

The Fall 915

Chapter 915: A Fate Encounter

The sky, which had previously been overcast and dull, was now illuminated by a radiant golden orange. However, the scene was localized to Zac's surroundings, as though an empyrean sun was trying to peek through the clouds. Of course, with the immense aura coming from above, no one would think this was a natural phenomenon.

Ogras and the Kan'Tanu looked equally confused by the sudden change, but Zac knew all-too-well what they were dealing with. After all, he had seen a similar scene less than a year ago. Certainly, the flames lacked the all-consuming intensity of the burning sky in the Orom World, and it only covered a small spot. If that wasn't enough proof, there was also the familiar fiery attunement that started to appear in the Cosmic Energy around them. It definitely shared the same origin as that of the terrifying Golem.

Just how was this possible? How had Iz Tayn managed to track him to the depths of the Void Star? He had even circulated motes of chaos through his body last time, partly in hopes it would destroy any tracking measures she or others might have placed in his body.

But not even that was enough to throw this crazy firebug off his scent. Zac couldn't believe his bad luck. What in God's name was wrong with this lunatic, to make her follow him this insistently? Had he become a heart demon for Iz Tayn when he escaped from her in the Tower of Eternity?

"We need to get out of here. Now," Zac swore as he looked for a way out.

Even if the Kan'Tanu had momentarily paused their attacks designed at destabilizing space and trapping them, they were still smack-dab in the middle of a spatial storm. Only the area where the opaque dome had previously been was still intact, but Spatial Tears were already closing in on them.

"Enemy reinforcements?" Ogras frowned as he looked at the fiery sky.

"Worse," Zac grimaced.

The sudden change to the battlefield had increased the uncertainty, except for Leyara's group. Zac had mentioned that his escape measure was fire-based already, so they probably thought the powerful fiery energies were him activating his treasure. Thus, they made it through the gates of Billy's fort without even having to clash with the intercepting army with the help of Leyara's spatial shifts.

The stalemate back on the battlefield didn't last for long. Ogras, having seen the fear on Zac's face as he started making his way through the spatial storm, had opted to run first and ask questions later. This time, the roles were reversed, where they were the ones who had to make their way through frayed space rather than the Kan'Tanu. Even worse, many of the Hegemons' skills were still active as they blasted the area, making the journey even more dangerous.

Meanwhile, the burning clouds in the sky slowly started to spin, seemingly forming a vortex of divine flames. All the while, the attunement in the air kept skewing further toward fire. It almost felt like someone was continuously crushing Fire-Attuned Nexus Crystals around them, letting their energies spread through the area.

Zac was surprised to see that actually worked in their favor. The chaotic Spatial Energies were being pushed away, and some of the Spatial Tears seemed to literally burn away as space mended. The Kan'Tanu's lingering attacks were being suppressed as well. It was like the Dao of Fire was claiming the whole area, pushing away and suppressing everything else.

The Kan'Tanu also made their moves upon seeing that they had made it halfway through the encirclement. Unfortunately, the invaders chose to attack with redoubled effort rather than back down, even if they didn't know what was happening in the sky. Zac once more lamented that their enemies were lunatics implanted with Heart Curses, which essentially turned them all into deathsworn who had to finish their missions no matter what.

Trying to intimidate them was useless since most of them weren't able to retreat.

The Templar Hegemons had crafted a set of space-stabilizing talismans as a precaution, and Zac and Ogras threw them out left and right as they tried to make their way out of the bombardment. Ogras was somewhat better off thanks to his elusive abilities, while Zac had to continuously use Vivi's vines to intercept attacks.

A trail of broken-off vines was left in his wake, but that wasn't enough to prevent his body from being covered in wounds. Zac even briefly considered activating [Void Zone], but he didn't actually know how that bloodline talent would work in this situation. The Spatial Tears could technically be seen as the Void of Space leaking through due to a lack of spatial integrity.

Would his nullification sphere remove the last vestiges of protections against collapse, throwing him into the Void? There were also some witnesses he didn't want to expose his Bloodline in front of, though he wasn't ready to die to keep that secret.

