

## The Fall 959

### Chapter 959: Wings

Zac felt a bit helpless as he tried to figure out where Iz was hiding and what she was up to. The huge geyser was supposed to help him suppress Iz a bit, but it had instead filled the battlefield with scalding mist that helped obscure her location. Meanwhile, Zac could feel something was changing in the surroundings as the temperature was rapidly rising.

It seemed like Iz was unleashing a domain skill, but the lack of clear accumulations of Cosmic Energy left him uncertain. What Zac did know was that he couldn't just stand around or swing his axe blindly in the air, so he quickly activated [Ancestral Woods] to get a better understanding of the situation.

Thousands of ancient trees sprung from the ground, and the haze even lifted a bit as they swallowed the mist around them. Zac's vision expanded to a radius of over three hundred meters in every direction, and Zac immediately found the source of the changes. Hundreds of small flowers were growing out of the ground.

Zac couldn't tell if the red and purple flowers were real or made from flames, but they emitted searing heat and an apocalyptic aura. It almost felt like a little bit of the Dao of Oblivion was mixed in the flowers, giving them a more powerful destructive tendency than normal flames. Of course, Zac could tell the source of the ruinous aura didn't actually come from Oblivion.

This aura had a different flavor, where the flowers almost felt like they had a desire to bring about the apocalypse and the end of days. Thankfully, they didn't seem to cause much trouble yet, except they somehow managed to suppress the geyser that was fast losing steam. But it didn't matter, as Zac had found his mark.

Just at the edge of his forest, a two-meter cocoon had appeared. It didn't emit any energy fluctuations at all, but it looked like a crystallized flame from the depths of hell. It had the same colors as the flowers, and Zac could vaguely see a humanoid shape inside. Zac wasted no time as he jumped into the closest tree, appearing just a few meters away from the cocoon.

This wasn't some tv-show. Zac wouldn't wait around for Iz to transform into some Giga-Iz. If he could stop her mid-transition and eke out a quick victory, that would be for the best. Unfortunately, just as Zac made to destroy the cocoon, it erupted in a hailstorm of sharp shards that pushed Zac back. Zac quickly found his footing and pushed through the shrapnel to attack, but he stopped in place upon seeing his opponent.

"A pixie?" Zac exclaimed, trying to make sense of her transformation.

Zac had seen Iz use a set of six wings a few times now, wings of pure golden-orange flames that felt almost holy. Iz emitted an inherent pressure when she wore those wings, like an Empress looking down at her subjects. However, this was something else entirely. Instead of six wings, Iz now only had one set, and they looked nothing like the empyrean pure-flame wings.

Instead, she had two small butterfly wings on her back. They were partly translucent, looking a bit like soap bubbles that shifted in deep red and purple colors. Iz's skin had a similar effect, though it wasn't as apparent as her wings. Most notably, Iz held a weapon for the first time. At least Zac guessed it was one.

It was a large flower of a different species than the smaller things that grew across the forest. It looked a bit like a purple and black sunflower, with the stalk cut to be around two-thirds of a meter. The flower was almost the size of a plate, and its weight made the stem slump slightly. The scene would have both been a bit comical and incredibly cute if not for the terrifying aura of infernal destruction the flower emitted.

It almost felt like she was holding something plucked from the depths of hell, and the air twisted around the flower.

“What are yo-” Zac hesitated, but he got no further before Iz attacked.

She didn’t conjure any fireballs or other skills like Zac would have expected. Instead, Iz flashed forward with incredible speed while swinging the flower like a club at him. It definitely wasn’t what Zac expected, but the experience of a thousand battles quickly kicked in. If Iz wanted to infight with him, that was fine. Great, even.

Because this was his domain.

Zac pounced forward like a primordial beast, unwilling to surrender even an inch of territory. This was the principle of the primal wilds, where it was only eat or be eaten. [Verun’s Bite] howled with mad glee as Zac slashed up at the incoming flower while Vivi’s vines had already begun their suffocating dance.

However, the expected scene of Zac cutting off the flower halfway up the stem didn’t occur. Zac felt an overbearing pressure on his right arm as edge and branch collided, and he was almost pushed into the ground. Iz was surprisingly strong, and the flower was incredibly sturdy. Verun’s edge didn’t even manage to leave a mark on the stem, but that wasn’t the only problem.

The collision released some pollen from the flower, which turned into terrifying hellfire threatening to submerge him. Zac was in no mood to get scorched again, but that didn’t mean he would back away. Instead, Zac leveraged the fact his raw Strength slightly edged out Iz’s to tilt her arm to the side while he pushed forward for a frontal collision.

But Iz nimbly dodged Zac’s rush with a flutter of her wings, while another wave of her flower unleashed a second cascade of flames. It looked like the sunflower doubled as a melee weapon and a wand, with each attack releasing a fiery outburst with power comparable to the fireballs that had almost cooked him alive in the Void Star. Taking too many of those waves would be more than his body could handle, and he didn’t want to go out like that.

