

The Fall 954

Chapter 954: Three Years

In just an hour, three powerful factions on Earth had disappeared without leaving so much as a ripple behind. This would all be kept away from the general population of Earth, but those who needed to know would learn of it one way or another. Zac shook his head and started up the second rotation of his Body Tempering Method.

The days passed this way. The world outside was rapidly changing while everything remained the same in Zac's cultivation cave. Zac got a few more notifications about the integration, from scuffles erupting to another outright mutiny. But Ogras dealt with the dissidents from the shadows while Vilari toured Pangea as an ambassador of peace.

Days turned to weeks, and Zac soon reached the point where his [Thousand Lights Avatar] was fully recovered to the level before it was destroyed. Part of it was thanks to the Moss Crystal, but it was only upon returning to Earth he had seriously cultivated the Eidolon Manual for extended periods. He had occasionally practiced it in the Orom World, but he had spent most of his time focusing on his techniques back then.

At this rate, Zac judged he'd be able to finalize the avatar inside the Time Chamber. Of course, this was just the first layer where he'd form a complete spiritual body that would be able to emerge from his body for short durations. There were further layers in the technique where one would drastically strengthen the avatar, even allow it to survive indefinitely outside his body.

Zac wasn't sure if there was any point to that, though, from how he planned to use the [Thousand Lights Avatar]. He'd have to see if the first layer was enough to use it as a delivery system for his Daos. If not, he'd keep going until it was.

His soul was getting along as well, with his fifth set of outer Cores already nearing completion. This was years ahead of schedule, though he hadn't planned on cultivating the [Nine Reincarnations Manual] this much before breaking through to the D-grade. Until getting the Moss Crystal, he had thought reaching the third reincarnation before heading to the Perennial Vastness was a fool's hope.

Now, there was a window of opportunity.

Zac was even using Soul Crystals during every cultivation session since returning from the Kaldran Strait, something that was only possible thanks to his recent negotiations with the Undead Empire. Soul Crystals were impossible to source in Zecia, but the Undead Empire obviously had its own channels. He had already commandeered any Soul Crystals Catheya and the others carried with them, and larger batches would start arriving soon.

His [Void Vajra Sublimation] was even closer to a breakthrough. In a perfect world, Zac would have wanted to stay inside his cave until he reached the first layer, but there were a few more things he needed to deal with. First, he needed to send the others to the Million Gates Territory, and he had just gotten a message that they were ready to set off.

Fifty people stood waiting at the Nexus Hub when Zac arrived. Most of them were the core combatants of his faction. Rhuger and Vilari would lead ten more Revenants. And two Raun Spectrals, apparently.

Had they heard about Ra'Klid and a Mavai Shaman joining the mission and petitioned for two slots as well? Then again, spectral cultivators had a couple of unique advantages, and they made great scouts.

Joanna brought eight Valkyries and a couple of human warriors Zac somewhat recognized. For example, there was the archer who had left some impression on Zac in the battle between the Raun spectrals and the Ensolus army. Next to him was a demoness, along with six more Torrid Demons.

Ten people didn't emit as bloody an aura. They were the support staff, which included the administrators who had helped steer the Yphelion during the previous mission. Among them, there was a familiar face Zac hadn't seen for years. He hadn't expected Sui, the little healer who once saved his life in the depths of the Dead Zone, to join the mission.

Zac had almost forgotten about her already, but it turned out she had reached late E-grade already. Judging by her almost holy aura, she had continued down the path of a healer. She would no doubt take up the role of medic on the mission. There was also one Ishiate and one Volor Stoneturtle among the support staff. They were most likely technicians who would hopefully be able to perform some field repairs on the Starflash in case something went wrong.

Finally, there were Rhubat, Ibtep, and two more elite Zhix warriors.

The Starflash could obviously house a lot more people, but Zac could only send one person over at a time. Furthermore, he was under the same restrictions as the Space Gate Guild, which meant he couldn't just activate the Nexus Hub and transport a whole army to the other side of the sector.

If he wanted to accomplish something like that, he would have to first seize the destination planet and hold it long enough to lock in the ownership. Or better yet, he could have the Allbright Empire gift him a world, avoiding the headache. Apparently, that was exactly what was happening right now in the Red Zone, where most C-grade factions were given planets to allow for mass transportation and Cosmic Vessel production.

"Alright, I won't waste your time with empty speeches. You are all the best of the best our planets have to offer. I hope you all find opportunities on the outside. But remember, you only have one life. Coming back in one piece is the most important," Zac said before turning to Ogras, who stood at the front. "Is everything prepared?"

"Would have been ready a week ago if not for the bastards who refused to face reality," Ogras snorted with annoyance. "You should've just let me put their heads on pikes to wake the others up."

"Well, from what I hear, things have already stabilized," Zac said. "But thank you for your help. All of you."

"It was our pleasure," Vilari smiled. "It was nice to finally see the other half of our home world, even if the environment was a bit unpleasant."

"Is everything dealt with in that regard?" Zac asked.

