

## The Fall 956

### Chapter 956: Connected By Fate

The golden hands radiated a holy light, and Thea felt she could almost glimpse something inside the radiance; a vast ocean where all the answers to cultivation existed. In front of that ocean, her Sword Intent was nothing, a small parlor trick not worth mentioning.

No, it wasn't! Thea shook her head, her awe at the hands replaced with fear. It was almost like she had been hypnotized there for a moment, led astray by another's path. Zac had described something similar that had happened when they reached the Dimensional Seed, but this seemed more targeted, more intentional.

The next moment the hands disappeared, and Thea's eyes widened in shock upon seeing the state of the Hallowed Mother. She was completely drenched in blood, and her demonic arm was simply gone.

"Who?!" the bleeding Monarch screamed, but she didn't even wait for an answer before she disappeared.

Thea wasn't surprised in the slightest. If she had learned one thing over the past eight years, it was that concepts such as victory and defeat were luxuries that only existed in the minds of men. When the thin veneer of civilization had frayed, there was only life and death. Honor and mercy didn't exist in the wild.

That was why the Hallowed Mother unhesitatingly ran for her life when faced with a mysterious cultivator with the strength to cripple her. The only benefit to staying was to figure out who had attacked her, but what did that matter compared to surviving the ordeal? Running was the best option in this kind of situation.

Yet it was futile.

Two monks and a nun had suddenly appeared out of nowhere. One of the monks seemed to be a hairless dwarf or a very fat gnome, while the other two had the same statures as humans. Thea couldn't see the features of the female, though, as her face was hidden by a veil. None of them said anything. They just looked in the direction of the fleeing Monarch with an eerie calm.

Thea could no longer see Hallowed Mother; she had turned into a streak of light, escaping thousands of kilometers in no time. However, the nun veiled simply waved her sleeve, and the Hallowed Mother was suddenly right in front of them. At first, there was confusion on her face, but it was soon replaced by horror.

"Wait!" she screamed, "I have--"

"Too much sin has accumulated," the tall monk sighed as he lifted the staff in his hand. "To send you into the wheel of reincarnation like this would be doing you a disservice. You shall be given a chance at redemption."

The staff slammed into the ground and the dozen golden loops on top of the staff sang. Thea didn't know what she expected after the monk's proclamation, but it wasn't a massive explosion of gore. What chance at redemption? The Hallowed Mother had been splattered all over the ground.

But Thea swore with surprise when she noticed a young woman appear where the Hallowed Mother once stood. She looked a lot like the Hallowed Mother, but there was a sense of hollowness to her that Thea quite couldn't explain. She almost seemed like a humanoid puppet, albeit an incredibly lifelike one.

"What is your name, child?" the staff-wielding monk asked.

"This one does not now," the naked woman said with a bow.

"You will return with us and recite the Avalokiteshvara Mantra," the monk nodded as the nun handed the woman a simple robe. "When you have found your self, you can begin your journey of redemption."

"This one understands," the reformed Hallowed Mother nodded and silently moved to stand behind the nun. There was not a ripple of emotion in her eyes, just a sea of tranquility.

Thea just stood and looked on with incomprehension. What had just happened? Rebirth? Was such a thing even possible? And why had these people appeared here? They were clearly Buddhist monks. Was there such a faction on Goldblade Continent? Thea didn't know what was going on, but her heart shook when the four turned toward her.

"Benefactor, the past years have tested you," the short monk sighed. "This poor monk is happy to see benefactor has managed to hold onto their humanity even after becoming subject to the sorrows of the world."

Thea's eyes widened in alarm upon hearing his words. She could tell. The Monk hadn't said it outright, but they knew. They knew she wasn't a native of this place.

"Thank you for saving my life," Thea said. "Can I ask who you are?"

"This poor monk is but a passerby, traveling the cosmos in search of enlightenment," the small monk smiled. "Karma pulled us toward each other, benefactor; we are connected. Benefactor, you carry great destiny on your self, and it was too early to enter the samsara. Lending a helping hand was just the will of the cosmos."

