

The Fall 970

[Chapter 970 - Return](#)

Zac spent another hour looking at the cores before stowing them away in two boxes. Even if the center of the museum were where they belonged, he didn't want to risk them being damaged or destroyed. So he'd carry them with him, at least until he had created the real thing. He left the inner sanctum and found Triv waiting just outside.

The ghost looked almost exactly like a posh Revenant butler by this point, though he was still translucent. His soul had benefited immensely over the past years thanks to the Eidolon Cultivation Manuals. As such, he had gained better control over his previously slightly ill-defined form and had chosen an appearance more in line with Zac and the rest of the undead population.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your cultivation, Lord," Triv said with a bow. "But I believe you would want to hear this."

"They're back?" Zac asked with excitement.

"Alas, Lady Vilari and the others have not yet returned, but another one has," Triv said. "Your little disciple."

"Emily?" Zac exclaimed, the matter of his core almost completely forgotten already. "Where is she?"

"She just arrived in your compound."

"Thank you, Triv," Zac nodded before disappearing.

A moment later, Zac stepped out from the teleporter to a both familiar and foreign scene. As his cultivation sessions intensified, he'd spent less and less time here. The few times he'd taken a break to clear his head, he had mostly traveled off-world to satiate his boredom and somewhat quench his growing desire for adventure. But for a moment, Zac felt he was back to the first year of the integration as he found Emily standing there, waiting for him.

It had been so long. For him, it was over 15 years since he saw his disciple, and it had almost been as long for her. Zac had worried for her a lot over the past years since there was no news forthcoming from the Big Axe Coliseum. He'd even asked his new allies from the Allbright Clan to keep a lookout in the Million Gates Territory and put some pressure on the leaders of the coliseum to find out what was going on.

She was so young when she left, and almost half of her life had been spent off-world honing herself. Unsurprisingly, Emily had changed a lot since Zac saw her last. She no longer looked like a feral child decked in warpaint and animal furs. Instead, she had grown into a young woman just a head shorter than him. Her build had filled out a bit, even if she could be considered skinny compared to someone like Zac or Qirai.

But there was no sense of frailty to that thin frame. A palpable feeling of danger emanated from her, like there was a storm trapped within her body. Her gear looked quite odd, like a patchwork of strips of bright leather armor. She was a splash of color to his compound's tranquil but slightly dull environment.

Her hair was cut quite short in a practical pixie cut, and she was decked in all kinds of weird contraptions apart from her two tomahawks.

Emily grinned at Zac when he appeared, but her smile quickly turned crooked as tears pooled in her eyes. Zac didn't say anything as he walked over and enclosed her in a hug.

"You're finally home," Zac said as he lifted her from the ground. "I'm glad you're okay."

"You too," Emily said, not moving for over a minute.

"Is your mission to the Million Gates Territory over?" Zac eventually asked as he put her down.

"What mission?" Emily huffed. "We didn't even manage to find a single infiltrator before our ship was ripped apart."

"What?" Zac yelled, a pang of worry filling him as he thought to Ogras and the others.

No, they should be fine. Otherwise, the progression of his quest would have stalled out. Zac shook his head and led Emily over to her home. The old camper that nowadays hung twenty meters in the air from a carefully pruned tree, with a large sundeck around it.

"It's still here," Emily smiled as they jumped up and sat on a lounge sofa on the deck.

"Of course, always," Zac nodded. "What happened in the Million Gates Territory? Pirates?"

"No, a spatial storm suddenly swallowed the whole flagship. I managed to survive inside an escape pod. Floated around for over a year, cultivating and trying to rebuild it so I could get out."

"Holy crap," Zac muttered.

"That's nothing," Emily grinned. "When I finally was rescued, it turned out the ship belonged to a bunch of Kan'Tanu."

"What?" Zac frowned before he leaned over, grasping Emily's hand before she had a chance to react.

He infused coruscating waves of Life-Attuned Dao through her body while scanning every inch with Mental Energy. But there was nothing, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief as he stepped back.

"As I said," Emily said as she lightly slapped Zac's hand with a roll of her eyes. "I had to take them all out before I snatched their vessel. You know, I'm pretty powerful nowadays. There were even five Hegemons among them. One of them was a bit too strong, so I had to use most of your talismans to blow up a section of the ship and fly away when he was launched into space."

"That's fine; I have more," Zac smiled. "Then what happened?"

"I sailed around for a few more months, but their ship wasn't much better than my old escape pod. It broke down after just three jumps, but I managed to reach a more populated region of space. I traded the vessel for passage with a pirate crew, and they took me to a Space Station. From there, I joined a mercenary crew, and they ultimately flew me out of the Million Gates Territory so I could teleport home."

Zac looked at Emily with shock, and it almost felt like he saw her for the first time. The story was short and succinct, but he could tell a lot of hard work and hardships hidden within those details. For example, trading a stalled Cosmic Vessel for passage? Most pirates would simply kill the lone survivor and take the ship. For her to walk out of it unscathed, she must have both used brains and brawn.

