

The Fall 891

Chapter 891: One's Path

Zac spent the next day studying the methodology behind the research project Vai had shared with him.

The scrapped project was based around a cultivation manual called [Emberstar Patterns], an interesting technique that an elder of the Void Gate had gotten her hands on when exploring an ancient Mystic Realm. It was a pure fire-based method, but the way it infused one's nodes with fiery energies that resembled stars was relatively novel.

The Void Gate wanted to see if the old manual could be retooled and turned into a space-fire mixed-meaning manual to suit their heritage better. But infusing a Dao from a different peak into a pure fire manual was easier said than done. Vai's nunnery had spent years dismantling the method and coming up with different paths that might work – just like how he was doing now with his Void Energy.

From there, they had started their experiments, where they swapped out certain aspects of the method and let dozens of youths practice with it. The changes were designed to create different pathways in the cultivators, to improve the compatibility with space-attuned skills and classes. The first trial resulted in deviations that would have killed the cultivators if they hadn't been monitored.

They weren't discouraged, and they kept changing the method, piece by piece, fractal by fractal, as they searched for a perfect equilibrium. Unfortunately, the research team never found a solution that worked. The original manual was evaluated as High-quality D-grade, but the best they could create was a Low-quality E-grade manual that incorporated both Daos.

[Emberstar Patterns] simply didn't allow for itself to be altered like they wanted. The moment they added too much foreign Dao, the underpinning theories that made the technique possible fell apart. Even then, it was very illuminating how they worked. It was a systematic process of elimination where they slightly altered the method bit-by-bit, following specific patterns that were designed to ensure they didn't accidentally miss a working solution.

It was this kind of scientific method Zac needed to adopt if he wanted to make any real progress. Right now, he was testing random things in hopes he stumbled onto the answer. That might be fine if he had years to waste, but now, he only had a month to make as much progress as possible.

He needed to get organized, and the first step was collecting data.

The plan was solid, as far as crazy ventures went. Even then, Zac was so nervous when applying a fresh set of arrays across his body that he made more mistakes than when he tried this the first time. The concept of Heart Cultivation was simply too nerve-wracking. He could essentially be hypnotizing himself to subvert his worldview without even noticing.

The array was eventually applied, but Zac still spent another twenty minutes stabilizing his heart and mind by meditating to confirm his own stance, conviction, and path. After that, Zac opened his eyes and took a swig of [Void Slate] before starting up the movements.

"Aum," Zac said as his hands slammed together, and both a spiritual and physical ripple passed through the room.

No longer was he stuck practicing inside a claustrophobic cave at the bottom of a toxic ocean. Zac felt like he was standing atop a mountain peak, and a star-spangled sky showered him with the wisdom of the cosmos. Never before had he so clearly understood what the monks meant when they said all was one, and this feeling only intensified as he continued toward the sublimation of his body.

As he thought, the sutras brought purpose and meaning to otherwise hollow exercise. The movements were suddenly not just a precise set of stances. They became expressions of life, where each pose aligned his body with the heavens. And when one truly became all, it was just a natural course of events when the Life-Attuned energies in the paste entered his body and fused with him.

The pain grew an order of magnitude more intense, yet it didn't seem so bad. Suffering was transient, while enlightenment was forever. Nothing else mattered; only the Dao and the boundless potential of Life was worth focusing on. Like this, Zac continued with his tribute to Life, to Creation. Eighty-one ripples were reinforced by three Heavenly Cycles, and the fusion was complete. Movement turned to tranquility, and the paste on his body fell off, now just a dry mud void of purpose.

Zac looked at the room he stood in, filled with a sense of contentedness and wholeness he hadn't felt in a long time. But Zac's brows suddenly scrunched together as [Void Zone] blasted out from his body, cutting him off from the Dao around him and the Heavens above. The sharp reversion severed the connection he felt to the universe, and Zac drew a shuddering breath before swallowing the second dose of [Void Slate].

No wonder the Buddhist Sangha had such a double-edged reputation.

He hadn't felt anything amiss after completing the practice session. He was still Zac. It rather felt like he had come down from an epiphany, where he enjoyed the lingering sense of clarity. He hadn't felt his path subverted at all. Zac had simply thought he had gained a greater understanding of the Dao.

But in hindsight, he realized just how much his perception had changed, how the sutras had slightly altered his goals. Priorities had been realigned. Until now, the leading star on his path had always been his various goals, from saving Kenzie to securing a place in the universe for himself and those he held dear. Gaining power and delving deeper into the mysteries of the universe was a gift and a marvel, but it was ultimately a means to an end.

