Chapter 957: What Doesn't Belong

The gains weren't earth-shattering, but Zac was still happy with the result. Getting attributes at all was usually the sign of a high-quality Constitution, and he actually got efficiency from the first layer. That almost made the entry layer of the method equivalent to a top tier-title, which wasn't anything to scoff at. The flat attributes were useless now, but Zac suspected he'd get a noticeable boost when the method caught up to his cultivation level.

Besides, the Body Tempering Manual provided other benefits than just raw attributes. It was just that the System didn't showcase them. Zac could absolutely feel a sense of vibrancy in his body, though his Branch of the Kalpataru didn't seem to gain anything from it. The Dao felt the same to him, confirming his affinity hadn't changed.

With his Bloodline, that was to be expected, and Zac was confident the same thing would happen after using the [Essence of the Abyss]. The vibrancy in his body was rather that of a powerful life force. Zac couldn't be sure, but he had probably regained a good chunk of the years he had lost to Creation Energy and other encounters.

Iz had warned him that using life force as a source of energy would hollow one out, robbing you of your fate and potential. Conversely, getting a longevity boost was equivalent to reigniting your momentum and potential. Zac wasn't sure if the rule fully applied to him with his unique cultivation system, but who would say no to living longer?

The original method also provided resistance to toxins, certain curses, and a faster recovery speed. Zac guessed these boons were still there, even if he had altered the method. After all, replacing "Boundless" with the "Void" mostly changed the absorption process rather than the end result, with the notable exception being the difference in Heart Cultivation.

As to why the System had placed the information together with his Bloodline, Zac wasn't sure. But he guessed it made sense considering the connection to the Void, and his Draugr-node was also there. In a sense, it almost felt like good news since it hopefully meant there weren't any clashes of compatibility between Bloodline and Body Tempering Method.

Now, he was just missing the equivalent line on his undead side. In fact, Zac wanted to check whether the attributes transferred to the other side. He couldn't be certain that [Quantum Gate] would fully transfer these gains. However, with Iz waiting outside, Zac skipped turning into a Draugr for the time being and instead walked back outside.

Iz wasn't waiting where he left her, but Zac soon found her standing by his central prayer mat, curiously looking at Yrial's statue.

"My master," Zac said with a weak smile when she looked up at Zac. "He's also the one who made the escape treasure and penned that poem. He's a bit… eccentric."

"I didn't know you had a master?" Iz said with surprise. "What force is he from?"

"None. He's a soul wisp from a Dao Repository I got from the System," Zac explained. "He's also an Edgewalker like me, though with Fire and Ice."

"Hm," Iz said as she looked up at the clashing elements above her. "A world of Life and Death. It's odd. Life and Death are part of the natural cycle of a world, yet this seems unnatural."

"I've inconvenienced everyone with changing this planet's direction," Zac sighed.

"To progress is to cause ripples. If others can neither rise above the waves nor adapt to them, then they simply aren't fated," Iz shrugged as she looked at Zac curiously. "But that method of yours, the one from before. It contains something different. It's a method of the Sangha, yet it is not. Can you tell me what it is?"

"It was a Body Tempering Method I got from a Monk belonging to the Sea of Tranquility," Zac shrugged. "It didn't suit me, though, and contained some hidden traps. So I reformed it using the insights of the seals."

"My uncle says the Sangha is incredibly difficult to deal with," Iz commented. "Then again, that goes for all established factions for someone unattached like you."

"I've come to realize that as well," Zac grunted. But Zac suddenly froze before he looked up at Iz speculatively. "Are you able to discern whether items are tampered with?"

"I might," Iz said after some thought. "But a price must be paid to maintain balance."

Zac nodded, mentally preparing himself to be scalded again. But things took a different turn.

"I don't need to test your fate; I know you are fated. Instead, I want an answer," Iz said. "I've asked twice now, but you skirted the answer I was looking for. Your method contained a concept that felt familiar yet distant to me. It is not often I fail to discern the true nature of things. If you can tell me what that was, I will do my utmost to resolve any hidden traps in your treasures."

Zac hesitated for a moment. He obviously knew what she had been digging at before, but this was closing in on some of his secrets, secrets he had no way to gauge the importance of. There was simply no information on the concept of the Void of Dao in a Sector like Zecia. Who knew what people from the Multiverse's Heartlands thought of it?

But Zac didn't immediately refuse upon remembering the trap hidden within the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation].

He had all kinds of justifications for why it should be safe, but it would ultimately be risky to drink the [Essence of the Abyss] or jump into the Temporal Chamber blindly. His instincts told him that the Undead Empire wouldn't harm him before they could extract all value from him, such as assisting them inside Ultom in seven years. But the [Boundless Varja Sublimation] had shown him that being killed or crippled were not the only things he needed to look out for.