"This isn't working. We'll either get incinerated or cut apart by spatial tears before we get out of here," Ogras swore as he narrowly dodged a Hegemon's swing that cut off their escape path.

Zac nodded in agreement. Should he just do it? Activate [Flashfire Flourish] and hope that the dense fiery energies in the atmosphere would bolster the escape treasure enough to blast through this spatial turbulence. Or should he hold out a bit longer in hopes that Iz Tayn would inadvertently create an opening?

Suddenly, five pillars of blindingly hot flames crashed down around them, each one containing an unbelievable amount of energy. Space was singed wherever they passed, but the Spatial Tears were burnt and cauterized the moment they appeared. Luckily, none of the pillars were aimed at them, but Zac was still aghast upon sensing the extremely powerful Dao within.

Was Iz Tayn really this powerful?

The pillars were rather targeted at the groups of infiltrators who were boxing them in, and seven Hegemons were reduced to cinders in an instant. They had actually been prepared for an attack, but their defensive talismans and skills had proven utterly useless in the face of those flames. It drastically lessened the pressure the two were under, but Zac wasn't relieved as he looked to the sky with trepidation.

And there she was.

Descending from the sky like a demonic angel, her orange hair dancing in the sky like a celestial fire. Six burning wings gently moved behind her back, buffeted by the Dao itself. She wasn't actually flying though, but rather standing on the back of a three-meter-wide hand wrought from rock.

It was from this hand those fiery pillars had emerged, and terrifying flames were still burning at its fingertips. And by the looks of it, the hand was actually a being of its own rather than a skill conjured by Iz. It radiated an immensely powerful aura that easily eclipsed that of the Lipless Hegemon, let alone the Kan'Tanu cultivators around them.

Zac suddenly felt a gaze upon him, and his eyes locked with Iz Tayn's. He also heard a commotion far to the west, but he couldn't look away as Iz stepped off from the golemoid hand and started to descend toward him. A Kan'Tanu Hegemon unleashed a skill toward her, but she didn't even so much as glance at the incoming bloody ray.

As expected, the attack and the Hegemon himself were annihilated by the burning hand long before the ray reached Iz, and no one else dared to so much as breathe loudly in front of that oppressive display. They could only look up at Iz helplessly, like mortals in front of a goddess.

"You thought you could subvert the unyielding river of fate? Chaos might be able to hide you from the Heavens, but not from me." Iz said, her calm voice empowered and elevated by the Dao. "Twice now, you have fled from my grasp. There will not be a third."

"Always something with you," Ogras whispered as he glared at Zac.

"Hide us," Zac whispered as he started infusing Cosmic Energy into the [Flashfire Flourish].

They could no longer wait, and the surroundings were mostly stabilized thanks to the trigger-happy Golem. Ogras nodded, and a huge burst of shadows engulfed the whole area. But just as they were summoned, they were dispersed, like clouds unable to withstand the sun's cleansing rays.

"What the- "Ogras swore as he looked up at Iz Tayn through the remnants of his destroyed domain.

Zac inwardly sighed before looking up at Iz Tayn. "Alright, you've found me. But we need to deal with these unorthodox cultivators before anything else. The leader is over there."

Iz Tayn frowned with annoyance as she glanced at the random Hegemon Zac pointed at. "The Black Heart Sect is irrel-"

Zac didn't hear the rest as his body was consumed by flames, and a groan next to him confirmed Ogras had been brought along for the ride. Zac's whole world was suddenly seen through the lens of fire, and his heart clenched upon seeing Iz this way.

He had already seen that his stalker seemed more attuned with flames than even Fire Crystals when looking at her with [Cosmic Gaze], but that was nothing compared to what he was seeing right now. The Golem's Dao of Fire was stronger than Iz's, yet it seemed subordinate to Iz's very being.

It somehow felt like she was the origin of all flames when he looked at her. Like she carried the fires of the era's birth within her body. It was mesmerizing, and Zac almost felt like he would better understand the underpinnings of the universe if he just got to study those flames a little longer.

