

The Fall 976

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"Why are we going here?" Carl asked, warily looking at Ogras.

"You're the one who said you had to speak with the Lord immediately," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "That your happiness depended on it. And this is where he went, apparently, leaving the boring stuff to me."

"But this place is trouble," Carl muttered. "I can sense it."

"What trouble," Ogras scoffed. "The Ruthless Heavens shrouds us, and we're stronger than any warriors on this planet."

"But how will that protect us against the boss?" Carl countered.

Ogras looked at the cowardly archer for a moment, a smile spreading across his face. "I guess you have a point there."

"See, over there," Carl sighed. "I told you. Trouble."

Ogras glanced over, frowning upon seeing hundreds of people gathered in front of the trial.

"What's going on?" Ogras asked after flashing over.

"You are...?" the guard asked with some confusion before spotting Carl next to him. "Ah! Captain Elrod! Thank god you're here."

"At least one of us feels that way," Carl muttered. "What's happening?"

"It's Lord Atwood... He..." the guard hesitated, glancing at the huge half-disk behind him.

Ogras ignored Carl's pointed look, snapping his finger to regain the guard's attention. "The Lord what?"

"He entered eleven hours ago and still hasn't come out. We even tried cutting open a bunch of flowers in case he was trapped, but we couldn't find him. Ultimately, the vines started releasing dangerous energies, forcing us out of the graveyard."

"So he's eleven hours in," Ogras muttered. "Well, let's just wait for another hour. He probably passed the first one and somehow entered the next."

"You know what, my matter is silly," Carl said. "It can wait."

"You sure?" Ogras grinned. "It's hard to know with you. You were so adamant about not joining our mission just an hour ago."

"That's because you told Lissa," Carl said with grit teeth. "Forcing me to choose between hell with the boss or hell in my home."

"That's my mistake," Ogras sighed. "I simply felt I hadn't talked with my former subordinates enough, and it somehow slipped out when she was listening."

"I'm sure," Carl spat.

"Now, don't be like that," Ogras laughed. "Whether you like it or not, you have one of the most powerful fates of any Earthlings. Excluding that guy, of course. Are you going to keep resisting it, or will you seize the opportunity? Aren't you a man? Shouldn't you have the power to protect Lissa?"

The man's face scrunched up to look like a dried Palo Fruit, but he still sat down when Ogras took out a table and some chairs. The minutes passed until people eventually started to stir, their gazes turned toward the huge disk.

"It's about time," Ogras muttered, a sense of anticipation filling him.

Who knew? There might be some benefits to be had if that guy really caused a scene. The ground started to shake, and Ogras looked on with shock as the whole half-disk started to spin. Was the thing really a coin? The somewhat simple half-moon with the ladders and the two entrances entered the ground as a completely different scene emerged.

Paradise.

An exquisite diptych engraving in black and gold was hidden on the other half of the Gates of Rebirth, depicting with excruciating detail a Buddhist paradise. Arhats were guarding the mountains, and Buddhas spread their boundless love from the peaks. Enlightened beasts, celestial lotus flowers, bodhi trees, and temples.

A huge silhouette of a Buddha appeared in the sky, its two hands clasped in a Dhyani mudra. Inside its palm, a wheel of gold and black turned, and Ogras felt his soul shudder as he looked at it. It almost felt like he was looking at both his future and his past.

"What in the..." Ogras muttered, but the avatar was gone the next moment.

Suddenly, two doors opened in the middle of the scene, and a familiar figure stepped out. Ogras hadn't even spotted the gate; they perfectly blended into the mural. Zac took a few steps before turning back, looking at the huge coin as it gradually spun back to its original position. Ogras glanced at the ladder, not too surprised to see no name had been added to the tally.

That bastard had obviously enjoyed some sort of special opportunity.

"That's the boss, alright," Carl sighed as he got to his feet.

Zac turned away from the Gates of Rebirth and immediately spotted Ogras and Carl walking over. Ogras wasn't too unexpected, considering he'd been stuck in this place for twelve hours. But why was Carl here?