Yet in that moment, when he was chanting the sutras and moving in accordance with the Dao of Life itself, he had felt – why bother? As long as he understood the true meaning of Life, everything was possible. All could be accomplished as long as he severed his Mortal Heart and focused on the Dao. Certainly, that was both a common and effective method of progressing, but it was not for him.

Even worse, for a moment, he had felt a terrifying indifference hiding within that sense of vast interconnectedness, a mental state where all was heavenly destiny. If Kenzie was taken, she was taken. Perhaps that was for the best. Earth's fate was up to the Heavens and not something he should meddle in.

If those around him died, it was just their time to enter the wheel of reincarnation. He should simply say a prayer and wish them luck on their journey. Thankfully, his true beliefs quickly returned to him the moment he stopped practicing, and his nullification zone had forcibly cut his connection to the technique.

Zac spent the better part of the next day stabilizing his mind, returning to a sense of normalcy. Over the first hours, a small cloud of golden haze was released from his pores as [Void Slate] expelled the small amount of Life-attunement he had accrued during his session. The process left him with a small amount of toxins, but Zac could tell it would only take an hour or two for [Purity of the Void] to remove them. Vai had really provided him with a top-tier concoction for it to have so few side effects.

Only when he felt confident he had wholly regained his sense of self did he dare delve deeper and analyze the experience. The first takeaway was that the Sangha's reputation wasn't just for show, and he was filled with a sense of respect for those elites who dared practice proper Buddhist methods as a form of tempering.

Secondly, Void Energy was surprisingly effective at resetting his mental state. Even then, it didn't change much. It was a valuable safety net now that he was experimenting with the original method, but he would still need to reform the manual from scratch. If Zac only wanted to get his hands on the surface benefits of body tempering, he could probably just practice a couple of layers and forcibly suppress any mental changes with [Void Zone].

But that wasn't what he was looking for. He wanted to properly fuse his human side with life, not just form his Cultivator's Core. The real goal was to reach a state of equilibrium that he planned on maintaining indefinitely, where his Draugr and Human were in balance – a state where Death empowered life and vice versa through [Quantum Gate].

Perhaps even until he could fuse his two sides into one. And for that, he needed to practice the method wholeheartedly and not just grab for immediate gains like some attributes and regenerative abilities. As for finding a solution, he was left with mixed emotions.

Zac had gained more understanding of what the Heart Sutras accomplished in this one session compared to going over his memories for months. But most of what it accomplished was drive home just how complicated Heart Cultivation was. If anything, he felt further away from a solution now than he ever did before.

The chants hadn't formed any mysterious patterns that mirrored or added to the array on his skin. He still didn't understand what had happened or how it had happened. When he uttered each chant, reality had shifted, and what his heart believed in became true. It was a terrifying subversion of reality that almost upended his previous understanding of cultivation.

He wasn't even sure where to go from here, so Zac eventually chose to stretch his legs and see if perhaps Vai had any ideas. Luckily, Vai hadn't retreated into one of the cultivation caves already. Instead, Zac found her perusing various documents inside one of the laboratories.

"How was it?" Vai asked with interest as Zac walked over. "How do you feel?"

"It's hard to say. Just some chants somehow altered the way I saw the world for a moment, and that belief impacted reality. I don't understand where that came from."

"It's probably all connected," Vai said. "You could try the chants without the movements or the paste. I bet the effect will not be nearly as pronounced. They probably form a coherent system where each part enkindles the others."

Zac nodded in agreement. "You're right. I simply don't understand how it's all related, so I'm having a hard time figuring out where to go from here."

"Research is a long-term commitment," Vai smiled. "Don't rush for immediate gains. Take your time and deepen your understanding first. Take some breaks to reflect on what you've experienced. After that, you can start thinking about how to proceed."

Zac released a pent-up breath as he nodded. Vai was right, of course. He was being too impatient, wanting immediate and measurable progress. But even if he was on a deadline, there was no point in rushing. He had already learned a lot of small details over the past days, things that weren't mentioned in his implanted memories. If he kept working at it, he would eventually get there.

After all, he was different from the researchers who had tried to reform [Emberstar Patterns]. There were many things he didn't understand, but there was one thing he knew with utmost certainty. At the end of the path, a functioning Body Tempering Manual waited. The lights empowered by the Left Imperial Palace and Ultom had shown him that much.

This month was just meant to find and remove the barricades leading there.