"Both main ship and the backups have been refitted with Holy Beacons and barriers," Vilari nodded. "We will most likely need to temporarily disable them when we jump through dimensions, but that shouldn't be a problem. We have more than enough Miasma Crystals as well. Enough to last us two decades, if need be."

“Good,” Zac nodded. “Still, be careful. From what I’ve heard, there are very few Death-Attuned worlds in the Million Gates Territory. Most places you will traverse will be toxic.”

“We will be careful,” Vilari nodded before her mouth turned upward. “And who knows, some suffering might help me advance my soul faster. I have been much-too-comfortable as of late. Oh, by the way, don’t forget about Lily. I will not be able to keep tabs on her after I leave.”

“About who?” Zac said with a blank look.

“The pet keeper with a bonded Ayn Hivequeen. Of course, it is more apt to say she’s become the pet while the Hivequeen is holding the leash,” Vilari said.

“I thought it was handled?” Zac frowned.

“It is, in a sense. I forced the insect queen to leave Lily’s mind, but the two were bonded in a way I couldn’t deal with. I felt it was fine after I had a talk with the Hivequeen. It will work for you, and the girl will act as your liaison. Of course, you can always kill the queen, but that would damage the girl’s soul,” Vilari said. “But I think they can be an asset in the war, provided you can speed up the Hive’s growth.”

“Alright,” Zac sighed before turning to Rhubat.

“Anything?” Zac asked.

“Not yet, but I will keep searching,” Rhubat rumbled.

Zac nodded, not overly surprised. Finding another seal in the Ensolus Ruins felt like a long shot by now. But walking among the ruins of the Limitless Empire might have helped him gain some Karmic Links to the Left Imperial Palace, so Zac didn’t think it a complete waste of time.

Finally, Zac turned to one more person who stood to the side from the others; Calrin, who was accompanied by two peak E-grade warriors with powerful foundations. Of course, Calrin’s safety mostly came from the shocking amount of defensive and offensive treasures he was decked in. Seeing as the little Sky Gnome was a Hegemon himself, he could throw those things out indefinitely and create utter mayhem.

“Are you prepared?” Zac asked.

“I have everything I need,” Calrin nodded.

“Perfect, get me a good deal,” Zac smiled.

Calrin obviously wouldn’t join the others on their adventure to the Million Gates Territory. A ship belonging to the Peak Family was already waiting for him on the other side, which would take the gnome to the closest War Fortress, where he could showcase and negotiate the wares. Zac ultimately chose to send Calrin for the negotiations rather than dealing with the matter himself.

With the region being so hectic right now, Zac didn’t feel confident negotiating in person as he did with the Undead Empire. It was better to send a representative instead, someone who had experience in negotiating trade deals. Calrin didn’t mind either since this was a great opportunity to make connections and offload parts of the huge stockpiles of raw materials Zac had brought back from Twilight Harbor.

“Alright, let’s get started,” Zac said as he put his hand against the Nexus Hub.

Zac spent the next week sending one member after another to the Million Gates Territory. He didn’t head over himself, but simply activated the Hub and let the others enter. He had to wait almost five hours before he could trigger a teleporter to the same world again, so he kept up most of his cultivation in-between, except for the [Nine Reincarnations Manual], which took up too much time.

The world Zac was sending his squad to was called Crimson Edge. It wasn’t quite as dangerous as it sounded, though it was by no means a safe world. The name simply came from the fact that it was a world at the edge of the Red Sector, bordering the Million Gates Territory. A lot of mercenaries, pirates, and adventurers passed through Crimson Edge on their way to the lawless lands beyond.

As such, the order had never been particularly good, and battles in the street were a common occurrence. The war had changed that, though; tens of millions of soldiers were now stationed on the planet. They didn’t interfere with the unattached cultivators, but few dared to cause a stir with such a force nearby.

Calrin had already bought a large plot of land through some sort of dummy corporation, giving the Atwood Empire a small base of operations in the region. Zac hadn’t visited himself, but there were already barracks and hangars where they could set up their Cosmic Vessels without anyone spying on them.

The week passed until Ogras was the only one remaining.

“Three years,” Ogras said.

“Don’t get yourself stuck in some Mystic Realm again,” Zac smiled as he shook the demon’s hand. “I’m not sure how many times I’ll be able to fish you out.”

“My ring is full of escape treasures. I’m not sitting around for another decade,” Ogras grinned.

“Have fun then,” Zac said as he activated the Nexus Hub one final time. “And if you get the chance, recruit some capable fellows?”

“I’ll mention the boss is filthy rich, trick a few of them,” Ogras laughed. “Good luck on your end.”

A moment later, Ogras was gone and the array winked out. Zac sighed as he looked up at the sky. He wouldn’t have minded exploring the vast beyond in the Yphelion, but he had work to do. Zac returned to his cave and resumed his cultivation. Every day, his body was annealed with the inexhaustible flame of Life, pushing him closer and closer to a tipping point.

