

The Fall 961

Chapter 961: A Lonely Path

Zac had overestimated his new Void Vajra Constitution for a moment there, but it wasn't all bad. Zac had felt that his constitution wasn't just for show during the fight, even if it hadn't given him unique healing capabilities just yet. He had been constantly inside or adjacent to incredibly powerful flames, but his skin had resisted the onslaught better than expected.

The vibrant life in his body had sped up the healing process by letting his damaged cells die, and new ones be reborn. That didn't just allow his body to endure more punishment but even helped expel Iz's Dao a bit faster. The constitution wasn't powerful enough to provide a significant advantage in a battle with someone like Iz, but that would eventually change.

By the time he reached Minor Sublimation at the third layer of his technique, he would no doubt be immune to Daos and attacks beneath a certain threshold, where his body automatically healed faster than the environment or enemy could damage him. And this effect would have great synergy with his Eoz durability, where the sum would be greater than its parts.

"So, are you satisfied now?" Zac asked.

"Yes, I feel much better," Iz seriously nodded as she handed him the [Stone of Celestial Void]. "Like an annoying sound in the back of my head has been quieted after a decade."

"That's nice, I guess," Zac said with a roll of his eyes before he looked at Iz suspiciously. "By the way, why the hell are you so strong? I thought you were a mage."

"My transformations convert to and add Strength and Dexterity, based on my Intelligence and Wisdom," Iz explained. "Besides, I never said I was a pure mage. It's simply more convenient to use my [World's End] and Dao to deal with annoying matters. Also, using these forms have some implications, so my elders don't want me to use them on the outside."

"Well, your secret's safe with me," Zac nodded as he took out a piece of Beast King meat.

[Adamance of Eoz] had been working overtime throughout the fight, reducing the damage he took while buffeted by Iz's unrelenting flames. Now, it felt like a black hole had opened in his stomach, and he was only satiated after gobbling down over five kilos of D-grade meat.

"By the way, you still have another transformation you could add on, right?" Zac said. "For six wings total."

Iz nodded slightly, and Zac sighed. "So, I couldn't force you to go all out."

"I think you weren't going all out either. I didn't add my third Aspect, while you didn't use your third Dao Branch. And I know your bloodline is incredibly powerful. I can't sense it anymore, but I could feel it back in the Tower of Eternity," Iz said. "Who knows how far you would have pushed me if you had used all your cards? The distance between us is much shorter today than ten years ago."

Zac hummed before looking at Iz with some confusion. "How is that possible, though? I am by no means an expert, but I can tell you have incredibly high affinities. Not only that, but you're rich enough to give others Heart Demons. How am I catching up to you? Don't you enjoy cultivation?"

Iz seemed to be ruminating over the question for quite a while before she finally answered. “Do I enjoy it? I don’t know? I think I do, and I want to live up to my family’s expectations. They sacrificed a lot to give me an opportunity. So I have worked hard on my cultivation, even if it might not seem like it from your perspective.

“Your ascension would be considered rapid anywhere, and I think you have experienced more than most in our age cohort. But an important reason you are progressing relatively quickly compared to me and others like me is urgency and timeframes.

“You have been desperately pushing yourself to protect yourself and others. You have been forced by environment and circumstance to target short-term gains, things that will directly improve your combat strength. It was only when you were stuck in the Voidcatcher and forced to slow down that you had the chance to focus on a long-term project such as your techniques, no?

“People from older factions generally do not have that urgency. We have no deadlines to meet, no looming threats that require us to rise to the occasion. Nothing has changed for my family over the past million years. So the way we cultivate is a bit different. I have less reason to focus on quick gains – I will still be considered a junior even after reaching Monarchy.

“Instead, we spend the earlier grades purifying our bodies and communing with the Heavens, steadily shoring up our foundations. You could say that we are both floating down a stream, but you have been swimming to speed up your progress even further,” Iz said. “Meanwhile, people like me have been conserving our strength and gotten to know the river better. In the future, we will be better prepared when the river turns more dangerous and unpredictable.”

