

## The Fall 907

### Chapter 907: Unsealing

The trio didn't waste any time as they pushed deeper into the Badlands, and Zac couldn't help but marvel at the environment even if there were a lot of misgivings in his heart. Enormous calcified trees in pink and blue towered toward the sky, their branches homes to scaled beasts with four wings.

The occasional rumble heralded golemoid beasts that migrated between lakes to extract minerals. The lakes themselves were kettles of pattering death which hid gorgeous flowers in green and purple. Whole fields were made out of glass and mirrors, creating a mystifying spectacle as they ran.

Their frantic pace drew some ire from the locals, but Zac and Ogras made short work of the beasts who thought they were in for an easy snack. Vai was once more sitting in a chair made from Vivi's Vines. Ogras had also tried to commission a seat for himself but had been rebuffed. Vai got to sit because she was investigating the infiltrators' Spatial Rings while keeping track of powerful auras in her bowl.

As expected, the lipless cultivator's ring was booby-trapped, while the others had simple seals that the little researcher quickly undid. There wasn't anything new or exciting in these rings, just a bunch of cultivation materials far worse than what Zac carried around himself. The rings primarily served as a reminder they weren't alone in this vast Mystic Realm, even if they hadn't seen a single cultivator after running for three days.

But even after three days, Vai hadn't spotted a single additional cultivator. It looked like there weren't any larger encampments in the area, or someone would probably have come to investigate by now. However, the lack of pursuit had another meaning – the squad of infiltrators wasn't originally there for him.

Did they know about the temples and were sent to investigate? Or did that leader have a quest for Ultom as well?

After running for another week, they were ultimately forced to stop and rest inside a hollowed-out and crystallized trunk that shimmered like a million sapphires. Running for over ten days straight while occasionally fighting had drained them, especially Ogras, who often kept up his illusive domain.

There was another reason as well. Zac had gotten close to opening another node from the battle against the infiltrators, and a recent fight against three crystal Beast Kings had provided the final energy he needed to open another node. When Zac informed them of his plan inside the trunk, the demon looked at Zac like he was a fool.

"You're not at the peak yet?" Ogras exclaimed. "It's been ten years. What are you waiting for?"

"There were some speed bumps along the way," Zac grunted.

"So what level are you at?" the demon asked, and even Vai looked over with interest.

"Three nodes to go. Two with this one," Zac said.

"Don't you have any pills to push you to the final step?" Ogras said.

"I have, but I've been wanting to keep impurities at a minimum for my breakthrough," Zac explained.

"Fair, but we need every advantage in case we have to fight our way out of here," the demon said.

"You might be right," Zac slowly nodded before turning to Vai. "How is your work on the ring coming along?"

"Slow," Vai sighed. "It's not overly complex, but there are too many patterns I don't recognize. It's interesting; the Kan'Tanu base their arrays on an entirely different set of princ--"

"So that's a no?" Zac coughed, seeing how Vai was gearing up for another lesson. He usually enjoyed listening to Vai expounding on various esoteric pieces of knowledge, but now was not the time.

"I can make an attempt, but I'm not very confident," Vai said.

"I might have an idea," Ogras said. "My little buddy is pretty knowledgeable with arrays. The problem is he's a pathological liar and a general asshole, so you might need to bribe him."

"The goblin?" Zac said with surprise.

"K'Rav, a vaunted councilor of the Lunatic kingdom of Ra'Shallar," Ogras nodded as he removed the talismans from the sinister flag he always kept in his sleeves.

"Alright, bring him out," Zac nodded.

A moment later, the pocked goblin appeared within the trunk, where he suspiciously looked back and forth between Ogras, Zac, and Vai.

"Let me guess, you ignorant children have run into a problem, and you want me to solve it after trapping me for weeks?" K'rav said as he gave Ogras a blithering stare. "Your trick is clever, but we'll see how long you can laugh. Sealing me means removing the barrier between you and the flag. How long can you retain yourself?"

"What's he talking about?" Zac frowned.

"Cursed artifact or cursed company, I had to pick my poison," Ogras shrugged. "Let's get on with it."

"You're right," Zac said as he looked at the Tool Spirit. "We have a sealed ring that needs to be opened. Ogras thinks you have the knowledge to show us the way."

"I might, I might not," the goblin snickered. "More importantly, why should I help you? I know who you are, but your status and fame mean nothing to me."

"What do you want?" Zac sighed, feeling like he was dealing with Brazla.

"Well, this gentleman is quite content for the moment," the goblin grinned. "Let's just say you'll owe me for now."

"I won't do anything against my conscience just to return a favor in the future," Zac said.

"That's fine, that's fine. I'm sure we'll be able to reach an accord," the K'Rav snickered as he floated over toward the ring in Vai's hands.

Vai was visibly uncomfortable with the spectral goblin in such close proximity. Zac wasn't surprised. It was not just a matter of appearance, though the goblin looked quite wretched. He emitted a strong corrupting aura, just like that of the purple pillar—the aura of the Lost Plane.