"Hey," Zac nodded. "Sorry, I got a bit derailed."

"That's fine," Ogras said. "Some scene. At least nothing exploded this time."

"I know, right?" Zac laughed before turning to Carl. "Welcome back to Earth. Good job out there."

"Thank you, Lord," Carl said with a small bow, slightly glancing at Ogras, who shrugged and summoned a swirl of shadows around them.

"As you've heard. I have attained the first piece of a Seal of the Radiant Court. I was hoping you'd allow me to join the Command Group and the excursion in the future. As such, I'd appreciate any clues as to where I can get the missing pieces of my seal."

"Uh, of course," Zac slowly nodded. "I don't have any solution right now, but you might want to check the Ensolus Ruins, just in case. The seals are connected to the war. We'll all have to fill out our seals there."

"I understand," Carl nodded. "Then I shall start preparing. Have a good day."

With that, he turned around and walked toward the teleporter with a straight back, slightly nodding at a few soldiers who came up to greet him.

"I thought I'd have to bribe that guy to join in," Zac muttered. "Guess he grew a lot during your outing."

"Something like that," Ogras laughed.

"I'm sorry about the commotion," Zac said to the guards waiting in the distance.

He was about to head back to Earth but suddenly turned back toward the public.

"Add a new warning to the trial. No one should attempt the Sixth Layer without having 500 Effective Luck. Less than five people in the Atwood Empire have the strength to break through without providence on their side, and they should know who they are."

"We will immediately add it to the missives," the guard assured.

Zac nodded, and he and Ogras walked away.

"You remember the situation inside?" Ogras said curiously.

"I do," Zac said. "For a moment, I thought I'd lose it, but after passing both trials, I got it back."

"So? What's with the Luck?" Ogras asked.

Zac thought about it for a while before simply explaining the situation. He hadn't decided whether to also divulge the details yet to the wider population. Zac wasn't sure if doing so would do more harm than good. Some people would overestimate themselves after reading about the challenges, pushing further than they should.

At the same time, the first five layers didn't have any special traps or pathbreaking elements. They provided a comprehensive challenge, testing everything from your Dao to intangible things like determination and Dao Heart. Furthermore, all of the trials could be overcome with raw strength if need be.

"Providence, huh? Well, like you say. Should be possible to force it," Ogras muttered before looking at Zac suspiciously. "That's not the whole story, though, is it? Don't tell me you just passed the normal way."

"Well, turned out there's a secret seventh layer," Zac smiled as Ogras groaned with disgust. "But that one has extremely specific requirements to survive. They require the Daos of Life and Death, but they're actually inverted from the rest of the trials."

"Inverted?" Ogras frowned. "So, you'd need a Dao of Death in the Gate of Life?"

"Exactly," Zac nodded.

"Sounds like a Death Trap. Any Revenant who even had a shadow of a chance of reaching the last layers would obviously pick the Gate of Death because it seems much more suitable from all the experiments," Ogras said before looking at Zac with a scrunched-up face.

"What?" Zac said.

"I just felt it's nice to see some things stay the same with all the crazy things going on," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "It sounds like the Ruthless Heaven created that trial just for you, huh?"

"I don't know about that," Zac said. "As you saw, I think the trial was made to train Monks. An extremely powerful cultivator might also pass it, provided they have the right Daos."

"What about me?" Ogras asked. "You think I could brute-force the hidden layer?"

"Impossible," Zac said without hesitation. "It's a trial requiring Life or Death. Anything else is useless."

"That's just great," Ogras muttered. "Well, I guess the Sixth-layer title is better than nothing."

"Better than nothing?" Zac scoffed. "Six percent to two attributes for a total of 12% boost is right up there with any of the top titles available in Zecia."

"So what did you get?" Ogras asked curiously, but his face collapsed upon seeing a smile appear on Zac's face. "No, never mind. Don't tell me."