“So you are improving yourselves in various ways that will help you pass the future bottlenecks?” Zac asked.

“The road of cultivation is long, and you can only direct the river of fate when you reach the peak,” Iz said. “And only when we become Autarchs or higher can we be of real assistance to our factions. So that’s what we plan for, what we train for. Some things are better accomplished early, even if it delays our progress by a decade or two. Because it will create a ripple effect of positive changes for the rest of our journey.”

“What about momentum?” Zac asked.

“In the grand scheme of things, a few years, decades, millennia even, doesn’t matter. If you rush headlong toward the future, you might miss some clues along the way,” Iz answered. “As long as we progress one way or another and don’t dally too long at every grade, we will retain our momentum.”

Zac thoughtfully nodded. There was truth to what she said, and he had multiple examples of just that in his own situation. His ascent to E-grade was extremely rushed. He would have been far more powerful if he had just spent a few more years shoring up his foundations. He could have gotten more titles, higher Daos, and figured out his path better before evolving.

Ultimately, Zac felt no need to worry about it overly much. Everyone had their road to walk. There were no guarantees a slower path like Iz’s would have benefitted him more in the long run. He might have missed out on other opportunities instead, such as Twilight Harbor and the Orom World. Progress was progress, and there were usually ways to shore up one’s weaknesses down the road.

Life wasn't a video game; there was no such thing as min-maxing and getting 100% completion. You could only work your hardest and stay true to your heart.

"I'm not saying this to minimize you or your accomplishments. The path you've taken is incredible," Iz added after a short silence. "I'm saying this because you need to be careful about underestimating your competition in the upcoming trial."

"What about them?" Zac asked.

"There are still some years before the competition for the Eternal Heritage begins. The candidates of the respective factions have most likely already entered a different phase of their training. One more akin to your progress where they use their steady foundations to climb in strength quickly. That way, they will be able to exhibit far more power during their trial," Iz explained. "It will be the same with me after I return."

"I know; I'll keep working hard," Zac nodded. "Alright, let's get out of here. Do you want me to take you to the Nexus Hub?"

"I'm not in a hurry. Kvalk will require another two days to reach our assigned meet-up spot," Iz said. "How about you show me around your grand empire?"

"Sure," Zac grinned. "But you'll have to hide your presence. Your looks will create some waves, and your presence here might leak to the outsiders. It'll be hard to extract resources from the various factions if people think I work for you."

"You're playing a dangerous game," Iz smiled. "But that's what I like about you."

The two toured Earth and Ensolus over the next two days, visiting the various species and towns under his umbrella. Iz mostly asked about his process of conquest and how he had incorporated the various factions rather than the people themselves. It seemed to be a result of her family's upbringing; other people weren't fated, so they didn't matter to her.

She was much more interested in how the integration and the subsequent years on Earth had influenced him and his path. She hadn't participated in an Incursion herself, so she was curious about the struggles and how they had helped him grow.

Instead of an Incursion, Iz had undergone various tests and trials that provided similar titles and boons. Not to mention, she was already a Countess from the System's perspective, which apparently was the highest rank you could attain in the E-grade while mostly relying on your background. You needed to be an actual Autarch to become a Duke and enjoy the various benefits such a rank provided.

Not only that, but you also needed to accomplish various feats. Unsurprisingly, conquering unintegrated territory seemed to be the most effective way to rise through the ranks, but there were other ways you could prove yourself to the System. Similarly, Iz had needed to complete a series of quests similar to his own Sovereignty-questline to get the rank and titles that her family's status awarded.

Ultimately, Iz didn't say much about life in the Heartlands, and Zac didn't feel comfortable prying too much. It felt like something would change if he did, and not for the better. But it was clear it was a very different environment to the chaotic and lawless struggle for power that had allowed Zac to climb the ladder of success.

