

The Fall 946

Chapter 946: Rendezvous

Checking the time, Zac realized he had already spent over a month grinding his Body Tempering Manual. Altogether, close to three months had passed since he returned to Earth, and it was about time to deal with the lingering matters standing between him and his prolonged seclusion.

Just ten minutes later, five people had gathered in Zac's compound; Zac and Ogras, along with the three candidates chosen to receive the heritage of Ultom. Ogras had thankfully returned a week ago after having surveyed not only the remaining moons but also the two neighboring worlds containing beasts.

Zac was curious about the demon's findings, but the matter of Ultom obviously took precedence.

"Anything?" Zac asked, but he knew he already had his answer upon seeing Joanna's downcast face.

"None of us managed to attain a seal," Joanna sighed. "We did find six structures with fragmented markings related to one of the nine outer sigils, but we failed to uncover any fragments. Four of the buildings were unsealed and searched already by the scouting parties, while the remaining two were part of sealed blocks. Neither of the two had any dust lining the streets like you described, though."

"We managed to break into one of the two sealed chambers," Rhuger added. "We did make some interesting finds, such as cultivation manuals and a powerful recipe that seemed to be a faith-based berserking pill. But no seal."

"So nothing?" Ogras muttered before glancing at Zac. "Then just what's going on with your quest?"

"That's-" Zac frowned, not sure himself. He opened up his quest screen to make sure, but the result was the same.

One by Nine (Unique, Inheritance): Form a full cycle of Sealbearers. Reward: Entry to the Left Imperial Palace (4/9) [2604 days] [NOTE: Multiple cycles can be formed.]

The progress was still the same, with almost half of the slots already filled in somehow. Back then, the progress had made sense if you counted Ogras, Joanna, Rhuger, and Vilari. But now, Zac didn't know what to think.

"There was really nothing?" Zac asked to make sure.

"Well," Joanna hesitated and glanced at Vilari, who wordlessly took out a black crystal ball the size of Zac's fist.

It didn't emit any energy fluctuations, and [Cosmic Gaze] didn't give Zac any indication something was special about it either. It just looked like a black decorative glass ball without any special function. But considering how carefully Vilari held onto it, there had to be more to it than that.

"This was the only thing of interest," Vilari slowly said. "We found it in the center of the building we managed to unseal. Neither Rhuger nor Joanna can sense anything from this thing. Truthfully, neither can I, yet I am drawn to it for some reason. I feel there is some secret inside it; I just haven't figured out how to unlock it. I was wondering if you can sense anything from it?"

Zac and Ogras looked at the crystal, but neither could glean anything from it.

"Nothing," Zac said with a shake of his head. "But that doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"That's right," Ogras agreed. "I've visited two sites with seals belonging to Zac right now, and I couldn't sense the slightest hint of anything magical coming from those places. I think only those fated will be able to connect with the items related to the Outer Courts."

"But I cannot get anything from it," Vilari sighed with helplessness.

"Give it time," Ogras shrugged. "I had to kill a Kingdom's worth of cursed beings to gain access to my seal. I don't think everyone will fall ass-backward into an opportunity like our blessed Lord here."

"It doesn't hurt to keep working at it," Zac agreed, ignoring the demon's jab. "Since you're the one who can sense something, it might be related to the soul. Maybe one of the courts is related to Mentalists? After all, Ogras got the Hollow Court, which seems suitable to him. Soul-related things often take a bit longer."

"I'll keep trying," Vilari nodded.

"Did you find any signs of Janos?" Ogras asked. "If I'm one and Vilari is the second, then Janos could be counted as the third. That only leaves one mystery person for the quest."

"No," Joanna said. "If his disappearance is related to all this, then he's either in the central temple we sealed off or in the building we could not crack open."

"Alright," Zac sighed. "I'll try to break into that building later to ensure he's not trapped there. Otherwise, I think the results are decent. The Ensolus Ruins weren't that big; finding a possible clue apart from my own seal is pretty good already."

"I'm sorry we couldn't help you more," Joanna sighed.

"Don't look at it like that," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I was just hoping to provide the same kind of opportunity I've enjoyed. I have no expectations of you helping me in the upcoming inheritance."

"Besides, it's not over yet," Ogras added. "We're heading to the Million Gates Territory. A few years there will provide far more opportunities than some old ruins. The Ensolus Ruins were probably just placed there by the Ruthless Heavens for its favorite son to finish up his seal."