"You sure? It's a good one," Zac laughed.

"Spare me, great lord," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

"Alright," Zac smiled, but he still opened his status screen to marvel at his latest gains.

Name Zachary Atwood

Level 150

Class [E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

Race [D] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment [Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

Titles [...] Blooddrenched Baron, Connate Conqueror, The Second Step, Singular Specialist, Apex Attainment

Limited Titles Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, The Final Twilight, Equanimity, Big Axe Gladiator, Gates of Rebirth

Dao Branch of the War Axe - Middle, Branch of the Kalpataru - Middle, Branch of the Pale Seal - Middle

Core [E] Duplicity

Strength 29272 [Increase: 149%. Efficiency: 319%]

Dexterity 13005 [Increase: 106%. Efficiency: 222%]

Endurance 24578 [Increase: 140%. Efficiency: 319%]

Vitality 22853 [Increase: 138%. Efficiency: 319%]

Intelligence 3920 [Increase: 100%. Efficiency: 222%]

Wisdom 8646 [Increase: 107%. Efficiency: 234%]

Luck 721 [Increase: 124%. Efficiency: 248%]

Free Points 0

Nexus Coins [D] 9 491 406

For so long, his attributes had barely moved, except for the small amount of flat attributes his Body Tempering provided. But the years of accumulation had set the foundation for a massive leap forward. As expected, a well of death awaited him in the heart of the maze engraved with the truths of life, which led to a chain reaction of benefits.

[Branch of the Pale Seal (Middle): All attributes +50, Strength +750, Endurance +4750, Vitality +1500, Intelligence +50, Wisdom +450. Effectiveness of Endurance +25%.]

The attributes of his Branch of the Pale Seal perfectly matched those of Kalpataru, just like when the Dao Branches were at Early Mastery. Together, the two had provided another huge boost to his survivability. Of course, that wasn't the end of it. It was, after all, a trial.

[Gates of Rebirth: Conquer the Gates of Rebirth. Reward: All Attributes +3%, Strength, Vitality, Endurance +7%. Effect of Strength, Vitality, Endurance +3%.]

Passing both sides of the Gates of Rebirth resulted in a similar situation to his experience in the Havenfort Chasm. But since the difficulty and requirements were far greater in the Gates of Rebirth, the gains were noticeably better. First, the two titles had been fused into one, giving +7% to three attributes instead of two. On top of that, it had both added a boost to all attributes and a small push to Attribute Effectiveness.

The title was more than twice as strong as his other 'normal' Limited titles, such as Heart of Fire and Big Axe Gladiator. Unfortunately, the challenge wasn't enough for the System to provide him with Title Permanence, which forced him to give up his Heart of Fire title.

Having to give up a title to retain the new one had made the boost a bit smaller than a real title. However, it had still pushed him just past 100,000 Attribute Points without relying on [Forester's Constitution], which gave him a title he'd lacked before.

[Apex Attainment: Reach 100,000 Attribute Points before reaching D-grade. Reward: Effect of Attributes +8%]

It was the third Apex title he'd received, after Apex Hunter and Apex Progenitor. Unfortunately, the title only provided 8% instead of 10% like the others, most likely because he didn't get the equivalent title

while still in the F-grade. Zac could probably get a redo token and fix the title in the future, but it wasn't a high-priority matter.

Looking at his attributes, Zac couldn't help but marvel at his progress. Half a day and his attribute pool had increased by almost 25% while his effective combat strength had improved even further. If he met Uona today, he was confident he'd be able to defeat her without relying on the Remnants or his bloodline.

The attribute limits of having a D-grade race were between 40,000 and 50,000, depending on your body's potential. When Zac broke through to E-grade, he'd thought it crazy high and unattainable. Clearly, he had underestimated the compounding gains of elite E-grade cultivators. Had he followed a simpler path with three Strength-based Dao Branches, he'd probably have hit the limit already.

Zac closed the screen, turning to Ogras. "Talked with Vikram yet?"

