

## The Fall 971

### [Chapter 971 - Recruitment](#)

Zac looked with blank incomprehension at the quest telling him Emily had two pieces of the seal of the Radiant Court.

"I found the first piece while I still was part of the Big Axe Coliseum. I found the second one by chance soon after commandeering the Kan'Tanu ship. I was never able to find a third piece, though," Emily huffed.

"The System is keeping the final pieces as rewards during the war," Zac distractedly looked at his protégé. "So you're one of the four?"

"What?" Emily said with confusion.

"Nevermind," Zac said. "Can you tell me what you used the epiphanies for?"

"The first one was to create a skill and kind of understand my path in general. It helped me create my Axe Array later," Emily said. "The second one was to recreate a Cultivation Manual I got from my teacher at the coliseum and form a blueprint for my Cosmic Core. I was afraid I'd end up stuck in space, so I was planning on breaking through in case my ship blew up or something. That way, I wouldn't die from lack of oxygen, at least. I could just keep flying for a hundred years until I ran into someone."

"You're resilient, I'll give you that," Zac laughed. "You're getting ready to break through?"

"I think so," Emily said. "I'm not in as big a hurry now that I'm back on Earth, though. I'll probably spend a couple of months figuring things out first, but I'll make the attempt before the war starts."

"Don't feel you need to rush it," Zac urged.

"No, it's fine," Emily said. "I feel it's better even. This way, there'll be a purpose to my breakthrough. I can protect the people around me. There's no point to cultivation if I hide in some cave for a hundred years before emerging as a slightly stronger Hegemon."

"I guess you're right," Zac smiled. "Who knows, you might break through before me."

"And the student becomes the master," Emily grinned before her eyes suddenly widened. "Oh crap, my underlings."

"The mercenaries?" Zac asked.

"It's been longer than I planned. The idea was to come fetch you right away," Emily explained. "Can we go now?"

"Sure," Zac nodded. "I could use stretching my legs a bit."

The capital of Lua-lor wasn't much different from the other cities you'd find on low D-grade planets of the Allbright Empire. There were the Halls of Light in its heart, the administrative building with its appointed Mayor, which doubled as an academy for cultivators. Academia and governance were tightly related in the whole Empire, which had proven an effective method to retain talents within the Imperial Faction.

Many who graduated switched to employment within the Halls of Light, never giving the Clans, Sects, and Businesses a chance to headhunt promising elites. Here, right at the edge of the Empire, the Hall of Light wouldn't normally have as much prestige as in the central regions. In these chaotic parts, things were more fluid, and the power dynamics more complex.

With the war, the muddy waters had been cleared. Those who needed to be reminded which Empire they were part of had been reminded, and purges of problematic factions had taken place across the border. Zac didn't care about any of that, though, as he and Emily walked the streets, taking in the surroundings.

The architecture was more simplistic compared to the inner regions of the Allbright Empire, even if they still leaned toward structures made with large walls of spiritual glass and white stone. But here, the rounded and artistic styles had given way to squarish practicality, and the protective arrays were often engraved right on the outside of the buildings.

Doing so was far cheaper than embedding it into the wall, but it allowed anyone to observe the patterns for weaknesses. Zac, who had enjoyed hundreds of bouts of synthetic enlightenment over the past years, could easily spot numerous weaknesses in most of the arrays. A simple punch would easily topple many of these buildings, even if they were supposed to withstand much more.

His vast knowledge of patterns was something Zac hoped to utilize more in the future, though he hadn't decided how. He only knew it would be a waste not to benefit from all that knowledge after having finalized his blueprint. He even had a set of 72 artisan axes in his Spatial Ring that had proven useful on most materials.

He just lacked a crafting method that could allow someone with low Dao Control to succeed. As it were like now, he could easily create F-grade or Early E-grade array disks simply thanks to his muscle control and skill with axes.

