't work in the Million Gates Territory, meaning they would have to make their way out themselves somehow.

But no matter how arduous such a journey was, it was a preferable option to being blasted into nothingness by a Monarch when they emerged. So the two had made some preparations with the help of Billy and Gemmy, but Zac hoped this conversation would alleviate any need for using them.

"Well, I guess I owe you that much," Leyara slowly said. "And seeing as you're a candidate, you will get to know the truth sooner or later. But you cannot tell anyone else about this. Fate is already fraught with uncertainties, and even the smallest of ripples can bring about a storm."

"Of course," Zac nodded.

"You have nothing to fear from the Void Gate. We will not interfere with you or the events that are about to unfold. Neither will anyone from our side try to gain access to the Left Imperial Palace or its nine outer courts," Leyara said with certainty. "Or meddle with the thing residing within."

The allusion to Ultom and the mention of the nine sigils pretty much confirmed that Leyara was the real deal and not just pretending to know things to extract information from him. Still, that felt as much a threat as an opportunity when she held the key to their freedom.

"Why should I believe you?" Zac asked. "Your faction is clearly interested in this stuff, and has probably been looking for them for a long time."

"I think you have figured a few things out already," Leyara nodded. "First of all, the Void Gate is not our real name. Our faction is older than the System itself, and we call ourselves the Vigil."

"The Vigil?" Zac frowned. "Never heard of it."

"You wouldn't," Leyara said. "Honestly, most of us don't know about it either. The Void Gate is just a small subsidiary force looking for clues at the frontier, and only a select few know the truth. Master only told me just before I entered the Void Star, so this is mostly uncharted territory for me as well."

"Then why wouldn't you get involved? If you've searched for so long?" Zac asked suspiciously.

"If you want to know, then tell me how you became a candidate. What was the criterion?" Leyara countered.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he chose to tell her the truth.

"It just happened the moment I passed through the Void Star's outer film. I got a terrifying vision that almost killed me. My whole compartment was covered in blood afterward," Zac said. "After that, I could sense the pieces from a distance."

"As I suspected," Leyara said as she looked at Zac with a complex gaze. "The Vigil has a mission. To watch as the river flows and to make sure fate isn't usurped or altered."

"Fate usurped?" Zac said with a raised brow. "Like a nobody becoming a candidate?"

"No, not like that," Leyara smiled. "This is a matter of those at the very peak. Small beings like us are just part of the river. How could we truly affect it as we are? I don't know what it means, but the result is that we will not interfere with you, nor will we interfere with any infiltrator who becomes a candidate."

"But you're not just observers," Zac countered. "You directly got involved when you started hoovering up ruins and realms with the Void Star. And now the outsiders are involved."

"That was an unfortunate side effect of our mission," Leyara grimaced. "My master could feel that the pillar was stirring, and she had to pave the path to let fate flow unobstructed. That presented an opportunity to these infiltrators. Now, she can't just close the connection and seal off the Kan'Tanu, since that would affect her true mission."

"So Zecia will suffer because of a technicality?" Zac frowned.

"That's..." Leyara sighed. "You could see it that way. But that's why we're here. To try and right a wrong without breaking the precepts. Luckily, your friend has provided us with a solution by forcing us to labor for his undertaking. If this realm is removed from the Stellar Ladder, then the whole ladder should destabilize. Even if it doesn't, we should be able to do it ourselves since this realm is the origin of fate."

"Furthermore, most of the Void Gate will join the upcoming war, even if the Vigil doesn't get involved with mundane struggles. After all, this is our home as well. Almost everyone was born in Zecia."

"That's the least of our problems," Zac said. "You should know what will happen if powerful factions turn their gazes toward Zecia. Will the Vigil spread the appearance of the Left Imperial Palace?"

"I don't know," Leyara said and quickly continued when Zac's brows furrowed. "I'm still coming to terms with this all. I really have no idea if my faction has allies they'd bring over or if they will keep it to themselves. But you should know, even if the Vigil doesn't say anything, this cannot remain a secret for long. The ancient factions have their means to discover something of this magnitude."

Zac nodded with exhaustion in his eyes. He had already started to fear as much, that an Eternal Heritage appearing unnoticed would be too much to hope for. Even if the Kan'Tanu didn't expose the truth to the multiverse, it was just a matter of time before some Supremacy figured it out.