The two also discussed various aspects of cultivation, and it was almost like they were in a world of their own. Even when strolling the busy streets of Port Atwood, they were like ghosts. Zac didn't even need to use his cowl or bracer. Iz had some sort of treasure that had a much greater effect – it even made people unconsciously move around the two.

Zac and Iz even sparred a few more times, though they didn't use skills in the bouts. Instead, they fought using just techniques and Dao while restricting their attributes to be roughly the same. As expected, Zac held a small edge when it came to technique, but Iz was infinitely better at infusing her strikes and movements with her Dao.

That way, it balanced out. Her application was a bit worse since she couldn't perfectly fuse her Dao into her movements and attacks. Conversely, the empowerment from her Dao was greater since she always used incredibly powerful Dao Arrays.

The two days passed in a flash, and they eventually returned to his compound. Iz had asked to visit his favorite spot on the island, and he had taken her to the pergola overlooking the sea after some hesitation. He rarely visited this spot anymore, but Triv always kept it nice and tidy.

"Your citizens seem happy," Iz commented after sitting down.

"Well, I try my best," Zac said with a smile, though it wasn't without some mixed emotions as he sat with another woman in this spot.

"Don't you find it a hindrance to your path?" Iz asked curiously. "To be fettered by billions of lesser fates?"

"I don't look at it that way," Zac shrugged. "My empire and my followers make me work harder so that I can better protect them. Besides, I'm not some benevolent ruler. I know I'll continue into the Multiverse one day unless I get myself killed first. At that point, they will have to pave their own path."

The two sat and overlooked the ocean for a while longer until Iz eventually spoke up again. "It is about time I return."

"It's been nice having you," Zac said. "Apart from the beatdown, I guess."

"I don't know about that. I've seen the happiness in your eyes when we've fought; it shone the brightest during our first bout. Your path is best expressed on the battlefield. It's where you're closest to the Dao," Iz smiled as she stood up. "I have enjoyed myself as well. It's like your poem said; the road to power can be a lonely one, even if you are surrounded by people. Occasionally getting a break is not bad."

"I know what you mean," Zac sighed.

Zac could tell she was in a similar situation as himself back home, where status and potential created a wall around her. If anything, it was most likely much more exaggerated in her case. From what little he could gather, Iz's family wasn't one with trillions of descendants like some of the ancient clans.

It was rather one of the small factions with incredibly powerful individuals. Like the Peak family, only far more exaggerated. Being the little princess of such a faction as an E-grade cultivator was most likely quite lonely. Those around her were either old monsters like her 'uncle,' or servants.

It wasn't quite that bad for Zac just yet. Even then, he could tell how his relationships had shifted as the gap in power and status increased. Lacking fate, Iz would call it, where most of his followers weren't destined to walk down the same path as he. Some, like Nonet and Sap Trang, had already indicated they had reached their limit, and they were just the first.

Iz and her family seemed to deal with it by avoiding Karmic connections and keeping a distance. Zac still tried to hold onto his mortal side, but it was getting harder as he pursued the Dao. Would he one day sever his connection to individual citizens and look at the Atwood Empire as an intricate machine?

Zac wasn't ready to face that issue, so he turned his attention to Iz. "When are you coming back to Zecia?"

"Just before the trial, I expect," Iz said. "My elders will want me to train for as long as possible if they're to let me participate. So I will only arrive in time to pick up the last piece before I head into the Left Imperial Palace."

Just as expected. Zac hesitated a bit before he made his decision.

"There is one more thing," Zac slowly said as they walked toward the Teleportation Array. "I have some information that I think is important for you."

"Oh?" Iz said curiously.

Zac waved his hand, and the quest screen for Ultom appeared.

"Nine Sealbearers," Iz muttered. "I do not know that many people. This is troubling."

"I figured you should know, considering you've been dealing with this alone," Zac said. "Of course, I'm not sure if everyone gets this quest or if the rules differ for different people. I was just afraid that you wouldn't have time to assemble a cycle if you returned at the last minute."

