

The Fall 945

Chapter 945: Taking Control

Zac couldn't believe it when [Void Heart] suddenly shuddered and stopped contending for the medicinal paste mid-beat. The surprise was so big that he tripped, instantly failing the stance and losing the ethereal connection to the Void. The Life-Attuned Energy that had entered his cells failed to fuse and instead started seeping through his pores.

It was an unavoidable result of not completing the session. Only when fully completing the [Void Vajra Sublimation] would the Integration become perfect, allowing some of the Life-attuned energies to fuse with his body permanently. Even then, Zac didn't mind the loss. He sat down on the ground, far more interested in what had just happened. This was just the first session, and discoveries were far more important than the progress itself.

And this was a big one.

Ever since breaking open [Void Heart], it had always marched to its own beat. Zac was never able to control it in the slightest. Instead, he had been forced to learn its rules and work within those confines. But this time, he had somehow managed to connect to the Hidden Node and turn it off with a mental command.

But now, the moment had passed. Zac watched on as [Void Heart] resumed thumping, dragging the lingering Life-Attuned Energy into its vortex. He tried commanding and cajoling it like before, but the Hidden Node completely ignored him this time. Even then, Zac wasn't overly concerned. Between the ethereal connection he'd sensed and how different the [Void Heart] had acted, he knew what he'd perceived was real and not some hopeful delusion.

Zac even had a pretty decent idea of what was going on – it was all thanks to the [Void Vajra Sublimation].

The whole reason to cultivate a Body Tempering Manual was to gain a specialized Constitution. Like with Soul Strengthening Manuals and Souls, there were both attuned and unattuned Constitutions. An unattuned Constitution might provide general improvements, such as his Draugr durability and poison resistance. Meanwhile, an attuned Constitution could attune your whole body to a specific Dao.

For example, a Pyromancer who had managed to cultivate a Fire-Attuned Constitution would find their skills were more powerful. Sometimes, they'd even improve their affinity to the Dao of Fire and their cultivation speed. The [Void Vajra Sublimation] was an example of an attuned Body Tempering Manual, where he would gain a Life-Attuned Constitution to balance out his innate Death-Attuned Draugr Constitution.

However, there was another aspect that complicated the situation with Constitutions; Bloodlines.

There had always been a close connection between Constitutions and Bloodlines. Most bloodlines naturally imbued the cultivator with a constitution, and specialized Bloodline Methods generally doubled as Body Tempering Manuals. The Izh'Rak Reavers were a prime example of this. They all were Body Tempering Cultivators who tempered their bones through their Racial Bloodline Methods.

In fact, people with bloodlines often had extremely stringent requirements on what Body Tempering Manuals they could use. The slightest mismatch and the unaffiliated manual wouldn't work. Such a conflict could even damage one's foundations – it was akin to a cultivator with a fire-based class suddenly starting to use a water-based Cultivation Manual.

This was something that Zac had been worried about ever since getting his hand on the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation]. He knew next to nothing about his Void Emperor Bloodline, except that it had some sort of relation to the Limitless Empire and Karz. What if he cultivated a life-attuned constitution, only to encounter a clash between the Body Tempering Manual and an incompatible Bloodline?

That was a big reason he had wanted to reform the method in the first place, though it had become a necessity for other reasons after discovering the hidden traps within the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation]. If he tuned the method to the Void, the risk of conflict would hopefully decrease. Now, it looked like Zac hadn't only managed to avoid calamity, but reap some benefits he'd barely dared hope for.

The [Void Vajra Sublimation] had allowed him to connect with his Void Emperor Bloodline in a way that [Bloodline Resonance] never had. Right now, it had only worked while he was running the method and was attuned to the Void, but that might not be the case forever. Every reincarnation with the [Nine Reincarnations Manual] gave him greater control over his soul. In the same vein, every layer of [Void Vajra Sublimation] might improve his natural control over his Bloodline.

Just turning the Hidden Nodes on and off was just the first step. Top-tier Bloodline Methods could even amplify the effect of bloodlines. What if he could suddenly supercharge [Void Zone], allowing it to spread across a whole enemy army? Or if he managed to completely open the floodgates of [Spiritual Void], drastically improving the lethality of a strike?

There were so many possibilities, but Zac reined in his imagination. There were ultimately no guarantees he'd gain full control over his Void Emperor Bloodline through his Body Tempering Manual, even if things looked promising. He would have to finish the first layer of the [Void Vajra Sublimation] to see the results.

Zac was even more eager to continue his cultivation after encountering such a stroke of good fortune, and he quickly bathed and reapplied a new set of life-attuned paste. Moments later, he was once more one with the Void, moving from one position into another with pinpoint precision.