But now that Zac knew how the flower worked, he wasn’t overly bothered. It was just another variable to work around. A sharp cut split the wave apart, allowing Zac only to get slightly burnt as he rushed into melee range once more. Zac furiously tried to break past her defense, while Iz created cascading curtains of flames with her expertly aligned parries.

Simultaneously, Vivi’s vines slithered around from the back, trying to tie down Iz and prevent her from utilizing her wings again. However, it soon became apparent the odd sheen on Iz’s body was not just there for looks. It was a thin film of incredibly destructive flames, and Vivi couldn’t hold onto her for more than a fraction of a second before a section of her vines was burnt off.

Zac quickly swapped to standard suppressive use, where the vines aimed at Iz's vitals like eyes and heart. Zac was like a hurricane of violence, using not only his axe but his free fist and legs to drown Iz in strikes. It was clear, though, that this wasn't Iz's first rodeo. Fighting her felt like fighting a dancing flame, where he continuously failed to land any real strikes and instead kept getting burnt.

But it wasn't all bad. While Iz was a surprisingly competent fighter, she wasn't at the Integration Stage, as far as Zac could tell. She was just using a top-quality set of techniques that probably belonged to her family. Neither were Iz's attributes geared toward infighting like his were, so Zac had completely seized the momentum after Iz's initial ambush. As long as things kept going this way, Zac would be able to force an opening before his burns became too much to handle.

However, the situation in his forest was deteriorating. The first flowers had fully matured, and a silent flame burned from their petals. Dozens of trees had been burned down already, and it was just a matter of time before his domain would collapse. If that were the only problem, it would have been manageable; he didn't really need [Ancestral Woods] right now.

The real issue was the small butterflies that each flower seemed to birth when they bloomed. They looked a bit drunk just after being born, and Zac had seen one of them accidentally hit one of the trees. The tree had instantly disappeared in a puff of flames, leaving not even a wisp of his energy behind. If Zac had any hair left, it would have stood on end at the prospect of hundreds of those little firebombs flying over to blast him.

Zac would have to step up the pressure and end things quickly if he wanted to avoid being overrun. Seeing that Iz had time to grow hundreds of little kamikaze pilots while fighting proved she wasn't at her limits, even if Zac held a small advantage. It meant he could stop holding back.

Until now, a part of him had been afraid to wound her, leaving his strikes hollow. Unfortunately, that mindset was anathema to the brutal technique of the Evolutionary Stance, which fully focused on killing one's targets. But Zac finally accepted reality, that thinking he could grievously wound Iz Tayn without any of his hidden trump cards was simply overestimating himself.

A fiery storm soon raged through the forest as Zac and Iz turned into a blur. Zac was pushing harder and harder, his axe and vines working in perfect harmony to suffocate Iz and restrict her movements. She found herself increasingly unable to fight fire with fire, and was forced to continuously use her wings to avoid leaving any openings.

Unfortunately for her, Zac completely controlled the trajectories she could back away in, which allowed him to simultaneously dodge the deadly butterflies. He was relentless, refusing to give Iz even the smallest of breathers. Neither did he unleash any skills or massive strikes that would slow down his tempo. He was content to whittle down his opponent, like a pack of hyenas dragging down a wounded lion.

Still, Zac was amazed at Iz's combat awareness, even if she found herself on the losing end. To this point, he hadn't managed to land a real hit yet. A few kicks and lashes from Vivi had connected, but they had all been neutralized by Iz deflecting most of the force with her free hand. Most enemies he'd fought would have made a mistake and left some opening by now, but Iz was as steady as a mountain even as she spiraled closer to a loss.

But suddenly, Zac felt a pang of danger, forcing him to quickly dove to the ground. He barely had time to close his eyes before the whole forest exploded. Zac only got a short vision of hundreds of butterflies exploding simultaneously, creating a wave of flames that scorched his back while tearing [Ancestral Woods] apart.

Zac swore in annoyance as he scrambled to his feet. He had been so close to victory. In less than ten strikes, he would have been able to break through Iz's meticulous defense and leverage his edge against her neck. Zac guessed she had also figured that out, forcing her to take drastic measures. Still, that would only delay the inevitable, and Iz was now without her restraining butterflies.

But as Zac pushed through the curtain of flames to resume his siege, he found his opponent had transformed once more. A second set of wings had joined the first, making Iz look even odder. The second set didn't look like the pixie wings she still wore, but Zac still recognized them. They were golden wings that looked a lot like the ones on the three-legged crow from before.

It should have looked odd with two sets of such different wings, but it somehow looked natural. Iz herself had undergone a small change once more. Her opalescent skin was still the same, but it had gained a greater golden hue, while some of her hair had been replaced by golden feathers. Simultaneously, she had a new item in her left hand; a small sun that drenched the area in golden luster.

What were these transformations? Zac didn't get it. He had barely sensed Iz rotating any Cosmic Energy, yet the effect was almost as pronounced as his Ultimate Skills. Was this her actual appearance, while she usually kept herself sealed? Or was this some form of cultivation that didn't exist on the Frontier? Zac had no idea, and Iz wouldn't give him any time to figure things out.