"I have thought on your matter over the past week," Vai slowly said. "Heart Cultivation is exceedingly rare, at least in the Zecia sector. But I once read a study that mentioned picturing a certain image can help. Perhaps you can use that? First, figure out what change each chant brings, and then conceptualize that kind of change from your viewpoint? Something that rings true with your path."

"Rings true with my path," Zac muttered, remembering the odd trial that Three Virtues had him undergo.

He had been shown everything from thousands of ancient tomes or rows of monks silently reciting sutras in those visions, and everything had looked identical if you looked at it conventionally. Even then, some things were simply true while the others were false. To this day, Zac didn't quite understand why he had known these things, but they were undeniably true.

"Do you remember if picturing anything, in particular, is better? Like is it objects, or perhaps patterns like fractals?"

"Anything that suits you, I guess?" Vai hesitated. "I don't really know, sorry."

"That's okay. You've helped me plenty already," Zac smiled. "It's even making me feel bad. Here, pick something you like."

A dozen boxes appeared in front of him the next moment, each one containing one of the top-tier treasures he had picked up during the years he spent off-world. Each one was significantly more valuable than anything they had found during their time in the Void Star and would cause some waves if put on auction almost anywhere in Zecia.

"This- This... What is this?!" Vai exclaimed as she looked with wide eyes at the array of treasures.

"Just some things I picked up while adventuring," Zac smiled. "Most of these things are pretty useful for making a push for Hegemony. Take one as a small thank you for helping me with this. You can't imagine how valuable your insight is."

"I cannot accept this," Vai urgently said, almost looking afraid as she looked at the priceless treasures. "Hegemony, is- is. I don't..."

"If you don't, I'll feel bad and won't be able to concentrate on my cultivation," Zac sighed with a sorrowful expression. "And even if you don't need these things, what about your little niece? She should be looking toward the next stage by now, no? What if she just lacked one little treasure to take that step..."

"That's-" Vai whispered, looking visibly distraught by the hypothetical scenario. "I'll take the [Kastron Root] then. It helps strengthen one's corporeity before breaking through, to better withstand the process. With your terrifying constitution, it should be useless."

Zac was about to answer, but a powerful ripple suddenly slammed into his mind. One moment, he had been teasing Vai. The next moment he was swept up by the unfathomable depths of the Left Imperial palace. Every cell in his body screamed in both fear and longing, and it felt so, so close. The Undrusian Ocean was forgotten, as was Heart Cultivation and the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation].

In front of the ancient monolith he saw in his mind's eye, it all amounted to nothing.

Finally, the vision faded without him being brought into the Ultom Courtyard, and Zac found himself back in his body. He shot to his feet as he wildly looked around him, trying to understand what had just happened.

"Ah- I'm sorry! I won't take it!" Vai urgently said as she scrambled back, shocked by Zac's explosion of movement.

The scared cry startled Zac enough to clear his head, and he apologetically looked at the little researcher as he retracted his billowing aura. "No, I'm sorry. Something unexpected just happened, and I lost my composure."

"Is everything alright now?" Vai hesitated.

"I don't know..." Zac muttered. "Something changed, and I'm not sure if it's good or bad."

"Is it the Heart Cultivation?" Vai stammered. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have urged you to take that risk. I-"

"No," Zac smiled as he threw over the previously unnamed root that Vai wanted. "My heart is just fine. Here, take this thing before I forget."

"Alright," Vai nodded as she carefully stowed away the jade box. "Thank you for this. I'll give it back if my niece doesn't need it."

"Sure," Zac grinned, knowing he'd never take it back.

With that, Zac walked back to his training room, a scowl covering his face. He stared at the cave wall like he wanted to peek through the bedrock and spy on what was going on. Why had he suddenly received a pulse out of nowhere? Not only that, but it was more potent than the one he felt when stepping onto this Mystic Realm.

Was the piece of rubble he aimed for on the move? Or had it been claimed by someone else? If so, what would that entail? Could he snatch it back? Would he still get an epiphany if he got it that way? The

spacious cave suddenly felt suffocating as their hidden sanctuary turned into a prison. Anxiety gnawed at him, and even hours later, he found it hard to focus on his Heart Cultivation.

He had been too confident in the piece of rubble after seeing Kuru Cera being turned into motes of ash from a simple ripple, satisfied that the seal's lethality would be enough until he reached it. The question was whether it was all too late, even if someone had managed to contain it somehow. Could the situation be salvaged? Zac wasn't sure, but his eyes turned to the hidden entrance to the cave.

Surely, the Beast Kings would have fallen asleep by now?