The same was true for the Mercenaries, who seldom were much better than the pirates they usually hunted.

"The Mercenaries sent you back, just like that?" Zac said with surprise.

"I was lucky to find one of the good crews. The captain was a former soldier of the Allbright Army. They mostly make a living hunting bounties and exploring the gates, but they have also started completing missions for the War Coalition lately. Besides, I presented them with a pretty good deal. You need to help me pick up a couple of people."

"Pick up?" Zac asked. "Who?"

"I poached a few of those guys," Emily grinned. "The captain was fine with it. He realized I had a decent background because of my items and talent. So, he sent me a few of the good ones, including his son. All are either talented Peak E-grade or Half-step veterans. They're pretty good and have a lot of experience in the Million Gates Territory if you ever go there. The captain has trained them in warfare as well."

"Alright, no problem," Zac readily agreed. "We have already started recruiting some outsiders for the upcoming war. We already have over 100 Half-step Hegemons and four actual Hegemons in the Atwood Army, but we could definitely use more of them."

The two spent the next couple of hours catching up, with Zac telling Emily of his experiences in the Twilight Ascent, Orom World, and Void Gate. She looked almost green with envy at the "fun" he'd had, even if she had been through quite the ordeals herself. Hearing that Zac had started on the path of techniques, her eyes lit up, and she dragged him to a nearby clearing.

"You're just back, and you want to fight?" Zac said with some helplessness.

"Show me that Evolutionary Stance of yours," Emily urged. "And I'll show you my Tempest Bop."

"Tempest Bop?" Zac smiled with a shake of his head as [Verun's Bite] appeared in his hand. "Fine, show me what the Ogres back in the coliseum have taught you."

"Don't get too shocked," Emily grinned as over thirty small axes flew out from a small bag on her belt.

"An axe array?" Zac whistled, watching the array start a deadly dance around her while she gripped her two tomahawks.

"Vines?" Emily countered with surprise upon seeing Vivi make an appearance.

"I guess we're pretty similar, after all," Zac smiled, realizing Emily had moved in a similar path as himself. The only difference was that she chose a weapon array rather than an armament to supplement her combat style.

Zac wasted no time as he stepped right into the whirlwind of axes, using Vivi and [Verun's Bite] to gently push the flying axes out of control. He was immediately impressed by the speed and complexity of the array. Axes kept coming at him from every direction, like a swarm of wasps trying to sting him to death.

Emily proved herself quite competent at controlling the axes as well. Zac was continuously hitting the axes in a way that was meant to disrupt the tempo of the axe storm, but she quickly adapted and righted the ship every time. Suddenly, a larger, gleaming edge appeared among the blur; a tomahawk aiming for his throat.

It flew right past him, a small step enough to avoid the hit. A second strike followed the first, but a vine suddenly shot up from the ground, aiming for Emily's chin. She was forced to alter her swing, cutting off the vine. Doing so stole her momentum, though, and the axe array was not enough to slow down Zac as he launched a counter-offensive.

Emily wasn't so easily caught, even if she had momentarily lost the advantage. A storm of blades forced Zac to slow down and parry while Emily distanced herself again. She was as elusive as the wind, flitting back and forth in the clearing. She worked in harmony with her array, only appearing when an opening presented itself, her strikes tempestuous and forceful.

Zac had his hands mostly full just dealing with the swirling axes, but he gradually started to regain control, forcing Emily to choose between a passive state or striking even when there were no openings. She chose the latter, trying to leverage her own attacks to regain control of the surroundings. But it was a losing battle.

Ultimately, Zac saw there was order to the chaos of the axes around him. The array was based on a set of cyclic patterns, something Zac was familiar with, thanks to his master. Their tempo rose and fell like the seasons. It still provided a surprising variance, like how no two summers were alike. But it wasn't perfect.

Zac could tell Emily hadn't reached the Integration Stage yet, and her cooperation with her array started to suffer when he pushed her. That created new openings, which eventually ended with Emily being dragged to the ground by Vivi, [Verun's Bite] levied against her throat.

"What the hell, you only used 60% of my attributes," Emily panted, looking at Zac like he were a monster.

"Don't feel bad," Zac smiled, helping her up. "I started this path over a decade ago. The fact you've reached this far in just two years, especially while stuck in an escape pod, is amazing. With some proper training, you'll plug most of your weaknesses. It's just..."

"What?"

"Are you the axe, or are you the storm?" Zac asked.

"I am both."

"Then you need to work more on your actual axework," Zac said. "I felt like I was inside a storm when you fought me, and I felt the tempo of your Seasonal Dao. But I didn't really sense the deadly intent of the axe, the ferocity and indomitability. Let me guess; you haven't fully comprehended [Axe Mastery] yet?"

"I was busy working on other things," Emily coughed.

"You really are my disciple," Zac laughed.

"So you're saying my Tempest Bop was a mistake?" Emily said, looking a bit crestfallen.