"This is too much," Iz slowly said as she seriously looked at Zac. "Balance has been eschewed. What can I give in return?"

"It's fine," Zac said with a wave of his hand. "You've already helped me a lot since the Void Star."

"No, my elders will not allow it," Iz said. "This is a gift affecting fate."

"Well," Zac said after some thought. "The Undead Empire is getting me Death-attuned treasures to nurture my Draugr side. I am looking for some Life-attuned items to balance myself out. Are you able to manufacture a certain array for me?"

"Array? For your soul?" Iz asked.

"Exactly," Zac said as he imprinted the fourth and fifth schematics onto an information crystal.

He'd gotten the second and third sets of Array Disks in Twilight Harbor, but they'd lacked the raw materials needed to create the fourth. Getting the fourth and fifth death-attuned arrays from the Undead Empire shouldn't be a big problem, considering their desire to push him toward Death. That left the life-attuned side, where Iz was his best bet for a quick solution.

"These things are incredibly simple to manufacture," Iz commented.

Zac wryly smiled. "Well, throw in some Life-attuned treasures for nurturing my Soul and Constitution until you feel fate has been balanced."

Iz's brows scrunched up in thought a moment before her eyes lit up. Then she took out an item, but Zac blankly looked at it with confusion. It was not a vial, pill, or some other sort of treasure. It was a plushie, looking like a large fireball with a wide grin.

"This..." Zac hesitated.

"This was a present from grandpa when I was young," Iz said. "Grandpa has an identical one back home. In a sense, they are one, even if they are apart. I don't have any of the items you need on me, but I can place one in the mouth of Ballie back home, and it should appear in Flammie's mouth instantaneously."

"Something like that's possible?" Zac exclaimed. "A quantum-entangled plushie?"

"That sounds like some Technocrat invention," Iz said with a shake of her head. "In reality, the toys contain a unique stone found inside a Spatial Anomaly. They're the reason this works. The transfer can only be used a few times more times, though, since Grandpa used to send me candies with it while he was cultivating. A long-distance transfer like this will likely expend the last of their energy, so don't put anything in Flammie's mouth, or you might break it."

"Alright, thank you," Zac said with a smile.

Iz really came from a prodigal family. Those kinds of spatial stones seemed incredibly valuable, but they were just used to sneak sweets.

"It's just what I should do," Iz nodded.

"So, how will you deal with the quest?" Zac asked curiously.

"I'm not sure," Iz slowly said. "I do not like the idea of having the fates of nine strangers hang onto mine, even if my uncle sends some subordinates into this Sector. Perhaps I can capture nine people after returning and let them go on their own business after the inheritance has opened."

"That might not work," Zac countered. "What if the whole cycle is needed to progress through the inheritance?"

"If I cannot attain the inheritance by following my beliefs, then I am simply not fated," Iz said.

"I guess that makes sense," Zac nodded before he thought of something. "Those guys who invade us, the Kan'Tanu, seem to be capturing candidates and selling them to you outsiders. You might be able to get access that way, while freeing some people captured by those lunatics."

"Perhaps," Iz nodded, though Zac could tell she didn't like the idea of trading with the Kan'Tanu.

"I'm going," Iz said a moment later as the Teleportation Array flashed to life.

"Alright," Zac smiled. "Work hard on your cultivation. Wouldn't it be embarrassing if a barbarian on the Frontier caught up with you?"

"I don't think it would be so bad," Iz said. "I'd say 'stay out of trouble,' but I know you wouldn't listen. I will see you in a few years."

With that, Iz was gone, headed toward a border town of the Zecia sector where Kvalk was waiting. Apparently, it was quicker for Iz to make a few jumps until she reached a special wormhole a few sectors over, which would take her back home instantly.

The shimmering lights of the Teleportation Array soon dissipated, leaving Zac alone in his compound. It had been a fun diversion to have Iz visit. Like Iz said, even the beatdown had provided him with multiple insights. But now, it was time to continue his cultivation.

It was time to see what other Hidden Nodes his undead side had.