Dealing with that mess was for later, though. If worse came to worst, he'd just have to camp on Earth or Ensolus under the System's protection until someone claimed Ultom and left Zecia alone.

"Then what can you tell me?" Zac sighed. "What did you mean when you said a pillar was stirring? Is the Left Imperial Palace one of the pillars?"

Leyara looked out from her window, down at the army camped outside.

"When the Limitless Empire crafted the System, their power alone wasn't enough. The Heavens are not so easily subdued, and they had to lend the power of others. Eight pillars were erected at the corners of reality, each one powered by something called an Eternal Heritage. Places of penultimate power, of penultimate truth. Concepts beyond the Dao itself, which was needed to contain the Heavens."

Zac shuddered when he heard the description, and the words from his vision once more floated to the surface.

Eight Pillars. Nine Seals. One Destiny.

"The undertaking was a success, and the pillars provided the strength the System needed to stabilize and grow during its infancy. Many tried to stop Emperor Limitless' experiment, and the Left Imperial Palace became one of the battlegrounds where even the Heavens joined the fray. But the eight pillars withstood the assault and disappeared."

"But now the Left Imperial Palace is coming back?" Zac frowned. "How will this affect the System?"

"According to Master, the System is no longer dependent on the pillars. They were let loose long ago. In fact, them returning unattached is by design."

"By design? Whose design is that?" Zac frowned.

"Who knows?" Leyara smiled. "Perhaps Emperor Limitless. Perhaps the ancient beings who crafted the places of power. I only know that the pillars were destined to return, and Vigil would be there to observe and aid the ascent."

Zac slowly digested what Leyara had told him, and he believed her on most points. She knew way too much information just to be some frontier scion. As for the Left Imperial Palace and Ultom being used in the construction of the System, Zac could definitely believe it. He had had the same thoughts over the past months, and the scarred exterior lined up with Leyara's mention of battles.

It was pretty shocking Emperor Limitless had managed to gather eight Eternal Heritages. However, it wasn't without reason since many still believed him to be the strongest person to have existed. Besides, this all happened at the beginning of the era, before cultivation had reached its current height.

The only question that remained was whether he could trust Leyara on the most crucial part; if her faction were really only there to observe or if they were aiming for the Eternal Heritages.

"Why are you only observing? What is your end goal?" Zac asked.

“No idea,” Leyara smiled. “Master wouldn’t tell me that part. If you want to know, you’d have to ask her. This is pretty much all I know. By now, you might know more than me. For instance, my master never mentioned anything about this Lost Plane you told us about.”

“Alright,” Zac sighed, though he wasn’t completely satisfied.

Zac asked a few more clarifying questions over the following minutes, and he managed to get a few valuable pieces of information out of it. She didn’t know how the trial would look, or how the nine subsidiary courts played into everything. But she was somewhat confident that no Kan’Tanu infiltrator had managed to become a candidate, which was good news.

Most importantly, she believed that the Void Star had swallowed no more than five pieces of various seals, while most remained in the chaotic space of the Million Gates Territory. Staying in this place was unlikely to bear fruit, especially if they managed to break the Stellar Ladder with their plan.

The two were eventually done, and it was just in time since Gemmy’s voice appeared and told them the others were waiting at the viewing deck.

“By the way, do you know which one of the Nine Imperial Bloodlines you have?” Leyara suddenly asked as they walked out of her quarters, her voice so casual one might have thought she was discussing the weather.

Zac’s heart lurched, but he somehow managed to keep his face impassive. “Nine Imperial Bloodlines? What’s that, and why would you think I have one?”

“Because I’m not blind?” Leyara laughed. “I’ve felt it a few times over the past weeks. Short bursts that felt like an emperor had descended onto the battlefield.”

Zac was shocked at how incisive Leyara was. He had indeed been forced to use his [Force of the Void] a few times over the past weeks. It was only to slightly speed up his skill activations to push a couple of rough situations in his favor, and he hadn’t thought anyone would notice. His enemies never seemed to realize, but it looked like Leyara had some means of her own.

“Why do you ask?” Zac asked.