But more powerful Arrays required you also imprint the array with continuous streams of patterns with Mental Energy and Dao, which was still beyond him. Zac had considered the possibility of creating Array Molds somehow. He'd carve out a perfect mold, fill it with his Dao, and then imprint it on a clay disk or something similar. It was a bit like his method of forming Dao Braids.

Unfortunately, his few attempts at the idea had proven unsuccessful, and the Volor Craftsmen weren't optimistic that the method was workable. They said crafting was an art where you put your heart and soul into the item you created. Literally. Using molds was more like mass production without heart.

Even if you managed to create workable molds, they probably wouldn't have the spirituality necessary for high-grade crafts. Zac had even considered visiting the more brutish races of the sector to see how they crafted, in case they had some ideas he could use. But when would he get the time for something like that? When he was dead, probably.

"So, where are your guys?" Zac asked as he looked around.

"I left them at a bar," Emily said. "They're either still drinking or sleeping it off in some alley outside. Although, with the current atmosphere, they might be in a drunk tank."

Zac nodded, glancing at a squad of disciplined soldiers patrolling the street. "I didn't expect the Dravorak Empire to have such a presence here."

"They apparently have one of their main bases in this neighborhood," Emily explained. "This planet has become an exchange spot for Dravorak and Allbright."

"Alright," Zac nodded.

Luckily, the two found the newest members where Emily had left them. The combination of adventurer poverty and Peak E-grade constitutions made it impossible to get overly drunk. There was almost an oppressive atmosphere at the table, but a few of them perked up upon seeing Emily walk over.

"Little Chief!" one of them exclaimed before looking at Zac, who had donned a new identity with [Million Faces], curiously.

"Only six of you? Where's Monkey and Elenka?" Emily frowned as she looked around.

"They... left," another grimaced. "Didn't think you were returning."

"I'll find them," Emily swore.

"Don't bother," Zac shrugged before paying for a VIP room in the establishment. "They've made their choice. Let's go somewhere more private."

Inside, he threw out a set of arrays, sealing them from the outside. The six cultivators looked warily at Zac with a mix of confusion and speculation.

"I want to begin by thanking you all for looking after Emily this past year," Zac said as six Cosmos Sacks appeared on the table. "A small token of appreciation from her teacher."

"What looking after," Emily muttered from the side. "I saved their hides more than once."

A few of the mercenaries picked up the sacks, and they immediately froze after scanning the contents.

"Holy crap," one of them muttered, looking up at Zac with awe.

For Zac, it was just a couple of Crystals and natural treasures. The combined value of each sack was barely 1 D-grade Nexus Coin; nothing for him, but a significant windfall for mercenaries eking out a living in this kind of environment.

"Now, you have the same choice as your other two companions. You can either go on and pave your own path or join us. I will be clear, though. If you join us, it will be as part of our armies, and your freedoms will be restricted. The only reason we are recruiting people from the outside is for the upcoming war."

"What would our role be?" one of the men hesitantly asked.

"Pilots, warriors, technicians, navigators; wherever your talents lie. We don't need meat shields, we need competent veterans who can help nurture and lead the large number of recruits we've added to our ranks upon learning of the war. You have lived in the Million Gates Territories for decades, which means you know how to survive. That's one of the most important skills of a soldier. Resources will be

far richer than almost any faction in Zecia, but we are planning to hit the ground running with the upcoming war. There will be deaths, but I hope you can help us keep them to a minimum."

"Can you tell us which faction you belong to?" another man, who Zac suspected was the informal leader, asked. "Little Chie- ah, Miss Emily, never told us."

"No," Zac said as he took out a token. "It's complicated. But I can tell you that our leader is a close ally with both the Allbright Dynasty, The Peak Family, and Zecian top factions like the Void Gate."

The token had the seal of the Allbright Empire and emitted a unique aura that was incredibly hard to fake. The token essentially gave Zac the same status as a nobleman within the Allbright Empire, which came with all kinds of benefits. It was also a clear indicator of status, and the eyes of the six mercenaries widened in shock.

The token and the Cosmos Sacks were more than enough to convince all but one to join immediately. The leader did not move to accept the sack or join the Atwood Empire.