"I could kiss that man," Ogras laughed, his scrunched-up face blooming into a radiant smile. "I'm richer than the whole Azh'Rezak Clan."

Everything was either on or ahead of schedule, mostly thanks to the shocking amount of wealth his Shipwright business brought in. Between his trade agreements and Calrin gradually selling off the excess resources he gathered before returning to Earth, Zac's private fortune had already ballooned to almost 10 C-grade Nexus Coins.

If you included his remaining resources, treasures, Cosmic Vessels, his actual net worth was almost triple that number. And he was still making money hand and foot, even if he spent exorbitantly to shore up the foundations of his soldiers. Every week, thousands of D-grade Nexus Coins poured into his coffer thanks to Calrin's agreement with the Allbright Dynasty.

"Speaking of, you're still not heading home?" Zac asked. "Even if you've lost your teleportation access, I can still teleport you to the border towns. Shouldn't be difficult for you to find a porter to send you over."

"No. Not yet, at least," Ogras said after some thought. "Still don't know whether I want to kill or help my cousins."

"Alright," Zac nodded. "But it's fine if you want to bring your grandpa over."

"The only way I'd get the old coot to come here would be if I stuffed him in a burlap sack," Ogras guffawed. "But I still want to see the old man. Hopefully, he didn't get too much flak for the failed Incursion. After all, we were pitted against the crazy Deviant Asura."

"I was no asura back then," Zac snorted. "You guys were just pretty disorganized."

"I had to keep up pretenses, you know," Ogras winked. "So, Million Gates Territory?"

"Not sure what I should do about Jaol," Zac sighed. "He's seen both my identities. I never expected to see him again, even after realizing the trial was happening in the real world. Even if I go with a disguise, he'll eventually find out about me one way or another as long as we bring him back."

"How about this?" Ogras said. "The guy is actually not even Peak E-grade yet. There's some sort of issue with his metallic body parts. You can still sign a contract with him and keep him contained on Ensolus. In return, you'll figure out how to fix his issue."

"Easier said than done," Zac muttered. "Not like my ancestry gives me any inborn knowledge of Technocrat parts."

"Seemed to have for your sister," Ogras said pointedly but lifted his hands in surrender upon receiving a glare. "Whatever, guess she got the smarts in the family. But you don't need the know-how to help him. You just need wealth."

"How so?"

"The more levels he gains, the worse his components work. According to him, he either needs to upgrade his components or swap back to a fleshy body. The former is definitely impossible now that he's been hauled deep into Zecia, but the latter should work. Either find a Transcender heritage for him or cut out the metal parts and provide some body-restoring treasures and skilled healers."

"That could work," Zac nodded.

If that was all, Zac only needed to knock the guy out and infuse him with some Creation Energy. It was faster than any Healing Treasure, and he still had enough Longevity Treasures on hand to not waste any more lifespan than the spark needed to start the process. Someone like Jaol shouldn't require too much energy, either.

Someone like him, with a physical class, high attributes, and now an attunement, would require far more to recover his organs. According to the small experiments he'd performed over the past years when forced to exhaust some of his pent-up energy, it would take about three times as much energy today compared to when he was stuck at the bottom of the Twilight Chasm.

"Alright, let's go get the guy."

"Go get him yourself. Since I'm here, I'll snatch a title myself before dealing with the inheritance," Ogras said.

"Alright, have fun," Zac waved. "Remember, don't enter the seventh even if the trial presents you with the opportunity. It'll get you killed."

"I know, I know," Ogras muttered, and the two split up.

An hour later, Zac stepped into the guarded compound on Crimson Edge, immediately spotting a few familiar faces. He smiled and waved, though he had to admit his mind was elsewhere. Everything was finally dealt with. The blueprint, his Daos, his foundations. His followers knew what they were doing, and the war preparations were all-but-complete. Nothing was holding him back.

The moment he got word from Catheya, he'd activate the token and leave for the Perennial Vastness.