She was already upon him again, and he wasn't overly surprised to find her speed and strength having gained a boost after adding another set of wings. Simultaneously, Zac saw nine golden suns gradually phase into reality above his head and immediately felt a vague sense of danger from them. It was almost like a dangerous beast was glaring at him from above.

At the same time, Zac realized new infernal flowers were already replacing those that had been incinerated, and he didn't have [Ancestral Woods] to keep track of the situation any longer. And to make a bad situation worse, Zac soon found the small sun in Iz's hand was not just an ornamental object.

The orb kept spewing out arcs of flames so hot they looked like plasma. Zac wasn't even sure if Iz was controlling it, but it both helped her block his strikes while sending out some attacks on its own. Zac suddenly felt like he was fighting two people rather than one, and the pressure tested the limits of his Evolutionary Stance.

Still, Zac refused to give in, and he managed to at least give as good as he got. He didn't have an advantage anymore, but neither did Iz manage to suppress him. With his monstrous endurance and energy reserves, he would have a chance to turn things around again as long as he kept fighting.

But a pang of danger forced Zac to back away just as he was about to launch another attack. His Danger Sense had narrowly allowed him to avoid a golden crow that had dove at him from one of the suns above. It just missed Zac's face, but it still left a trail of primal flames in its wake that obscured his vision.

Zac growled in annoyance as he cut apart the trail, but he was immediately forced to dodge a solar flare from Iz's hand.

Two sets of flames raged around them as Zac desperately fought, pushing his Evolutionary Stance to the limit. [Verun's Bite] was a blur as it fought off the flower with its infernal flames and the constant barrage of solar flares. It was lucky Verun had swallowed a small lake's worth of Dragon's Blood. Without it, the Spirit Tool would probably have been damaged by this point.

Vivi was much worse off, and her vines were in a constant cycle of destruction and regrowth as they tried to help as best as they could. But Zac could sense exhaustion through his link. These terrifying flames were too draining, and she wouldn't be able to keep fighting much longer. If he forced it, Zac would be damaging her already waning vitality, and he definitely wouldn't do something like that for a duel.

But the pressure kept mounting. One three-legged crow turned to two as another one emerged from a sun in the sky. Zac was forced to fight the critters off with his free arm, relying on his durable body and recovery to constantly recover his burnt skin. Even then, Zac knew the situation wasn't sustainable.

He was already drowning under Iz's assault. And since two of the suns had birthed powerful helpers, Zac guessed it was just a matter of time before there were nine of them harassing him. Zac fought with all the ferocity and tenacity of a primordial beast, but some things couldn't be defeated with guts and grit alone. Iz Tayn was like a natural calamity that had descended upon his domain. Fighting her was like fighting nature's wrath.

Zac would either have to activate [Arcadian Crusade] to bring things back under control, or go for a Hail Mary before more crows and butterflies emerged. Since Vivi was tired and this ultimately was just a sparring session, Zac went with the latter. Using Berserking skills or treasures felt like breaking some unspoken rules, so Zac would rather give it one last hurrah before throwing in the towel.

The next moment, Zac's combat style slightly changed. It became more frantic, almost to the point it could be seen as suicidal. Zac completely ignored a solar flare hitting his chest as he violently slammed the infernal flower to the side. From there, Zac once more made to slam into Iz in a full frontal collision. Like before, she expertly created enough distance with the help of her wings, but this time Zac didn't follow in her wake.

Taking a solar flare straight on his chest hurt like hell, but he pushed down the pain as he pushed Cosmic Energy into the skill fractal for [Empyrean Aegis]. He had kept his ultimate defense in his back pocket until now, and it was finally time to use it. Iz's eyes widened in surprise upon sensing Zac's energy churn, but she smiled a bit as she followed suit.

But how could Zac let her do as she pleased?

He had a head start already, and with a small infusion of Void Energy, he cut the casting time down by another 30%, allowing him to summon the golden pillars before Iz managed to activate her own skill. Zac hadn't initially planned on using Void Energy in this fight, but he also didn't want to lose without giving a proper performance.

A golden radiance swallowed the fiery domain, and Iz shuddered as the suppression of Zac's defensive skill interrupted her skill activation. Zac was already charging his second skill by this point, and he

launched it the moment it was ready. The Abyss and Arcadia sang as the world was split in two, and the delineation between Life and Death headed straight for Iz.

Vivi had managed to catch Iz's ankles, thanks to [Empyrean Aegis] temporarily weakening her burning film. She wouldn't be trapped for long, but Zac didn't need more than an instant. Zac was ready to forcibly deactivate his skill if Iz threw in the towel, but he knew there would be trouble as she pushed forward her miniature sun with a wide smile on her face.

Zac urgently activated a barrier to block out the fallout. But as the world turned white and eerily calm, Zac heard the sound of three pillars instantly crumbling before he lost consciousness.