"Little Bolt!" Emily glared as a tomahawk appeared in her hand. "Your dad told me to beat some sense into you if you started making trouble."

"No, that's not it," Little Bolt quickly said before turning to Zac. "Do you need more? People like us."

"We might," Zac said. "But we don't need scum or unorthodox cultivators. Even if they have some combat strength, they'll cause more trouble than it's worth."

"I have some contacts, but not here," Little Bolt said. "Mercenaries, adventurers. Various types of people who make a living at the edges of the Million Gates Territory. Some of them are pretty decent, and I think many want to join something bigger now that things are going south. Better lose some of your freedoms than being caught between murderous invaders and those war fortresses."

Zac thoughtfully looked at 'Little Bolt' for a few seconds before nodding. He engraved a list of planets in the region he had access to, handing it over.

"Any of these planets work?"

"Kulga Soro," Little Bolt said without hesitation. "We've traded there before, and none of the large empires have a strong presence there yet. I can move unhindered there."

"We'll set up a base for you there and provide a continuous source of resources," Zac said. "Each useful man you recruit will provide contribution points you can exchange for resources. But beware, this region is about to become volatile. Kulga Soro is close to the border. It might get caught up in the war before you have a chance to escape."

"I'm aware."

Ultimately, two mercenaries decided to follow Little Bolt to set up a recruitment station, and Zac sent them through the teleporter. He'd also send a squad of elites to help them get things started. Who knew, he might find some diamonds in the rough among the vagrants of the imperial border.

After that, Zac brought the remaining three back to Earth with Emily. Thankfully, sending people back home to his own planet didn't have as stringent restrictions, and all five returned in a flash. The problem

was sending people to places he didn't control. Zac had already started nurturing a group of porters to lessen the pressure on him, but it wasn't easy for his followers to gain access to new Teleportation Arrays.

The quintet appeared in the fort which had been built around the Nexus Hub to protect against any surprises now that there was more traffic. The crystal itself had already been hidden within layers and layers of arrays, while they emerged on one of six connected Teleportation Arrays.

One manned by two Revenants and a Raun Spectral, while the room was flooded with Miasma.

"Y-You!" one of the mercenaries stuttered as he took three steps back. If not for Zac stealthily deactivating the array, he might have teleported back home. "What's going on?!"

"Don't mind them," Zac said, his face turned back to normal because he didn't bother resisting the restrictive arrays. "They're just guarding the teleporter."

"Oh, that's fine then," a Peak E-grade cultivator called Shifty Ziv said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"My energy," Needle, a prospective pilot of the Atwood Navy, exclaimed.

"Sorry about that," Zac said as the guards walked over with three bracelets. "We have been forced to take a few precautionary measures with new arrivals."

The next moment, the three Revenants, their Miasma completely fine under the restrictive array, placed the bracers on the mercenaries.

"You-" the sole Half-step Hegemon, Usko, said, his eyes thinning as he looked at Zac. "Why are you familiar?"

"Let me re-introduce myself," Zac said. "I am Zachary Atwood, the leader of the Atwood Empire, which you now are part of."

"You might know him as the Deviant Asura," Emily grinned from the side.

"What! That lunatic!" Shifty Ziv swore, backing away to the edge of the room. "You're wanted all across Zecia. Send me back right now!"

"No turning back now," Zac smiled. "You should know those bracelets are designed to disintegrate you if you try to escape off-world through the teleporter."

"Like the Revenants?" Usko sighed, turning to Emily. "Ai, girl, what have you gotten us mixed up in?"

"Well, the Revenants are part of the 'complicated' part I mentioned," Zac smiled. "This is Earth, a Life-Death Attuned planet. As such, we have both Revenant and spectral citizens in this faction. You'll be working with both in the armies, so I hope you'll put aside any preconceived notions you may have."

"All those rumors about Zac are exaggerated," Emily added with a roll of her eyes. "The bounties don't matter either; only the Tsarun clan dare hunt my teacher. And if not even the big empires care about the Revenants here, why should you?"