"I guess that's true. It's still not over," Joanna nodded. "We have the Million Gates Territory."

"And even if that fails, there's a final chance waiting for you," Ogras continued. "Seizing fate. We already know this mess has been integrated with the upcoming war. I am certain likes will attract, and we will find ourselves fighting against other seal holders."

"Stealing the opportunities from others?" Joanna said with a small frown. "That's a bit.."

"Cultivation has always been a fight for resources," Ogras snorted. "How is this any different? Better we get the slots than some outsider bastards. Or even worse, the invaders."

"We still don't know if things will work like that," Zac said, but there wasn't a lot of conviction behind his words. He could almost feel it. A storm of fate was brewing, and those with affinity would find themselves on a collision course sooner or later.

"We'll figure out the rules sooner or later," Ogras said. "There are probably a few infiltrators who have stumbled upon opportunities already."

"That's fine, but I doubt getting the seals that way will provide the same burst of insight," Zac said. "The insights themselves are half the reason to get the seals, considering we have no idea how dangerous the actual inheritance is. We might be forced to bow out immediately when faced with the scions from the outside. So if possible, we want to find the seals rather than snatch them."

"All the more reason to not waste any more time. The ships are ready, and the key personnel has returned. We are just waiting for your go-ahead," Ogras said, and Zac could see the other three were of a like mind.

Zac nodded in agreement. It was time for his subordinates to spread their wings and search for their own opportunities. Emily had already gone ahead in that regard. Zac had already sent a demon to the Bloodwind Planet, to bring her a message he was back. But it turned out Emily had already left for the Million Gates Territory as part of the very same coalition army Zac had seen mentioned when he visited the coliseum all those years ago.

The thought filled Zac with a mix of pride and worry. Part of him wanted to set out himself and bring her back home. But he had to remember that the better part of a decade had passed since they last met. She wasn't the wild teenager robbing adventurers any longer. Like Thea once said, she had to find her path. Zac believed she would return before the war, hopefully strong enough to help keep both herself and Earth safe.

The same was true for the others. They would never become true elites until they gained some real experience. But he couldn't ferry them over to the Red Zone of the Allbright Empire just yet.

"I just need your help dealing with a few things before you go," Zac said.

"The integration?" Vilari said, and a rare hint of anticipation flashed across her face.

"The integration of the undead," Zac nodded. "Everything is prepared already."

"When will you announce it?" Vilari asked.

Zac didn't immediately answer but instead turned to Ogras. "How did the experiments go?"

"It worked just fine," Ogras nodded. "The little blue cheat came through. The plan seems feasible, and we can start setting things up anytime."

"And the other thing?" Zac asked.

"Here," Ogras said and threw over a box. "Three uses."

"Perfect," Zac sighed in relief before turning to Vilari. "I just need to meet with the representatives of the Undead Empire. We will go ahead with the integration no matter what their stance is. But having some assurances would be better, especially for the Raun Spectrals who are in a tough spot right now."

"Of course," Vilari nodded.

Zac turned back to Ogras. "Set everything up, and I'll send the location to Catheya today. It should take them around a week to reach the planet we chose."

"Do you want me to accompany you to the meeting?" Vilari asked.

"No, this time, I have something different in mind," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"Do you need our help in some other ways?" Joanna asked.

"Just focus on your upcoming expedition. Ogras and I are enough to deal with the preparations," Zac smiled. "Ten days. Provided the meeting is fruitful, we will have a global announcement in ten days."

"Alright, I guess it's time to earn my pay," Ogras grunted as he got to his feet. "I'm heading to So'Liv."

"Perfect," Zac nodded. "I guess I'll go deal with things from my end."

It would be a busy week.

"Long time no see," Zac smiled as his old friend stepped into the little meeting room he had placed in the middle of the forest. "You look nice."

It was true. Zac didn't know what Catheya had been through since they met last, but it felt like every single aspect of her had undergone a subtle yet very noticeable elevation. Her appearance had moved closer to perfection, in the same sense that Iz's features were marked by the Dao. She even carried herself with a level of grace that eclipsed her previous manner. Just taking a few steps into the building had almost been enough to steal Zac's breath away.

It was not just her appearance either; her aura was incredibly condensed, eclipsing that of elites like Leyara and Ogras. She still wasn't at the level of Iz, but it was far beyond her previous status as a decently talented Scion of the Empire Heartlands. It looked like Catheya had encountered some lucky opportunities of her own since they last met, real significant ones at that.