Luckily, the overwhelming pain of being forcibly turned into a streak of fire snapped him out of it, and Zac staunchly held onto his senses over the roaring flames as he steered the treasure as best as he could. Activating the [Flashfire Flourish] was like setting yourself on fire and taping yourself to a rocket, and the enormous momentum in the treasure ripped him out of Iz Tayn's grasp.

The burning pillars were gone in an instant, as was Billy's fortress. They were moving at speeds approaching teleportation, yet he somehow managed to have a vague sense of his surroundings. Two seconds later, Zac felt they had moved the required distance, and he willed [Flashfire Flourish] to deactivate.

Zac appeared in a foreign hillside region in a flash of scorching flames. The withered stalks of grass within five meters were incinerated, but there was thankfully no obnoxious avatar announcing their arrival. Yrial had enough presence of mind not to ruin the escape treasure that way, at least.

Tearing pain throughout his body derailed Zac's train of thought. His whole body felt like a scorched wasteland, and ethereal flames were still eating at his pathways and organs. Zac groaned with pain as he took out a pill bottle with shaky hands. A gust of ashy smoke escaped his lips from the exclamation, a poignant reminder his body was still literally on fire.

Still, Yrial's prediction been proven more right than he could have known. He had said that damaging one's foundations was an unavoidable price of using such a powerful escape treasure, that it was the law of balance. Yet Zac felt the damage to his body wasn't that bad. The flames were pretty stubborn, but his Hidden Nodes had already started swallowing them. As for the damage to his foundations, they weren't any worse than breaking open a node or two. With Leyara's Pill and a few of his own, he should be good to go before the next battle.

As expected of a Terminal Disciple of a powerful Monarch, Leyara had all kinds of valuables in her Spatial Ring. She had given him and Ogras one pill each that looked like a golden nebula trapped in a black bubble of night sky. It was called [Resurging Star Pill], a special type of recovery pill that helped after overdrafting your body.

The pill was normally meant to be used after using powerful Berserking Treasures or Taboo Skills that damaged your foundations, but it should work just as well in their current situation. A weak groan echoed next to him, and Zac looked over to see Ogras kneeling. His body was covered in scorch marks, looking utterly wretched.

"You okay, buddy?" Zac asked.

"Heaven-cursed heart-eating lunatics, netherblasted spatial tears, and now crazed fire witches?" Ogras complained as he swallowed his prepared set of pills. "You'll be the death of me."

Zac laughed in response, but his smile became strained as he felt a tremendous burst of energy behind them.

"I told you there wouldn't be a third."

—————

Vai blankly looked at the scene from her spot atop the wall, not knowing what to believe. At first, everything had gone according to plan. The tower had collapsed, and her niece had safely returned to

her side without any further casualties. The infiltrators had sprung a nasty trap to catch Gaun- no, Zac Atwood, but it had failed.

Then everything changed when the terrifying flame cultivator descended from the sky. Vai had never seen anything like it. Just looking at her felt like looking at the true face of fire, more true than any fiery Dao Vai had ever seen. A glance at Lara, who joined her atop the wall, had indicated her niece had no idea who she was either.

It was a hidden master, and someone who was clearly here for her friend – the mysterious woman's words carried through the whole battlefield. Vai wasn't surprised. Someone like the Deviant Asura wouldn't attract common cultivators. She had already seen as much from his two other inordinately powerful friends.

She still couldn't believe that her bodyguard and traveling companion was the man whose actions had shaken the whole Zecia Sector a decade ago, a talent who only appeared once in a million years. Looking back at it, she felt incredibly foolish.

Who else but the Deviant Asura could fight Hegemons and Beast Kings as though they were common fodder? Who else would carry a mysterious bloodline that made her very being want to kneel in obeisance? Who else would be embroiled in mysterious heritages that carried the aura of antiquity?

Still, it was difficult to combine those scattered rumors she'd heard in the monastery with the man who had stayed by her side for months. From the rumors, Zac was a powerful lunatic who was an amalgamation of lust and violence, but the reality couldn't be any further from the truth.