"The Allbright know about the undead?" Usko said suspiciously.

"The news may not have reached you guys inside the Million Gates Territory yet, but the Undead Empire have stopped their war. They are now working with the ancient empires to fight the invaders," Zac explained. "Although, the undead here aren't part of the Undead Empire. They're citizens of the Atwood Empire."

"Teacher was the one who helped broker the peace," Emily added. "That's why he's got such a high standing everywhere."

"I can't believe this," Shifty Ziv muttered. "I can't believe I'm a prisoner of the Deviant Asura."

"I- I'll work hard," Needle stuttered as his hands moved toward his crotch. "I'll teach you all I know about flying Cosmic Vessels. Just don't-"

"Just stop," Zac groaned. "Like Emily said, the rumors are false. And even if I were a deviant, why would I go for three wretched-looking mercenaries?"

"Now that I can believe," Usko laughed.

Zac snorted before turning back to Shifty Ziv. "And you're not prisoners. Everything I said before was true. I'll send you over to some Wandering Cultivators who'll catch you up to speed. I think you'll soon find you made the right choice, even if it wasn't what you expected. If you still want to leave afterward, you'll be free to do so. But until I can trust you, the bracelets stay on for the safety of my citizens."

Emily stayed with the unwitting conscripts to mollify their shock while Zac sent out a few orders to accommodate the trio. He wasn't a fan of the prison bracelets he'd had all the outsiders wear after arriving at Earth, but it was hard to enforce System-generated contracts with people of equal or higher levels.

After becoming a proper Hegemon, his faction would automatically upgrade, and he'd be able to hire them all as outer elders with iron-clad contracts. Until then, he'd have to be a bit heavy-handed. It wasn't even that he was afraid people would find out about his undead followers. The news had already started to spread through certain circles.

It was more about resources. Two thefts had already occurred, leading to one enterprising Half-Step Hegemon escaping Earth with a battalion's worth of cultivation resources. The second one who tried the same thing was killed during the pursuit. After that, Zac put the hammer down, forcing all recruits to wear the bracer for the time being.

In the following days, Zac spent most of his time either tutoring Emily or catching up on the various matters of Earth. He had all but sealed himself in his cultivation cave during the final years of his retreat, where he fully focused on his core. Thankfully, he had always been mostly a hands-off boss, and his people had long since learned to manage themselves.

Emily was making incredible progress now that she had some proper guidance in technique. She reached the final level of her E-grade [Axe Mastery] in just two weeks, and Zac could feel her daily progress. She probably wouldn't reach the Integration Stage in the short run, but Zac felt she definitely had a talent for techniques. It was just a matter of time and experience; she would get the latter in spades during the war.

Eventually, Zac received the update he'd be waiting for. The squad who set out into space three years ago were back in the Red Sector. Ogras had already returned and waited for him in his compound. Zac immediately canceled his inspection of a military drill and made his way back to Port Atwood. He found Ogras lounging in his courtyard with a glass in hand like he'd never left.

The demon looked the same as before, though Zac could feel an increased pressure coming from his body. Zac guessed he'd either evolved a Dao or, more likely, broken through with his odd Body Tempering Method. However, Zac frowned when he saw the cursed flag fastened to his belt. It emitted a far-stronger aura than before, to the point Zac's hair stood on end.

Zac felt he could hear distant wails when looking at the rolled-up flag. His [Immutability of Eoz] actually heated up a bit as well, nullifying some sort of weak curse-like effect it passively emitted. Zac ultimately put the matter aside, happier to see the demon alive than worried about him dabbling with the unorthodox.

"You're back," Zac smiled as he sat down. "Nice to see you."

"Nice to be back," Ogras grinned as he looked around. "You know, this place is really starting to feel like home, even if you've drowned half the city in death. Even the blue sky is starting to feel normal."

"Don't get too attached; we're leaving soon," Zac said, taking out a vat of wine himself.