Thea frowned as she looked back and forth between the monks. The small monk's words seemed genuine, and he was clearly incredibly powerful. But why did his eyes seem so shifty? Then, she noticed something in the cherubic monk's hand, and Thea's eyes widened in shock as she reached for a hidden pocket in her sleeve.

It was gone.

The small Spatial Stone she had found during her travels was currently in the small monk's hand. It contained a few Cultivation Resources and some other things she had managed to embezzle over the past years – a go-to bag in case she ever managed to escape from the Hallowed Mother's grasp.

"That stone-" Thea couldn't help but blurt.

"Blessings, blessings," the monk smiled. "A beautiful pebble indeed. This monk will keep it as a memento for our chance encounter."

Thea blankly looked at the diminutive monk, her mind trying to comprehend what had just happened. Had a powerful Buddhist Monarch really just stolen her backup stockpile and refused to give it back? Its contents couldn't be worth more than a few hundred E-grade Nexus Coins. Why did he need it?

"I- Uh, thank you for saving my life," Thea eventually said with a bow as she dropped the matter. Some random cultivation resources were ultimately a cheap price for her life. "I hope you can care for these children; as you saw, I don't have the strength to protect them. I will not disturb you any longer."

With that, she resolutely started to walk away. Her instincts told her not to get mixed up with these monks. Her track record when running into powerful Monarchs was just horrible, and she knew that the Buddhist Sangha wasn't just some altruistic do-gooders. She might not have as strong a Danger Sense as Zac, but she had developed a nose for trouble – and these people were reeking.

Thea would much rather resume her journey to the Cloudsoar Terrace. Its existence had been a source of inner strength for years now; that one day, she'd escape from the Shatterstone Valleys and continue on her path. And today, that moment had finally come. The seal on her heart had dissipated the moment the Hallowed Mother was gone, and nothing was holding her back anymore.

And today, the odds of making it to the terrace were a lot higher.

Even if it was just for an experiment, the years with the Blessed Kin had undeniably made her a lot stronger. It wasn't a coincidence the Hallowed Mother and many other unorthodox factions had settled in the Shatterstone Valleys. It was one of the most flourishing spots in the region, and there was no local force powerful enough to claim it all on its own.

The environment far eclipsed that of Earth. Between the constant life-and-death battles the scavengers had thrown her into, and the forced progression of the Hallowed Elixir, she had already pushed her Branch of the Clouded Sword to Middle Mastery. Now, she just needed to form a Pure Wind Branch to complement her Pure Sword Branch, and she would essentially be ready to tackle Hegemony.

After breaking through, with her unique access to the System's benefits such as Titles, she should be able to fight even Late-Stage Hegemons here on the Goldblade Continent. As such, she would be approaching the top level of the wandering cultivators in this place. The only problem was that she didn't know how much of her potential and lifespan the Hallowed Elixir had stolen over the years.

Thea estimated it was centuries, though, which meant there was no time to lose.

A subdued whisper dragged Thea out of her thoughts, and she was shocked to realize the group of children was still right next to her. Somehow she had been moving in place, rather than running away from these Monarchs. She fearfully looked back, only to see the monk smile at her.

"Benefactor has a benevolent heart," the monk continued, pretending he wasn't preventing her from leaving. "Neither fire nor wind, life nor death, can erase one's good deeds. They can't be seen, but they will nurture you. This poor monk has already benefited by lending a helping hand. It just so happens, I could use benefactor's assistance."

So there it was. These monks hadn't just saved her out of the good of their hearts. They knew she was an outsider, so were they after the secrets of her body? A body reformed by the System. Unfortunately,

she didn't have any way to integrate others on this continent – she had already tried all sorts of things when she arrived.