Zac could feel it build up inside him, even if his body hadn’t yet changed in any noticeable manner. His skin hadn’t taken on a golden or bronze hue, at least not a lasting one, and he didn’t seem to recover any faster from wounds. He hadn’t gained any attributes either, making it almost seem like the golden flakes in the depths of his cells were completely useless. But he felt full of life and verve even when not cultivating the [Void Vajra Sublimation], to the point he managed to add even more rotations every day.

Then finally, he reached the tipping point.

Even from the first stance, Zac could tell this one was different. The moment he stamped down on the ground, the whole underground forest around him shuddered, and a golden glow spread across the

area. It looked like radiant pollen had been released from the leaves, but it was the Life-Attuned energies that were being kindled by Zac's aura.

Zac wouldn't lose his composure at such an important junction, and he smoothly transitioned into the next expression of the Void. However, Zac could actually feel the illusory seal formed by from his first remained even as he moved away. It became a fixture that marked the starting point of the sublimation. And this was just the beginning.

One mark after another was imprinted in the small clearing as Zac progressed. They hovered in the air like gateways into the Void. They didn't even contain a smidgeon of Dao or Cosmic Energy, and none but Zac would ever lay their eyes on these runes. Yet they were as real as could be, confirmed with utmost veracity by his heart.

Thirty, fifty, seventy. The seals grew more numerous, and Zac felt he was closing in on something. On their own, they were just breaches into the Heavens, small pathways where he could siphon Life for his benefit. But as Zac expertly went through the motions, he felt he was actually creating something greater. It was like being shown a constellation after only having focused on individual stars until now.

The rune.

It was the illusory rune that always formed inside his body, only to disappear the moment the session was over. At the same time, it was different, almost inverted somehow. Zac couldn't figure out the details in the middle of his breakthrough, so he pushed all errant thoughts aside and became one with the Void.

One seal after another was added until Zac finally returned to the origin. As he looked through the meadow, the seals seemed chaotic and disorderly. In reality, they were anything but. They were just missing the final piece of the puzzle, the key that would allow it all to click into place. Zac took the closing controlled breath, and his hands clapped together.

A tremendous shockwave erupted from his body, and the trees around him were pushed back so far that their crowns almost touched the ground. But it was like time was put in reverse as the shockwave was dragged back toward the heart of the glade. And in the wake of the implosion, a storm of Life followed. It was like the shore receding from an impending tsunami before it all came crashing back.

Left behind were the trees that made up the natural formation of life. They were still bent, but now they rather bowed toward him, like subjects showing deference to their sovereign. And from them, even more Divine Energy was released, dragged out from the depths through their roots.

Zac welcomed it all with equanimity. He was the Void, there was no limit to how much he could absorb, and the innumerable vortices in his cells had begun a feeding frenzy. For a moment, it almost looked like he would drag up the whole Nexus Vein by its roots, but things soon changed. One by one, the illusory runes started vibrating before they started absorbing the abundant energies as well. Gradually, they lit up with golden splendor, turning into radiant lanterns of truth.

The first seal to light up was the opening step on the ground, and it rose by itself and entered Zac's body. The pain was unreal, far worse than when the paste burrowed into his body, but Zac knew he couldn't back down now. He had to withstand the whole process without flinching, or the foundation for his future Body Tempering would be imperfect.

So Zac stood frozen in place like a statue, holding on to his Dao Heart to withstand the agony. Meanwhile, the first seal superimposed on the large illusory pattern that always formed when he practiced the [Void Vajra Sublimation]. A corner of the fractal lit up, dragging it to the surface of reality from the illusory world of his Dao Heart.

One by one, the fractals entered his body as Zac started to radiate a blinding gold. The grass around him began to grow with mad zeal, and the branches of the neighboring trees stretched toward the warmth of his existence. Unfortunately, Zac could barely register the changes around him as he desperately held on to the Void. Eventually, the final seal slipped out from between his palms and entered his chest, forming a perfect whole.

Life.

Once more, the pattern receded into the depths of his body, but it was different this time. It wasn't just a truth made real by his heart. The pattern contained immense amounts of Divine Energy, which endlessly filled every cell in his body. By this point, his body had already swallowed a terrifying amount of Divine Energy, to the point the black holes were no longer black. They had become golden vortices filled with everlasting Life.

As the mysterious force from the rune of Void Life joined the vortices, it was like reality shifted. What was temporary was now permanent, on a deep, irrevocable level. A smile spread across Zac's face as he knew he had passed the first hurdle. He had perfectly passed the first layer of the [Void Vajra Sublimation].

The agonizing pain was soon swept away, replaced by a vibrant warmth as his cells adapted to the new energy at their centers. The process continued for a full day, and Zac felt like he had returned to the womb. There were no thoughts or problems, just warm Life and the protection of the Void.

Eventually, Zac felt his mind return to normal, and he slowly opened his eyes. This time, he could tell something was different with his body, even if his skin hadn't changed color. But just as Zac was about to open his Status Screen to check things out, a voice broke the silence of his cultivation cave.

The voice of a woman, a voice all-too-familiar.

"You've improved."