

The Fall 958

Chapter 958: Earth Immortals

Zac had never heard of the concept of Earth Immortals before, but he felt this was a rare opportunity to learn some new things without getting blasted by Iz.

"A what?" Zac said with interest.

"If you fail to build a ladder to Heaven, you still have a chance to conjure the chains to the Earthly Planes and become an Earth Immortal, or a Fallen Autarch. You are weaker than true Autarchs, and you will be assaulted by increasingly ferocious Heavenly Tribulations every ten thousand years," Iz explained.

"So it's a false realm, in a sense?" Zac asked. "Like a Half-step Hegemon."

"Both yes and no," Iz said after some thought. "It can mostly be considered a false stage. But technically, one can sever the chains to progress. If you manage to break all seven Earthly Chains, you should theoretically have a chance at Supremacy. And a Supremacy who rose through this path should be no worse than a true Supremacy who walked Heaven's Path."

Zac slowly nodded, though he didn't quite get the difference.

"But practically, it's not a feasible path of progression. Severing a chain barely improves your strength; you are still bound to the Earth. But breaking each subsequent chain will become more and more difficult. Even breaking the first is more difficult than stepping into Hegemony with a Half-step core. And all the while, you must deal with the recurring Tribulation Lightning," Iz sighed. "I've never heard of an Earth Immortal who managed to break more than three chains before a tribulation annihilated them."

"Seems like a broken path," Zac muttered.

"That's because it is," Iz nodded. "Heaven's Path is to form a Ladder toward Heaven where eight is peak and nine is perfection. The system of Earthly Immortals is actually not part of this. It's the path of a previous Heaven, and the method was discovered in an Eternal Heritage shortly after the System was created. Some hoped to use it as an alternative path to the Peak, so they adjusted it to work with our Dao. But ultimately, it's not part of this Era."

"So more suffering and less strength," Zac said with bemusement. "Are there any benefits to it?"

"Well, it beats dying when you fail to defend your Dao," Iz shrugged. "Today, it's mostly used as a backup if your Dao Defense fails."

"Then why haven't I heard of it before?" Zac said with confusion.

"Well, you need a decently powerful Supremacy to guard your ascension and fight back the Heavens when you fail to build the Heavenly Ladder," Iz smiled. "Just suppressing the Heavens for the time it takes to summon the Earthly Chains is quite taxing, even for a Supremacy. It can also be extremely dangerous because of outside intervention. Finding an A-grade Cultivator in such a vulnerable position is not easy. Therefore, Earth Immortals are quite rare even in the central regions of the Multiverse."

"No wonder," Zac nodded.

It made sense. Why would a Supremacy take such a risk in normal situations? To risk their lives for some Monarch who wasn't powerful enough to become an Autarch on their own, especially when the end result wasn't that great. Perhaps if it were their child, but they definitely wouldn't stick their neck out for some random junior of their faction. Better wait a few dozen millennia for another promising Monarch to appear.

"Alright, less stalling. Where are we going," Iz said, and Zac grimaced when he saw the eager expression on her face.

It was just like when they traveled through the Dimensional Seed together. She had offhandedly dropped a bombshell piece of information, such as the background of the Kan'Tanu. But any time he'd asked for more details, she had looked at him with that face while talking about testing fates.

"Of course," Zac said with a crooked smile as he activated the Teleportation Array. "Alright, let's get this over with."

A few moments later, the two appeared on one of Zac's private islands. There were a few beasts around even though the island was a rocky plateau without any vegetation, but none would dare get close after sensing the auras of him and Iz. Zac led Iz to a flat vista some distance away from his small camp, where they could fight without worrying about damaging the Teleportation Array.

"Is this really necessary?" Zac sighed, trying once more to avoid the inevitable.

"I never go back on my words," Iz said, while a smile crept up her lips. "Besides, aren't you curious? The distance between us, compared to the first time we fought?"

Zac reluctantly had to nod; he'd be lying if he said no. He felt he had made tremendous progress, and his foundations were far deeper today than when he ascended the Tower of Eternity. If he had climbed an E-grade variant of the tower today, he was almost certain he'd be able to conquer the whole thing.

At the same time, Zac doubted Iz's family would have just let her laze around all day during her prime cultivation age. It was just hard to know what kind of methods someone like her practiced. Zac had made it this far while cultivating Soul, Technique, and now Constitution. There was no way Iz didn't have similar accomplishments.

Unfortunately, he had only caught glimpses of her fight inside the Void Star. He had been too busy dealing with the oversized Qriz'Ul goblin to figure out anything new. He knew she was a fire mage, but he suspected the truth was far more complex.

"How about we don't use any Skills?" Zac ventured, hoping he could leverage his Integration Stage Techniques to level the playing field.

"That would put you at a disadvantage," Iz smiled as an array of intensely bright fireballs appeared above her head. "I do not think you possess the ability to utilize Cosmic Energy without guidance fractals."

"Nevermind," Zac grunted. "Just wanted to make sure I don't accidentally-."