"I'm not even a Core Formation Cultivator; I'm afraid I can't help vaunted beings such as yourselves," Thea said, almost with a pleading look on her face.

"Benefactor underestimates herself," the small monk smiled. "It just so happens a few of our young Acolytes are about to leave their monasteries on a pilgrimage, most of them for the first time in their lives. They are unaccustomed to the dangers of the mortal world and could use a guide. A guide with a benevolent heart, but who still is aware of the Mara in the world."

"You want me to guide your disciples?" Thea said with confusion. "You three are so powerful. What need do you have for me?"

"It's not proper for us old monks to look over the shoulders of our disciple-nephews. We would become like the tall oaks, covering the ground in shadows with our canopies," the other monk said.

Thea inwardly groaned as she thoughtfully looked at the three. "Where are you going? Toward the center of the continent?"

"No, Benefactor," the smaller monk said. "They are heading into the stars. Is benefactor ready to leave this world behind?"

"Leaving the Goldblade Continent?" Thea said with surprise.

Perhaps she shouldn't be that surprised. This place didn't have the System's Teleportation Arrays, but these three seemed to be late Monarchs. Perhaps they had other means of transportation, which would mean they might have access to all kinds of places. Like integrated space, or the distant heartlands of the Goldblade Continent where the Terrace still waited.

"I could guide your Acolytes," Thea slowly said. "But I get to pick where you drop me off afterward."

"Of course," the small monk said as his smile widened. "This poor monk is called Three Virtues. We will be in your care."

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Zac was in the depths of a mountain, hidden and protected by multiple layers of arrays. More importantly, he was on a planet shrouded by the System itself. Yet she had popped up out of nowhere when she should be on the other side of the Sector right now.

"Iz, what are yo-" Zac said as he spun around, but his voice rose an octave upon realizing he was still stark naked.

He dove toward the ground, thanking the gods for the tall grass that just sprouted as he hurriedly put on a robe. Only then did he dare look up again, and he was immensely relieved to see that the fiery golem wasn't with her. Zac wasn't sure he'd have survived if that were the case. Still, Zac didn't feel safe, and he warily looked around.

“Kvalk is not in this Solar System,” Iz calmly said. “He wasn’t able to force his way inside. The Shroud was surprisingly dense around your planet. If not for my uncle preparing a backup method, I wouldn’t have been able to make my way inside.”

“Alright,” Zac sighed in relief before looking at her suspiciously. “How did you manage to find me?”

“Every day, the echoes of Chaos around you weaken. The tracking seal on you is working again,” Iz said as she walked over. “As for the arrays... Well, they weren’t very impressive.”

“They weren’t made to stop people like you,” Zac sighed before he looked up at Iz with a weak smile.

“Now that we know each other, how about you remove that mark of yours?”

“Removing a mark empowered by a Supremacy is beyond my abilities,” Iz said, but the smile on her face showed she wasn’t too broken up about it.

“Forget it,” Zac muttered as he took out a canteen of water. “Well, welcome to Earth, I guess.”

“Just now, what did you practice?” Iz asked. “Those seals...”

“What?” Zac blurted as the water went down the wrong pipe. “Just how long did you look?”

“Long enough to see your Body Tempering Method contained some very odd concepts,” Iz said.

“That’s not what I-” Zac coughed as his eyes darted to the side.

“Your nakedness?” Iz said, her eyes widening a bit in realization. “Do not worry. You have quite a good musculature. As for the-“

“Let’s just drop it,” Zac groaned.

“No, this is my mistake. I admit, my social experience is lacking,” Iz said as she thoughtfully looked at Zac before looking down at herself.

“You aren’t-” Zac said, his heart suddenly beating a lot quicker. Surely, she wasn’t planning on balancing out karma that way?

However, Zac was soon filled with a mix of disappointment and relief as a small bottle appeared in her hand. For a moment there, he had almost thought this would turn into a sitcom scenario, and he wasn’t sure his fate could withstand something like that.