Now that Iz was right in front of him, he had a rare opportunity that might allow him to forge ahead with peace of mind. And if he had to ask himself whether he felt Iz was more trustworthy than the Undead Empire, his instincts said yes. If anything, she and her family seemed so far above him and his secrets that it didn't matter if he divulged them.

"It's the Void, and not just the Void of Space," Zac eventually said. "I used the seal to replace the Buddhist Sutras with the pull of the Void, dragging Life into my body. Don't ask me how, though."

"Interesting," Iz said before a smile bloomed on her face. "I wonder what those old things would think if they knew. A few have tried to grasp the peaks by plunging into the depths, but I don't think anyone has ever succeeded. Just extracting some benefits from the other side of the coin is incredibly difficult, yet a barbarian at the Frontier communes freely with the Void, upending convention."

"Uh, keep it between us, alright?" Zac said, deciding to forgo objecting to being called a barbarian. After all, being a barbarian beat out being a bug.

"I'm not so lowly to gossip about the matters of my friends," Iz said, her eyes shifting away slightly.

"Well, thank you," Zac said. "It's not easy to find trustworthy people in this world."

Iz nodded slightly with a smile before looking up at the clashing energies.

"You are forming a Life Constitution to match your undead half," Iz mused. "Balance between Pure Life and Death. Forming a core on a path that converges at the peak… difficult. Are you prepared?"

Zac sighed as he followed her gaze. Iz had hit the nail on the head with that comment. He had realized this more and more as his understanding of Duality, and the nature of Cultivator Cores, had increased.

The Elemental Daos had a relationship of restraining and enkindling one another, but that wasn't the case with Life and Death. It all led toward Chaos. Chaos was split into two, Creation and Oblivion, which gave birth to the concepts such as Life and Death. By their inherent nature, they were each other's opposites, only fusing into one when they returned to their Origin.

To fuse the two concepts into one Core at the D-grade was to put the cart before the horse, a paradox. Still, Zac wouldn't give up. Henry Marshall might be right, that he had nurtured hubris worthy of the Roman Emperors. But Zac still believed he could accomplish it thanks to his unique encounters and Bloodline.

He just needed to find the key that would make the impossible possible.

"Your heart is steady," Iz nodded before changing the subject. "What do you want to inspect?"

"Give me a minute," Zac said, taking out a table before flashing away.

A while later, Zac returned with the sealed Temporal Chamber and placed it on the table next to the [Essence of the Abyss]. The chamber had been placed at an off-shoot to the Divine Vein beneath the cave to charge while Zac cultivated. Iz didn't have any particular reaction to the two items and only nodded before taking out a fiery crystal.

The gemstone looked similar to a normal Fire Crystal, but Zac felt some palpitations from the aura within. Iz took the crystal, and Zac looked with amazement as a drop of fire formed on her finger. Looking at it felt like seeing the true face of Fire for the first time in his life, and only the light of Primal Dao could compare.

However, that Primal Dao had been spread out, diluted by holding so many truths. In contrast, this drop was pure flames, unblemished by anything else. The drop landed on the crystal, and Zac looked on with interest as it cracked. It didn't shatter and turn into dust, but it looked more like an egg hatching.

And that turned out to be exactly the case. A small bird made from pure flames emerged from the crystal. It looked a lot like a golden crow, but it had three legs and an additional eye on its forehead. The whole thing emitted an incredibly ancient aura, almost like the aura Zac felt when using Void Energy.

"Please find what doesn't belong," Iz said.

The crow shook its wings before bouncing over to the two items on the table, leaving fiery runes in its wake. First, it jumped a few times around the box before its third eye suddenly opened. Zac's mind suddenly screamed of danger, forcing him to quickly look away. He had barely seen a glimpse of the golden swirl, but it had almost felt like he had been dragged back to the beginning of time.

Inside that eye, there seemed to have been a sky set on fire, and Zac knew it wasn't some illusion. The whole cave shook from the pressure as sweat started pouring down Zac's face, but the feeling soon passed. Zac carefully glanced at the table and was relieved to see the crow had closed its eye.

"The Temporal Chamber seems to be unproblematic," Iz said as the crow jumped over to the vial and started the same procedure.

The same ritual repeated itself, and Zac realized the crow wasn't just bouncing around randomly. The runes its jumps left in its wake actually formed an intricate array around the item, though Zac couldn't figure out its purpose. The runes were too archaic, reminding Zac more of the markings on the Stele of Conflict than anything created under the System's purview.