His muscles and tendons were shuddering from the surprisingly strenuous stances, and accepting the attuned energy into the depths of his cells felt like standing inside a bonfire. Yet he continued, forming one seal after another. Soon enough, the [Void Heart] woke up once more, but a focused thought successfully quieted it down.

This time, Zac didn't lose his focus. He smoothly transitioned toward the next seal in the series, deepening his connection with the Void even further. The minutes passed, and a crackling sound eventually accompanied his movements. It wasn't his bones creaking from the exertion but rather the paste covering his body.

More than half of its medicinal efficacy had been dragged into his body by this point, prompting some of the paste to dry and fall off. The falling paste disintegrated and created a mysterious haze, unable to settle because of Zac's constant movements. It looked like he had formed a cloak of mist as he swirled

around in the grove, a fog that echoed the secrets of Life. Once in a while, a shadow of inscrutable patterns would flicker in the dust, only to disappear as quickly as they formed.

As for Zac himself, he felt himself fall deeper into his Void state. Initially, he had thought himself standing outside creation, a small pocket of anti-existence surrounded by the cosmos. Now, he gradually felt himself shift like he was being superimposed on the world. He still was distinctly separate from the cosmos, but he was closer.

He was like a specter walking through the Dao, grabbing what he wanted while passing through anything he disdained. His Branch of the Kalpataru had already started coursing through his body because of the stances, helping draw more energy into his body while tuning it to his Path. As a result, it seemed like an illusory fractal was being constructed within his body.

It was an expression of Life, one uniquely tailored to him and his Dao. Each seal he completed added to the pathways, pushing it closer to perfection. And the closer the pattern got to completion, the more strain Zac was under.

It felt like he was carrying a mountain on his back as he moved, but Zac knew it was actually the world trying to barge in, to depressurize and drag him out of the Void. Meanwhile, the Life-Attuned Energy had reached the very depths of his cells by this point, amplifying the pain even further.

Most F-grade Cultivators would be forced to stop at this point and slowly build up experience and resistance. But not Zac. He was already at the peak of E-grade, and neither the pain nor the pressure was ultimately not enough to make him stumble at this critical juncture. He smoothly forged on until he reached a neutral stance where his hands slammed together.

“Aum,” Zac hummed, and his voice melded with the sound of the clap from his palm.

It felt like he had closed a gate to his body, completely cutting off the temporary connection with the universe after snatching the final expression of Life. As a result, the pressure his body felt disappeared, and the illusory fractal was perfected and melded with every inch of his body. All of the medicinal paste had already fallen off his body, and the last motes of Life-Attuned Energy were swallowed by his cells.

Zac stood frozen in place for a few minutes as the swirling haze of dried paste gradually settled on the ground. His consciousness was like a diver slowly rising from the depths of a lake until it finally breached the surface. This time around, there was no need to activate [Void Zone] to purge the effect of the Heart Cultivation.

This wasn't the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] with its pathbreaking influence of the Buddhist Sangha. The [Void Vajra Sublimation] was uniquely tuned to himself, so there was no need to reset anything. If anything, he wanted to repeat and reinforce the Heart Cultivating aspect of his Body Tempering Manual.

Ultimately, it wasn't the Life-Attuned Constitution that would allow him to connect with [Void Heart] and his Bloodline. It was the Heart Cultivating aspect rolled into the method. And that part needed to be gradually built up, brick by brick, just like any other aspect of cultivation.

Of course, that didn't mean the impression of being a Black Hole separate from the universe was his true state of being. His self was his self, and his Dao Heart was his Dao Heart. They were connected but

separate. It was more correct to say that his Path was being reinforced by these impressions, rather than his personality.

Cultivating his heart this way would allow it to become sturdier, like intangible walls protecting him from outside influence. Whether it was the Buddhist Sangha, the corrupted water of the Lost Plane, or the immortal will of the Remnants, they would find it much harder to influence his mind and his Path. He would be just like the Void – there yet separate, taking what he needed, and rejecting everything else.

Zac eventually took a deep breath and opened his eyes. The first thing he noticed was that his skin had taken on an almost copper hue. The redness came from the damage the process had done to his skin, while a slight golden tint came from the Life-attunement. Zac knew this wasn't a permanent effect. He could already see the color fading thanks to his Bloodline and high Vitality.

This was exactly what he hoped to see happen. To reach an equilibrium between his two races, just completing the first layer of the [Void Vajra Sublimation] wasn't enough. He didn't exactly know how big the gain from each layer was, but he would at least have to complete the first two layers for his Human body to match up to the latent potential of his Draugr inheritance.