Zac didn't get any further as Iz looked at him like he were an idiot. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine even if you hit me with a blast of Hollow Chaos. Let's go."

“Alright, alright,” Zac said with a roll of his eyes. “Do you want to fight my undead side or human?”

“Up to you,” Iz shrugged.

Zac gave it some thought before he ultimately chose to stay human. His Draugr side would be a better match, especially if you included Vivi’s weakness against fire. But this wasn’t a fight to the death, and Zac wanted to push his human constitution to the limits to see if his Void Vajra Constitution improved his combat strength in any way.

Any errant thoughts were quickly thrown out the window as an enormous eruption of fiery energies blanketed the area. Iz had flown back, creating almost a kilometer’s distance between the two. And she was already preparing her skills. It almost looked like Earth’s core had been dragged to the surface as a small sun rose beneath Iz’s feet, and the six-winged demonic angel soon followed. Zac wasn’t surprised by the scene – he had seen Iz use this combo multiple times by now.

It seemed like the whole island was being fried by Iz’s domain, but Zac wasn’t ready to be outdone. Thousands of swirls appeared in the air as Zac unleashed a Dao Field powered by the Branch of the Kalpataru and the Branch of the War Axe. An area covering over a thousand meters became a battleground even more ferocious than the environment in his Cultivation Cave.

Ultimately, Zac found his domain suppressed and contained. But as long as it wasn’t ripped apart, Zac felt he had accomplished his goal. A clash of domains wasn’t a matter of pride and vanity; it was a strategic struggle for the upper hand. Whoever managed to take control of the environment would have a home-field advantage. And since Zac could at least prevent his domain from buckling, the environment wouldn’t empower her attacks.

Of course, Iz wasn’t relying on her apocalyptic Dao Field, even if it exerted constant overbearing pressure on him. The thing that really made Zac’s Danger Sense wake up was the six archaic arrays that appeared around the demon’s head like a nimbus. A stream of pure flames soon shot toward him with the speed of a falling meteor, but Zac wasn’t the helpless person he was back in the Tower of Eternity.

A huge fractal blade shuddering with barely contained Dao appeared on the edge of his axe, and [Verun’s Bite] keened with fighting spirit as he swung the weapon at an upward angle. The blade tore into the beam, splitting its front in two. However, a lone leaf was not enough to completely bisect this beam of unfettered fire.

Of course, the fractal leaves of [Nature’s Edge] rarely traveled alone.

A storm followed in the first fractal blade’s wake, and they ripped the beam apart like a swarm of piranhas. A few leaves even managed to continue toward Iz, who calmly stood atop the sun like a goddess. The huge Demonoid simply swatted them away like annoying flies, allowing Iz to calmly spectate the battle without moving. Even when imbued with Zac’s Branch of the War Axe, the leaves only managed to leave shallow scars on the Demonoid, which soon closed in a flash of flames.

Zac wasn’t deterred by something like that. He knew that the demon creature was one of Iz’s staple skills, just like his Pillar of Desolation in his other class. It wouldn’t fall so easily, especially not from a simple attack like this. The sun-and-demon pair was like a summonable array turret; trying to beat Iz at her own game with [Nature’s Edge] was a fool’s hope.

The ground cracked beneath Zac's feet as he shot forward like a rocket, easily avoiding a second beam that followed the first. Zac soon felt like he was caught in the Apocalypse, with fiery rays and molten rock assaulting him from every direction. He was already moving based on the concept of his Evolutionary Stance, each step finding a path of life in a sea of fiery death.

Still, the pressure mounted as he drew closer. The beams were incredibly fast and seemingly unending, and Zac got less and less time to react to their trajectories. Just dodging wasn't enough after two hundred meters, and he was forced to fight fire with fire. His right arm turned into a blur, and he kept launching fractal leaves to either destroy Iz's barrage of strikes or put some pressure on Iz herself.

Even now, Iz hadn't moved so much as a muscle, and she seemed content to let her avatar duke it out with him for now. Zac almost felt like he was playing a video game, facing a two-stage boss. He needed to take out the guardian before he could face the real challenge. And Zac had a plan to accomplish just that.

The whole battleground was soon destroyed beyond recognition. Some of the fire beams slammed into the ground between them to redraw the landscape, and Zac kept ripping up huge swathes of stone in an effort to obscure his pathing and create an opening. Vivi's vines were also helping by grabbing massive boulders and hurling them at Iz. Normal stones couldn't withstand the beams of flames for long, but they could delay them for a fraction of a second, allowing Zac to pass through or launch a fractal blade at a tricky angle.

Zac soon noticed that any time he made the avatar block one of his fractal leaves, there would be a brief pause in the beams. Seeing a path to close the gap, Zac started to focus even more attacks on Iz herself, which allowed him to advance even faster. Finally, Zac judged he was close enough for the plan's next step, and he suddenly pushed from the ground while he activated the torrential storm of leaves from [Nature's Edge].