His eyes had never carried that glimmer when he looked at her, the glimmer that was painfully obvious in his demonic friend. Neither had he taken up the invitations from the other wandering cultivators during their month of travel. And there had been more than one, especially after he had showcased more of his power.

In reality, he was almost obsessively focused on his cultivation, where violence was just a means to an end. Over the past two weeks, she felt he had managed to get a bit closer to the real him as well, now that he no longer carried his disguise. As far as she was concerned, Deviant Asura didn't exist, except in the mouths of others.

But as she looked at the following scene, she couldn't help but wonder if there really were some truth to the rumors.

Amid the new arrival's primordial flames, a new source of fire had erupted – right where her two companions stood. It didn't contain nearly the purity of meaning of the surrounding flames, but the fire was extraordinary in its own right. It exploded like a firework, sending hundreds of fiery streams in every direction.

Zac and Ogras had disappeared in one of those streams, and while the remaining flames formed a type of imagery Vai had never seen before, picturing Zac Atwood in the middle of a swirl of roses. His features were different, worse in Vai's opinion, and his eyes contained frailty that didn't exist. The avatar showcased a sorrowful smile before turning around, and his departing back was the last thing you saw before the scene was replaced by four lines of text.

A fate encounter, two hearts collide
But Heaven's Path won't be denied
A lonely road, the pursuit of power
Please forgive this lonesome flower

Vai felt her mind short-circuit as she read the short poem. What? Why? Why had he added such a weird contraption to the escape treasure? And what did he mean by it? Was there some sort of sordid history between himself and the mysterious woman floating in the sky? Vai had to admit she was incredibly beautiful, even eclipsing her niece.

The mysterious woman seemed surprised by the turn of events as well, as she stared at the flickering poem for a few seconds. But then, she lifted her arm, and a storm of primordial flames incinerated the illusion. The next moment, an incredibly complex array appeared where the poem hovered, its patterns far beyond anything Vai had ever seen.

The sigil quickly turned into a thin strand of pure flames that shot toward the east, and Vai looked on with wide eyes as the woman turned into flames and entered the stream. Just a moment later, she was gone, leaving a wide circle of scorched earth and incinerated corpses.

"No!" a panicked roar echoed across the battlefield as her powerful companion burst into flames.

It no longer cared about restraining the invaders as it rushed toward the stream. In the direction of Zac. The shocking scene had created a suspended lull on the battlefield, but reality came crashing back soon enough as the battle between the invaders and the newly arrived squad of Templars to the west resumed.

"What in the Heavens?!" Pretty Peak eventually exclaimed to the side. "Deviant, a pure-blooded deviant!"

"I liked it," Leyara laughed. "Both form and function."

"What should we do?" Vai fretfully asked. "It looked like that woman managed to enter the slipstream with the help of her flames. They might be in trouble."

"Well, nothing we can do," Pretty Peak grunted. "If that thing worked as that madman advertised, then he's already a month's travel away from this place. He's on his own now. We can only pray that guy can handle it somehow."

"Don't worry, aunty. I don't think they're enemies," Leyara smiled as she ate a Soldier Pill.

"How do you know?" Vai asked curiously.

"Woman's intuition," Leyara winked. "I felt a sense of threat from her, for my long-term prospects."

"Y-you can't marry that man," Vai stuttered.

"Oh? You want him for yourself?" Leyara asked with surprise while Pretty looked over curiously.

“N-No. I-I just feel his fate is too powerful. It’s dangerous to be around him,” Vai said with rosy cheeks. “I don’t wish for you to be hurt.”

“Don’t you worry about me,” Leyara smiled as she pinched Vai’s cheeks.

“More importantly, what should we do about your people over there?” Pretty interjected as she pointed at the group of unfamiliar Templars who had popped up out of nowhere. “They’re putting up a good fight, but that crazy Golem is gone now. They will be overrun unless something changes.”

“Let’s go,” Leyara nodded, but she gave the scorched area a last look before jumping down the wall.

“Lonesome flower, huh?”