There were no hard and fast rules to how much Body Tempering you could practice. It all came down to your body, and how much punishment you could take. Some cultivators could only absorb a small amount of energy before their cells reached their limit, where they would have to take a break to recover and stabilize. And how long that period of recovery was differed from person to person.

In this regard, Zac believed his potential was outstanding. His Bloodline had made his cells unique, almost turning them into black holes that could naturally swallow up energies. And between his extraordinarily high Vitality, his Branch of the Kalpataru, and his other unique advantages, his body recovered far quicker than normal.

Peering into his cells' depth, Zac could sense the energy he had absorbed. They were like small flakes of gold swirling around in the vortices of his cells. Most of them would soon be filtered out, but some would permanently stay on and become part of his body. This was regrettable but ultimately unavoidable.

More importantly, Zac could tell that one session absolutely wasn't his limit, at least not while he still practiced the first layer. As long as he had more paste at hand and could endure the punishment, he could keep going. So he did.

Zac only needed to wait ten minutes until his body had stabilized, at which point he reapplied the paste across his body. This time, Zac activated all the arrays to improve the effect even further. Roughly an hour later, Zac lay sprawled on the ground as steam rose from his body in mighty plumes. Occasionally, one of his muscles would twitch, prompting a series of painful jerks across his body.

Normally, Zac would barely notice a gravitational amplification of ten times. But he had almost been pushed to his limits when performing the stances in that kind of environment. It wasn't the stances themselves that became too strenuous. The difficulty came from how the Gravity Array had somehow magnified the mysterious pressure of the cosmos.

But it had paid off. Almost twice as many golden flakes had been added thanks to the arrays, and Zac believed he'd be able to push the arrays even further as he mastered the process. Not only would his

body adapt to the pressure, but the original [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] also mentioned that the stronger one's Dao Heart grew, the better one could endure the training.

It should be possible to push the Gravity Arrays all the way to fifty as long as one's heart grew firm enough. That would, theoretically, increase the cultivation speed a few times over, though you'd have to use higher-grade medicinal paste. The cost per session would shoot through the roof going about things this way, but Zac welcomed any improvements that could be seized by throwing money at them.

Altogether, Zac managed to practice the [Void Vajra Sublimation] five times before he felt his body had reached saturation. By that point, he could tell he wouldn't be able to retain Life-Attuned flakes of gold even if he could withstand the pain, and he was better off letting his body settle while practicing his other methods.

After adding the [Void Vajra Sublimation] to the mix, Zac was finally running toward Hegemony at full steam. But he felt the truth in Pavina's teachings at this moment. The Revenant Monarch had warned against spreading himself too thin back in the Orom World, where tacking on too many things to your Path would eat up too much time and steal your momentum.

Twenty-four hours simply wasn't enough to fit everything he needed to train. But instead of cutting out things from his itinerary, Zac divided his days into 36-hour-cycles. That way, he could fit [Nine Reincarnations Manual], [Void Vajra Sublimation], [Thousand Lights Avatar], and study both Duality and the general theories of Core Blueprints.

The only windows of rest he gave himself were those small pockets of utmost exhaustion after each Body Tempering session. But after a few days, even those short windows were filled with Triv updating him on the ongoings on the outside. Everything was steadily progressing. The topic of the war had already swept across the planet, and the recruitment stations across Pangea were almost mobbed with people.

Zac had been worried they would face staunch resistance from his citizens, to the point they'd be forced to conscript people. But a few rumors had proven more efficient than any stick or carrot Zac could produce. The threat of another System-run worldwide event had made people desperately try to join the Atwood Reserves.

The horror of the Integration was still fresh in the minds of most people, and many knew they only survived through sheer luck while 80% of the world's population had perished. They weren't confident in surviving another round in case the System dragged the conflict to Earth, so they sought strength and safety from the Atwood Army.

Others saw the war as an opportunity to catch up after a weak start to their cultivation journey. There were plenty of people who regretted not pushing harder during the Tutorial and the early phases of the Integration. When it was easier to rack up achievements and the air was literally filled with the Dao.

It was widely believed that Zac's monstrous strength came from hitting the ground running and closing both the first and most incursions, which was partly true. So many elites thought that if they could rack up some early achievements in the war, they could snowball that into huge gains. Thanks to that, many independent talents had finally taken the step to properly join Zac's faction over the past weeks.

Zac himself didn't bother with the details, though. Ilvere and the other leaders had already set up standardized tests and training programs to turn the recruits into powerful cogs in the Atwood Empire's war machine. But one day, there was a break in the monotony as Zac received a notice he had been expecting for a while.

Vilari and the others were back.