"Those two meatheads, I understand – they only know how to swing their weapons like base animals. But what is your excuse, girl? How do these simple traps elude you? Is this the limits of the modern researcher?" the goblin said with a scathing look. "Even a Ra'Lashar acolyte would be able to open this ring, many of them without losing a limb."

"I- Ah," Vai stuttered, utterly unprepared for the sudden dressing down.

"Less talk, just open it," Zac grunted.

"I cannot directly interfere with items in my form," the goblin said with a roll of his eyes. "But here."

The next moment, dozens of patterns appeared in the air. Most of them were grey, with a single blue line moving through them like a river. As the blue line passed the various fractals, they transformed, and the whole constellation was reformed after a minute.

"This stumped you for weeks? I had more intricate traps to protect my stash of candies back home," K'Rav snorted with disdain after he'd shown the solution twice. "Well, I guess I shouldn't expect too much from some lunatic who goes around erecting corpse trees. Not even we were so bloodth-"

The goblin didn't get any further as he was suddenly sucked into the Flag before Ogras hurriedly placed a talisman on it. Vai looked down at the ring with a mortified expression, like she couldn't believe she had missed such a simple solution, even if Zac could tell that the goblin's method was based on an incredibly deep foundation of understanding.

"Don't let that little bastard get to you, lass," Ogras muttered from the side. "Their civilization didn't even last the lifespan of a single Hegemon. Their way of research drew them straight into the abyss."

"There's no need to feel bad," Zac agreed. "You have other fields of expertise. Not knowing some unorthodox methods isn't a blemish."

"Thank you," Vai muttered before her eyes glazed over. "Wait, corpse trees? Why does that sound so familiar?"

"You had to run your mouth to that guy?" Zac whispered to the demon with exasperation.

"Hey, I've been stuck here for years with only that bastard to talk to. And you told me you both showed your face and introduced yourself to the lass. How is this girl's brain wired if she can't realize the truth from those things, but a random mention of a corpse tree sparks some recognition?" Ogras said.

"Still," Zac snorted.

"Well, this is my bad, alright? I haven't needed to filter my words for over a decade, and I guess I slipped up," Ogras muttered. "I'll fix it."

The next moment, the demon appeared in front of Vai in a puff of smoke.

"Lass, don't space out," Ogras said to the startled researcher as he took out something Zac had never seen before. "I found this thing inside one of the Spatial Rings as well. I've never seen it before; can you identify it?"

"That- That's..." Vai stuttered until her eyes finally focused on the shimmering crystal in Ogras's hand.

Zac looked at it with marvel as well as he walked over. It resembled an opalescent Cosmic Crystal but didn't seem to hold any energy. Even then, Zac found his cells greedily screaming for the gem in Vai's hand. It was chock-full of Dao, by the looks of it, something Zac had never seen before.

Certainly, he had all kinds of attuned crystals in his possession, but this was the first time he had seen a crystal filled with only the Dao. It wasn't just one Dao either, but Zac could feel all three of his Dao Branches resonate with what was within.

"Is it a Dao Treasure?" Zac hesitated.

"Doubt it," Ogras said as he took out two more. "This looks like an actual crystal that has been mined or fished out from these ponds."

"How interesting," Vai said with excitement as she took out a couple of instruments. "Let me run some readings on it."

"Could you please unlock the ring first?" Zac smiled.

"Ah?" Vai said before her eyes widened in remembrance. "Ah, right!"

"Alright, we'll stand guard outside to disturb you," Zac nodded as he dragged Ogras onto one of the branches outside.

"Did you really find those things in the invader's Cosmos Sack?" Zac asked when they were once more isolated.

"Hardly," Ogras snorted. "We found them shortly after arriving in this place. We call them Dao Stones, and I think they were created along with the world. They were key in speeding up my comprehension, but they aren't as useful for me now that I have Dao Branches."

"How many do you have?" Zac asked.

"Why do you ask?" Ogras asked suspiciously.

"Just give me a couple of them later," Zac said with a roll of his eyes. "I want to see if they are useful for me."

Pushing his Branches of Kalpataru and Pale Seal to Middle Proficiency was some ways off, but Zac could feel that he wasn't too far from taking that step with his Branch of the War Axe. His last breakthrough was over five years ago back in the Twilight Ocean, and he'd not only massively improved his understanding of Axes since then, but even entered the Integration Stage with his two stances.

He just needed a final push to break through, and these Dao Stones seemed like a good, clean way to fuel the process. Dao Treasures always held some truths of their own, which could influence the direction of the breakthrough if one wasn't careful. Meanwhile, these things seemed untainted.

"They should work even for a brute like you," Ogras nodded. "I think it's trapped Origin Dao inside. Can't give out too many, though. They are my golden egg for when I get out of here."