"What nice? Bastard, you know what kind of headache you created for me?" Catheya huffed as she sat down opposite him. "I've had the ancestors breathing down my neck for years because you had to go get swallowed up by a space fish, and now you don't even come meet me in person? You send this tin can in your stead?"

"Well, it was a gift from you, so I figured it was suitable," Zac joked.

This was the solution that he and Ogras had landed on. As they saw it, there were only two ways to ensure a safe meeting when there were Monarchs in the mix. Either he would have to meet Catheya with some sort of proxy, or he would have to take Catheya to a different world to shake off her handlers.

Ogras had argued for the latter, saying it would allow them to control the situation better. They would set up a meeting, but only leave Catheya a Teleportation Token. After she'd arrived at some other

corner of Zecia, Zac could teleport in, and they could have the meeting in peace. Knowing there was no way for the Monarchs of the Undead Empire to get there in short order.

Ultimately, Zac had felt this method put Catheya in too much danger and had chosen the proxy method instead. The problem was that no place on a planet was safe when C-grade cultivators were involved. As long as they managed to pin down your location, they could be there at a moment's notice, sealing you before you even had a chance at teleporting back home.

So he simply didn't stay on the planet.

Zac's vision was currently split into two. One of them was the puppet's sight, where he saw Catheya in the secluded meeting place on So'Liv Six, a central planet in the Kaldran Strait. It was mostly a desolate wasteland because of its location. The late E-grade planet was situated at one of the more narrow stretches of the border between the Undead Empire and the surrounding Empires, and it had been swept up in the struggle more than once.

Currently, it was tentatively under the control of the Empire of Light, but it was pretty much a penal colony and advance scouting station. A few million people had been transferred over to harvest some of the local plants, and the Empire hoped their presence would at least give a small warning in the event of an invasion. It was the perfect place to hold a clandestine meeting with the Undead Empire. The undead delegates could get there in a week, moving from one of the closest frontier planets under their control.

While the puppet he got in the Twilight Ascent was sent down to the surface, Zac himself was hiding in the vast emptiness of space, remotely controlling it from a safe distance. He wasn't using one of the standard Creator Vessels either, but something much better; the Yphelion.

He was currently sitting in a large room, its walls glistening in a beautiful mix of gold and black. It wasn't a design choice by Zac, but rather a result of the materials that went into building the huge space catamaran. Zac had provided a lot of Life- and Death-attuned materials for its upgrade, and after being purified and turned into alloys, they had mostly gained these colors naturally. The few with different colors had been altered by the Creators to not clash with the theme.

The bridge of the Yphelion looked a bit different compared to the one of the Starflash. For one, it was almost twice as big to accommodate a large floating sphere over five meters across. It was the core of the reconnaissance arrays, and ten administrators were sitting around it, continuously sifting through the endless data it spat out.

After building the first batch of ships, Zac immediately switched production to his own Cosmic Vessel. Thankfully, it had been completed with time to spare, which increased the chance of their plan to succeed drastically. Now, the vessel was hidden in a debris field at the edge of So'Liv Six's solar system.

Obviously, the puppet Catheya gave him couldn't be controlled over such vast distances. It was hastily constructed by an E-grade craftsman inside the Twilight Ascent, limited both by materials and the creator's skill. But on the outside, they had no such limitations, and much of the internal machinery of the puppet had been replaced over the past weeks.

Even then, sending a signal across a whole solar system was easier said than done, which is why Zac had placed hundreds of repeaters between So'Liv Six and the debris field. This technology was something he'd tasked Ogras with testing out while he surveyed the neighboring planets around Earth.

It had worked perfectly, thanks to Calrin's connections. The only downside was that the signal would be drowned out in regions with too many people and arrays. But there was no interference to speak of in a desolate forest of a mostly-deserted planet. This way, Zac could meet up with Catheya with peace of mind. Even if the Monarchs managed to trace the signal, there was no way for them to get close without the Yphelion's powerful sensors picking something up.

In fact, Zac already knew that two Monarchs were hidden in the forest, both exhibiting energies at the Middle C-grade. Not only that, but there was actually one more staying in the Cosmic Vessel that had ferried Catheya to So'Liv Six three hours ago. It was proof of how seriously they were taking this meeting and how he had been right not to trust a powerful faction like the Undead Empire blindly.

The hidden traps of the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] had engraved an important lesson on the dangers of the Multiverse deep into his bones, and it had paid off today.