Once more, the crow opened its eye, prompting Zac to avert his gaze. Something was different this time, though. When Zac looked back at the crow, he found it angrily staring at the [Essence of the Abyss], and Zac's eyes widened in alarm when it stabbed forward with its beak.

"Wai-"Zac said, but his words were caught in his throat as he saw the crow's beak somehow pass straight through the vial before dragging something out in a lightning-quick motion.

It looked like a ball of black mud, but Zac only caught a glimpse before the crow gobbled it up.

"What's going on?" Zac said with bewilderment, but Iz didn't immediately answer.

The next moment, the crow flew right into Iz's forehead and disappeared, and she shuddered before slowly opening her eyes.

"Something akin to a curse had been added to the mixture," Iz said. "It would seek out Life and convert it to Death. I'm not sure if it would have worked against you, though. After interacting, your situation appears somewhat unique. It's as though you carry two different bodies in one, completely separate. Normally, you should have Death hidden deep in your cells right now, but that's not the case at all with you."

"Still, better safe than sorry," Zac said as he looked at the vial with some trepidation. "Thank you."

So there was a trap, after all. It was not as nefarious as the one Three Virtues had left him, but it was still extremely dangerous. It didn't take a genius to put two and two together after learning about the curse attached to the [Essence of the Abyss]. As Catheya said, they didn't care about him being an Edgewalker. They were much more interested in his Bloodline.

So they wanted to kill his human half.

Zac had to admit it made sense. He could probably break through to the D-grade in a month if he only had to worry about one of his two halves. His path was infinitely more difficult, and there was a real risk of failure. Better they sweep the problems aside and open the path for him to progress as a normal Draugr.

Perhaps it was even a precautionary measure. They feared he'd give up on his path and discard his Draugr side. After all, he was ultimately born human.

"It was nothing much," Iz said. "I am afraid I have damaged the vial's seal, though. The actual tonic will slowly lose its efficacy. I recommend you take it within a month."

"Alright," Zac nodded, not too bothered since his Body Tempering Progress was better than he'd originally expected.

However, he soon looked up at Iz suspiciously. "Wait, if you had that crow, why wouldn't you be able to remove the mark left by your elder?"

"That crow wouldn't dare peck at something my grandpa created," Iz smiled. "After all, it's just a sentient wisp of his Dao."

"Oh," Zac muttered.

"Is that it?" Iz asked, and Zac absentmindedly nodded in response as he stowed away the two treasures. "Good, then it's time to fulfill our agreement."

"Ah, what?" Zac muttered before he looked up with alarm. "Ah, there's no need, no need. How about I give you a tour of my planet instead?"

But Zac shook his head in resignation when the [Stone of Celestial Void] appeared in Iz's hand.

"Some things are inevitable. As your poem said; Heaven's Path won't be denied," Iz said as a smile spread across her face. "Now, do you want to spar here, or shall we relocate?"

"Follow me," Zac sighed as he led her toward the Teleportation Array, where each step felt like walking toward the gallows.

"I thought I'd have another year to prepare," Zac added as he helplessly looked at Iz. "I figured you'd be deep inside the Millions Gate Territory by now."

"I was fortunate. It did not take me a lot of time finding the piece I marked," Iz explained. "I had no reason to stay in that region after that. In fact, it took me more time reaching your planet than searching for the seal."

"You're going home after this?" Zac asked.

"I need to work hard on my cultivation for the upcoming trial," Iz nodded. "My grandfather will guide me over the next years."

"Can I ask? Someone like you, what did you figure out with the insights the seals provided?" Zac asked. "It's okay if you don't want to answer."

"Someone like me?" Iz asked with a raised brow.

"Rich," Zac said with a roll of his eyes. "I feel like I'd need twenty seals to cover everything I'm lacking, but that's because I'm kind of making things up as I go. So I was just curious what someone with a proper background would ask from the Seal of the Left Imperial Palace."

"I focused on my Core. Like you, I have a heavy foundation and many pieces that need to fit together. Without its insights, it would take me years to figure things out."

"Won't your elders provide you with a working core?"

"They could, but it would ultimately harm me," Iz said. "For one, any seemingly perfect solution my grandpa creates might not be the most suitable for me. Some answers need to come from within, and a slightly imperfect start to your journey doesn't mean it will be shorter. As long as it is truly yours and you fully understand every aspect of it, you can slowly work on the imperfections as you progress.

"Conversely, if I rely on my elders too much, I might not even be able to defend my Dao properly. At that time, my grandpa would have to step in, and I'd be stuck as an Earth Immortal."

Zac stopped in place and looked at Iz with confusion.

A what?