"So stingy," Zac sighed. "I guess I'll keep my treasury to myself then."

"Treasury? What treasury?" Ogras said with a mix of anticipation and suspicion.

"This is the current merit exchange back home," Zac smiled as he threw over a crystal.

Ogras stared at Zac for a second before turning his attention to the contents of the Information Crystal.

"This- This," Ogras eventually stuttered, his eyes as wide as saucers.

"Of course, the really good things aren't put there. These are just the random baubles I picked along the way," Zac said.

"Along the way?" Ogras swore as he threw back the information crystal with disgust. "Did you stroll through the treasuries of an ancient faction? Fine, take as many stones as you want. I can't even look at you right now. I have to go meditate."

With that, he flashed away and pointedly sat down with his back toward Zac as he gazed out across the salt lakes from the edge of a branch. Zac snickered before he sat down as well. But instead of brooding, Zac pushed the trapped Kill Energy into his 148th node until it cracked open with a snap.

Zac took a deep breath before eating a Soul Nurturing pill, which helped with the headache. Vai was still fast at work with the lipless Hegemon's ring, so Zac spent the next couple of hours redrawing the pathways in his head.

"I'm done!" Vai eventually said from within the tree hollow a couple of hours later, at which point Zac was mostly recovered.

"What's wrong?" Vai asked with worry as she looked back and forth between Zac and Ogras as they entered the hollow.

"Nothing," Ogras grunted as he took an angry swing from his wine. "Sometimes, you just wonder if the Heavens have eyes."

Zac laughed in response as he sat down next to Vai. "Don't mind him. How did it go?"

"It's done!" Vai nodded with a smile. "I have never seen a method like the one the... ah... gentleman showed. It's worthy of further study. I think it might even be useful against some of the other methods of the Kan'Tanu."

"That's great," Zac nodded as he took the Spatial Treasure. "You'll save a lot of lives if you manage to build some array breakers for the upcoming war."

Vai eagerly nodded while Zac turned his attention to the contents of the unlocked ring. As expected, there was a lot more stuff inside this ring compared to the Spatial Tools of the previous Kan'Tanu infiltrators he'd taken out. For example, there were ten Low-Grade Cosmic Crystals, which translated to 1,000 D-grade Nexus Coins.

Even for Zac, that was a pretty good haul, especially considering Cosmic Crystals were almost impossible to get in Zecia outside the C-grade continents. Apart from that, there were multiple sets of various arrays, Natural Treasures, and other materials Zac suspected were for practicing his sound-based skills.

There were also a few vials of a dark-red liquid that gave Zac an awful feeling. At first, he thought the bottles actually contained Heart Curses because of the similar energy they gave off, but Vai said that wasn't it. There was no actual array hidden in the liquid, and Vai guessed it was a unique concoction meant to nurture the Heart Curses.

Zac shuddered at the thought of having such a creepy parasite inside his body and being forced to feed it to make it even stronger. He kept a few of those bottles to himself while handing the rest to Vai as a gift to the Void Gate. Neither he nor the people back at Port Atwood could gain anything from those things, but the researchers at the Void Gate might be able to use them to manufacture weapons or antidotes against the curses.

The various items weren't that interesting to Zac. More important was a set of maps, notes, and information crystals. After confirming there wasn't a second layer of traps, Zac scanned the items one by one, and his brows furrowed into consternation. The maps weren't very detailed apart from a couple of sectors, but together with the notes, they told a troubling story.

"Looks like I have to eat some pills, after all," Zac sighed.

"What's going on?" Vai asked, and Ogras looked over as well.

"The infiltrators found this realm before it even entered the Stellar Ladder, and they broke inside long before the Void Gate did," Zac said as he handed the other two the notes. "Judging by these things, there might be over ten thousand infiltrators stationed in this realm alone. They are led by someone called Reincarnator UI and have some important mission."

"Mission?" Ogras said with a frown as he started scanning the documents.

"The lipless cultivator was sent toward the mountain range over two months ago to investigate some energy signatures," Zac pointedly said.

"Your opportunity, they were looking for it as well?" Vai asked with surprise.

"Looks like it," Zac nodded.

"Well, shit," Ogras muttered.

"T-Then it's at least good news we came here, even if it's dangerous," Vai said, though she looked rattled from the news. "Seeing that pillar, I bet they are up to no good."

"Are the rest of them in the area as well?" Ogras asked as he turned to the map.

"Doesn't look like it. This side of the Mystic Realm is mostly unexplored on the maps," Zac said as he pointed at the east side of the map. "I can't find any mention of what their mission is, but their main base is over here."

"Over there?" Ogras said with surprise. "That's not good. Not good at all."

“Why? What’s over there?” Zac frowned. “The Kingdom of Billy?”

“No,” the demon sighed as he looked at the pitch-black section on the map with a complex expression.  
“That’s the ruins of the Ra’Lashar Kingdom.”