"Not at all," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I did the same thing. A Monarch in the Orom World helped me fix my training method. But looking back at it, I don't feel like I wasted time with my first iteration of my Evolutionary Stance. I found something I liked, something that resonated with my path. Thanks to that, I had a goal to work toward as I shored up my foundations. It'll be the same for you."

"Shore up foundations," Emily muttered, her eyes lighting up. "Right, and you'll help me spar. I haven't had any good sparring partners for years."

"Sure," Zac nodded. "I'm pretty free over the next month or two."

Zac wasn't exaggerating. It wasn't that he didn't need to cultivate, but rather that he couldn't. His [Void Vajra Constitution] was already at the very limit of the third layer. A single rotation and he would break through and reach Minor Vajra Sublimation. But why would he? He had only managed to form the first three layers of the technique with the light of Ultom, and he still hadn't finished creating the fourth.

He'd hoped to use some leftover light from Ultom to finalize it, but his Void Core had taken up all of his epiphany. Since he temporarily couldn't continue with his Body Tempering after breaking through, he would rather wait to break through inside the Perennial Vastness. Doing so might give him a leg up during his stay there, like during his previous experiences.

The Twilight Ascent and the Orom World had awarded you for progressing, though the reasoning differed. Zac leaned toward the Perennial Vastness being more like the Orom World. The owner of the Immemorial Realm had to have some reason to invite innumerable cultivators to their domain, teleporting them halfway across the Multiverse.

They probably got something from observing the process of cultivators forming their cores, possibly observing elites from across the Multiverse in general. So it wouldn't be surprising if there were some contribution system inside that awarded points for progress.

It was the same with his soul. Between the Moss Crystals and the attuned treasures from Iz and the elders of the Undead Empire, Zac had finished his third layer a century ahead of schedule. In fact, by the time he'd formed the nine sets of outer attuned cores, the inner core was halfway refined already.

Since the fourth layer most likely was an undertaking measured in decades, even with a steady source of Moss Crystals, Zac opted not to break through a year ago and instead focused on his blueprint. As for his [Thousand Lights Avatar], it was gradually filling up on its own just by cycling the run-off energy of the Moss Crystal with the help of his Mental Energy. Cultivating the method would speed up the process, but it wasn't something pressing.

Obviously, there were always things to work on when it came to cultivation, but Zac felt he'd be better off just relaxing and clearing his mind now that he had a plan for his core. The rest could be dealt with inside the time-dilated environment of the Perennial Vastness.

"Can't believe you're heading off to that Perennial Vastness just as I returned," Emily sighed. "Am I just supposed to sit around here after that?"

"You can help train the recruits," Zac said. "You should also start considering your role in the war. With your skill set, you would do well both as leader of a strike team or as a general of a large army."

"You're letting me go to the frontlines? Just like that?" Emily said, looking both pleased and surprised.

"You're not a kid anymore," Zac nodded. "Between your combat strength and support abilities, you are one of the most powerful people on Earth. I hope you can become someone our people can depend on."

"O-Of course," Emily quickly nodded. "I swear, I'll take this seriously. I'm done messing around like back then."

Zac slowly nodded as he thoughtfully looked at Emily. She was right. She was already an adult and an accomplished cultivator in her own right. Even if he didn't like the idea of Emily risking her life even further, he'd be doing her a disservice if he didn't give her the same option as Vilari and the others.

"There is actually something else going on. Something beyond the war. It might present an enormous opportunity, but it might also spell death. There is even a chance that just knowing about it will impact your fate, so you will have to think long and hard before deciding if this is something for you."

"No need. I can take it," Emily said. "I don't want to stay on the sidelines anymore. This is what I've trained for."

Zac took a deep breath before telling Emily of Ultom, of the Left Imperial Palace and its subsidiary courts, and the upcoming trial. Emily first looked at Zac like he was crazy, but her brows slowly furrowed thoughtfully as he reached the part of forming a cycle.

"Sealbearers?" Emily slowly said. "So what are they supposed to do?"

"I'm not sure yet," Zac said, not without some helplessness.

He had visited and exchanged letters with Vai and Leyara over the past years. With Vai, he mostly discussed research, where she'd helped him approach some problems from a new direction. As for Leyara, he tried to get her and her master to give up some more information about Ultom. But even after years of trying, he hadn't managed to gain much.

"I only know the inheritance will start in just over three years. Since I have a quest to gather people from the nine outer courts, I think there will be a teamwork component, but I can't be sure. Either case, it will be incredibly dangerous with the powerful outsiders coming here."

"An ancient castle and Eternal Heritages," Emily said, a smile tugging at her mouth. "These sealbearers, they'd have to be pretty impressive to get chosen by such a place, huh?"

"I guess," Zac said, his eyes suddenly thinning. "Don't tell me?"

"Don't you know who you're talking to?" Emily laughed as a quest screen appeared. "I'm more than halfway there already."