“Just curious,” Leyara smiled. “Just to be clear, we will not provide you with any resources or manuals even if you do.”

“Then I don’t have one,” Zac shrugged.

“Stingy,” Leyara laughed.

Zac rolled his eyes, but he was inwardly thankful. Leyara had probably not expected him to answer, but this was a good reminder that some apparently could sense the Void Energy. How much it mattered, Zac wasn’t sure. But from what he could tell, both his bloodline talents were things that broke convention, and the fewer that knew, the better.

The two soon joined the others at the viewing deck at the upper part of the mountain, the high vantage giving them a perfect view of both the soldiers outside and the work on the pathways below. By now, it was almost complete, but some of the most complex patterns remained to be engraved. The Gnivelings

could not help with those sections, even if they had proven surprisingly attuned to the Dao and inscriptions.

He could even spot Vai working far below, just like she had since they arrived. As far as Zac knew, she hadn't stopped working over the past ten days. The remaining Hegemons were also helping, but only two array masters were actually skilled enough to direct work rather than taking on the role of assistant.

Those three wouldn't be sent out for the raid, but the other Hegemons were slated to join them in this final push. Zac's eyes turned to Ogras, who was standing to the side. He looked a bit pale, but his aura was stable.

"How are you doing?" Zac asked.

"If I say I'm mortally wounded, can I stay behind?" the demon muttered.

Zac only laughed as he looked out at the army waiting outside, seeing that they hadn't changed their formation much since before.

"Still clumped together," Zac sighed.

"Looks that way," Pretty nodded.

Six enormous siege towers remained, each one guarded by roughly ten Hegemons and a horde of E-grade cultivators who all were protected by a barrier. Work was underway to rebuild the ones that had been destroyed as well, but they wouldn't be finished in time for it to matter. Pretty even believed the work was just a ruse to divert their attention.

There were no safeguards or warriors between the six armies, almost like they were inviting you to escape as that previous Hegemon had. This arrangement was far harder to deal with compared to the previous encirclement, where they were uniformly spread out. With how they were clumped together, it was almost impossible to take out any Hegemons now, at least not without taking on some losses of their own.

For the original plan, this wouldn't have mattered. The idea was for Zac and Ogras to flee the encirclement through one of those open pathways while a diversionary squad struck one of the nearby towers. If everything worked out, they'd leave the lockdown without issue and he'd activate [Flashfire Flourish].

But Pretty's proposal meant taking on one of the six armies before leaving.

"And we really have to take down another tower?" Zac grimaced.

"It's asking a lot from you, but we simply don't have a lot of options," Leyara sighed. "This is a gambit – we're all joining you in striking that spot. If we can take out the Hegemons and the tower, the pressure on us will be much lower."

"The problem is that barrier," Pretty said. "By the time we break it down, the other armies will have had time to send reinforcement, flanking us."

"Don't the two of you have something left up your sleeves?" Ogras asked. "You're supposed to be proud daughters of Heaven."

“We were just a small advance party meant for reconnaissance and, if possible, sabotage,” Pretty said. “If I had any siege treasures, I would have taken them out by now.”

“I have a few more D-grade Talismans, but I think they can weaken the barrier at most,” Leyara added.

“Billy can thwunk it,” Billy offered.

The man looked more like a mummy than a titan at this point, with bandages covering most of his body. Zac didn’t know why he insisted on using bandages when Zac had given him top-tier pills, but both he and Gemmy were adamant they were needed to recover.

Zac hesitated for a few moments before he looked at Ogras, who curiously looked back at him.

“Remember when we got trapped by the cultists?”

“Right here?” Ogras asked as he pointedly glanced at Pretty and Leyara.

“No point in holding back if it will get us all killed. Can you cover me?” Zac asked, and he got a reluctant nod in return.

“What are the two of you talking about?” Pretty asked.

Zac didn’t immediately answer but instead turned to Leyara first. “Are you able to tell who or what maintains the shield?”

“Not from here, but I will when we get closer,” Leyara nodded as she curiously looked at Zac.

“All right, I’ll deal with the shield; you guys just need to be ready to blast the Hegemons when it crumbles.”

“You’ll deal with it? Alone?” Pretty frowned. “How long do you need?”

“It’ll be over in an instant.”