Two beams were already bearing down on him the moment he launched into the air, but a simple step moved him over fifty meters closer. Waiting at his destination was a flying boulder Vivi had hurtled just a moment earlier, and Zac used it to reset [Earthstrider]. At the same time, huge amounts of Cosmic Energy entered his arm.

A huge wooden hand appeared in a crack of reality, just one hundred meters away from Iz and her demonic avatar. It ruthlessly swung down in a bloodthirsty arc just as Zac forced the avatar to block out a series of attacks on Iz. It prevented the Demonoid from instantly changing targets, but it still managed to fire off three of its arrays at [Arcadia's Judgment].

Blinding pain almost made Zac fall back on the ground, but he gritted his teeth as he pushed the skill downward. The hand was burning like a pyre, but space itself broke apart in the face of the immense sharpness contained in the axehead. Iz looked up with a thoughtful glance, and she finally moved for the first time since the battle started.

A stream of flames rose from the depths of the raging sun, slightly weakening its radiance to form a massive barrier above Iz's head. A moment later, edge and shield collided. The whole island shook, and billowing waves of cutting flames pushed away the clouds. Zac furiously tried to push through, but the barrier seemed completely inexhaustible.

Not only that, but the defensive shield even scalded the wooden hand even further, rapidly weakening its structural integrity.

“Close,” Iz commented just as [Arcadia’s Judgment] was about to collapse.

At this point, Zac floated in the air, assisted by Vivi’s vines. It looked like his all-out assault was about to fail, but he wasn’t worried.

“Was it?” Zac smiled as the ground started to heave even harder.

“Wh-” Iz frowned before looking down with surprise.

She didn’t get the chance to prepare her next move before the second half of [Arcadia’s Judgement] came crashing from below. This was the beauty of his ultimate skill. The wooden hand and its humongous axe were so dangerous it forced most opponents to activate their strongest defenses or counter with an all-out strike.

However, that left them vulnerable to the judgment of the earth, and the skill would pincer the enemy like the closing jaw of a primordial beast. Of course, Zac suspected that Iz’s sun would be able to withstand this much, but he had some outside assistance this time around.

“What-” Iz said, but the rest was drowned out by a tremendous explosion that threw Zac hundreds of meters away.

Zac barely had time to land and steady himself before a wall of superheated mist slammed into him. If he hadn’t been prepared for this, he would possibly have been thrown clean off the island by the eruption. Thankfully, he had already secured his spot with Vivi. His robes were frayed, and he was drenched in water like a drowning cat, yet a wide smile spread across Zac’s face.

It wasn’t a coincidence he had chosen this particular island, this particular spot, out of all the possible locations where they could fight. Visibility was almost zero, but he could vaguely see a geyser of shimmering water break apart a few hundred meters into the air, showering the parched island in torrential rain.

This wasn’t some new addition to his skill, but it was only made possible thanks to the powerful eruption of [Arcadia’s Judgment]. The earthquake had created an outlet for a spiritual spring containing huge amounts of Spiritual Water. This water wasn’t like the Cosmic Water back on his island, but F-grade water imbued with the Dao of Water.

Life and Death weren’t the only elements on the planet, even if they became increasingly dominant. There was still the huge Fire Crystal Mine in the Underworld, along with several other attuned resources. This island and its subterranean spring was one such example, though it hadn’t been excavated.

There simply wasn’t that much use for Water-attuned water on Earth, at least not water that could only be considered F-grade. It wasn’t even useful to nurture spiritual plants. It was more efficient to infuse clouds with Cosmic Energy and feed the plants with Gathering Arrays instead. So the island had been sealed off and its resource listed in a ledger until Port Atwood found some use for it.

And today, the water had finally shown its worth. Its Dao was obviously far inferior to Iz's sun, but the volumes were tremendous. Between the force of it bursting out from the depths and the slight attunement, it defeated quality with quantity.

Zac couldn't even see the hand in front of his face because of the mist, but he still shot forward at full speed. He didn't need his normal vision to figure out where Iz was; she was like an almost blinding beacon to his [Cosmic Gaze]. Two steps with [Earthstrider] placed him right behind her, and Zac's axe was already descending toward her shoulder.

However, a hint of worry filled his heart when he saw Iz fearfully look back with shock, and his hand slowed down a bit from hesitation. Was he going overboard? What if he actually hurt-

No.

A teasing smile appeared on Iz's face, and Zac yelped as a conflagration swallowed him. It wasn't an attack, but Iz herself had just up and exploded right in his face. Zac felt a flash of heat leaving him toasty, but the force of the eruption wasn't enough to actually wound him. But Zac still scrambled out of the way as he warily looked around. If his target was a fake, then where was the real Iz?

"You're pretty shameless," a laugh echoed behind him, and Zac swirled around only to cut apart a plume of scalded water.

"Nothing shameless about taking advantage of your surroundings," Zac coughed as he tried to find the source of the voice. "You could consider it as a lesson in practical combat."

"You sound like my uncle," Iz giggled, her voice coming from every direction. "Well, it's more fun this way. I guess I can be a bit shameless as well."

"Uh," Zac said with a sinking feeling as the island started to rumble.