“This is a tonic called [Wreathstar Nectar]. It is normally meant to be used after breaking through to D-grade, but it should be helpful after your current breakthrough as well. It will stabilize your foundations and even set your body in a ‘hungry’ state that will allow you to quickly absorb more energy,” Iz said as the vial floated over.

Zac’s eyes lit up as he grabbed the bottle. The nectar didn’t sound too impressive from Iz’s description, but every single thing she had produced since they met had been a unique treasure that you’d never get your hands on at the Frontier. There was definitely more to the [Wreathstar Nectar] than she let on. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have been carrying it around.

Showing some skin in exchange for a supreme tonic that would allow him to quickly move on to the next layer of the [Void Vajra Sutra] felt like a worthy trade, even if it was a disconcerting how she could just

find him like this. She had mentioned Chaos, could he perhaps get a jammer that used the energy of the Remnants?

“Oh, only drink three drops or you’ll explode,” Iz added with a small smile just as Zac was about to chug the whole thing.

Zac barely managed to stop himself from turning into a bomb, and he carefully swallowed three drops of the [Wreathstar Nectar]. Immediately, a powerful gust of wind swept through his body, and Zac shuddered as small pebbles of grey goop were squeezed out from his pores. Meanwhile, Zac felt his body quickly stabilize, like he had broken through months ago rather than just now.

The process lasted only a minute, yet Zac suspected the drops had saved months of cultivation. It wasn’t just the impurities that were removed and the foundation that got stabilized. It felt like the gust of wind had somehow pushed the Life-Attuned Energies deeper into his cells and condensed them. That had left room for more, and he could feel how his body almost screamed for more nourishment.

He would have to practice the next layer to be sure, but Zac suspected his cultivation speed would be drastically improved until the condensed cells were filled up with Life again.

“You have almost impossibly few toxins in your body for someone on the frontier,” Iz commented with interest. “I thought you would at least have accumulated some by that water you collected.”

“My body is pretty good at dealing with toxins,” Zac shrugged. “And the Tribulation Lightning help as well. Besides, the Lake Water doesn’t seem to leave any impurities.”

“You ought to be careful. Impurities can take many forms, including spiritual,” Iz said after some thought. “I managed to contact my grandpa before I entered the Eternal Storm. Do you know what that corruption is?”

“I just figured it some sort of spiritual rot from the Lost Plane,” Zac said.

“You’re right, in a sense. It’s the corpse of a previous Heaven,” Iz said. “When an era ends, the Dao collapse and is then slowly reformed. But someone seized a corner of the Heavens and put it inside the realm you call the Lost Plane. It became cut off from the Dao, separate from the natural rise and fall of the eras.”

“The Dao couldn’t escape, so it started to decay?” Zac frowned.

“The Lost Plane is incredibly old,” Iz said. “It is most likely one of the oldest Eternal Heritages that remain. Its ancient Dao has long lost its source and has mostly dissipated, and what little remains have been twisted in unexplainable ways. No one can know what the effect of prolonged use is, so tread carefully.”

“I’ll be careful,” Zac nodded as he looked down at the grime covering his arms. “I’m sorry, give me a second, will you?”

“Of course,” Iz nodded, and Zac flashed away.

He didn’t go far, but rather entered a secluded side room that was a small living space. There, he took a quick shower to rid himself of the dried Life-Attuned Paste and the expelled impurities. He also scarfed

down a bunch of dried Beast King meat, which helped him satiate the sense of hunger that the [Wreathstar Nectar] had elicited.

He was done just a few minutes later, but before returning to Iz, he first opened his Status Screen to look at the result of his breakthrough. There wasn't any new line on the main screen, and neither did he find one for his Constitution. However, when opening his Bloodline Panel, Zac saw that a new line had been added.

[Life] Void Vajra Sublimation (First Layer): Base Attributes +5, Vitality +10, Endurance +5. Vitality +5%, Effect of Vitality +5%.