

The Fall 994

[Chapter 994 - Keys of Ascension](#)

Zac released a long pent-up sigh of relief as he stumbled out of the teleportation array, appearing in Vastness City. The gate closed behind him, and Zac was finally free from that wretched place. Only then did he truly realize just how grimy he was. He was covered almost from head to toe in blood and corruption and literally oozed sinister energies into his surroundings. The angry scars on his body almost glowed as well.

A few people curiously looked over as Zac appeared, but seeing a wretched-looking human was all too common in this place. Too, too many looked like they'd been hit by a truck when coming back from their missions. Besides, it was close to the end of the month. Those who wanted to duel would have finished their fights already, so no one tried to urge him to leave the protected Teleportation Square.

Ogras and Catheya had teleported straight home to their manors. The twenty-one days in Sinner's Lament had completely wrung them dry, to the point Zac had been forced to carry them to the exit.

For three weeks, the assaults had never relented. It didn't matter if they didn't harvest so much as a single Sinner Crystal. Within two hours, they would be attacked all the same. And they'd soon found out that without farming a decent chunk of crystals, they'd soon fall behind on rent. Stress kept building as corruption accumulated, and there was never any time to recover. At least not if they wanted to make Mana.

Even with Catheya's method to localize the Sinner Mounds, they barely managed to find and destroy one Mound a day. The rest was spent gathering Sinner Crystals, withstanding surges, and trying to take some fitful bouts of rest. At least the rewards were pretty good.

Twenty-two Sinner Mounds meant a total bounty of 6,600 Mana. After deducting 21 days' worth of fees, they were left with a profit of 2,505 Mana. Of that, Zac had earned just over 1,000, while Catheya and Ogras shared around 750 each. Unfortunately, that meant Zac had stalled out at 9,803 Mana, just shy of reaching the second echelon.

Zac had gained the biggest share simply because he'd been responsible for dealing with most of the mounds and withstanding a larger and larger part of the surges. However, his share was only so much bigger than the others because Ogras and Catheya were needed to profit. Catheya had figured out the method of finding the Mounds, and her Dao of Ice was integral to quickly dealing with the mounds.

Meanwhile, Ogras had proven incredibly efficient at gathering Sinner Crystals, especially after successfully raising the first Resentment Wraiths. He used his shadows and the [Shadewar Flag] to carefully extract crystals from the ground and various structures. His method didn't release nearly as much resentment into the ground, which allowed them to avoid a few surges a day while collecting crystals to localize mounds.

Apart from the Mana, only Ogras managed to find some benefits. Sinner Crystals, shards of Sinner Cores, and incredibly foul plants that had taken root in the center of the zone all went to the demon for experimentation with his flag. Zac and Catheya couldn't find anything useful, though they harvested some lightning-attributed metals to trade or sell.

It was an important reminder that even Catheya was a newcomer in this place and didn't have all the answers. The mission had sounded suitable from the description, but it had proven to be quite a chore with no benefits for their core formations. Sinner's Lament was more suited for Hexers, Summoners, and Lightning Cultivators than their trio.

Altogether, Zac felt the experience reminiscent of the higher levels in the Tower of Eternity. Completing the tasks required certain skills and understanding, and Zac, back then, had been forced to brute force every level. Here, that method was impossible. Even if Zac had some strength to spare, so what? It wouldn't help destroy any more Sinner Mounds.

In fact, Zac wasn't confident he'd have broken even on the mission if he went at it alone, relying on his Luck and Endurance to scour Sinner's Lament in search of bounties. Even after weeks of digging through the ruins, Zac had only managed to form a vague idea that the position of the cities and mounds wasn't completely random. There was a pattern, though Zac was still far from extrapolating any useful information from his hunch.

Zac now better understood why so many top-tier characters in the Perennial Vastness chose to set up coalitions. One person couldn't know everything, so joining up with people with complementary skillsets would increase their Mana gain even if they worked with weaker companions.

It was a shame that Ventus was about to leave. A numerologist was probably a huge asset in a place like this. At least they had the [Perennial Transformations], which was already in Catheya's hands. Zac had been too busy dealing with the wave of wraiths while Catheya and Ogras recovered to bother with the book, but Catheya had spent the better part of the month reading.

She had hoped to use the secrets within to improve their results for the quest, but the theories had proved too complex to learn in a day or two. But judging by her engrossed face as she poured over the endless numbers and patterns on the pages, the book was the real deal.

Zac didn't return to his storefront. Instead, he entered a rest area by the teleporter, where he borrowed an empty room. A full hour later, Zac emerged looking clean and mostly refreshed, and he walked straight back toward the teleportation square.

'Keys of Ascension,' Zac said in his mind as he touched a pillar, and a path opened straight away.

Zac passed through the gate, and a cloud of incredibly dense energy greeted him. It was completely different from the disgusting gunk he'd suffered in Sinner's Lament. In fact, it was almost the opposite. His exhausted mind felt invigorated and clear. The small amounts of lingering resentment from Sinner's Lament were soon stripped away.—

The Keys of Ascension was a special Green Zone included in the free trials and one of the places Ogras visited before the mission. Zac found himself at a platform floating in a sea of clouds, with an ancient stone bridge right ahead. Two people were crossing the bridge, but they ignored Zac as they stepped up to another teleportation pillar next to his.

A moment later, they were gone, leaving Zac alone to marvel at the impossibly large structure ahead. Zac felt he was looking at an Escher painting come to life, stretching thousands of meters into the sky. He couldn't even tell what shape it had. One moment it seemed like a cube, but it was a sphere after Zac

blinked. It contained tens of thousands of rooms, buildings, statues, and all kinds of random features, each moving about in defiance of any logic based on three-dimensional thinking.

Zac wasn't sure if the Perennial Vastness had built this thing or if it had picked it up like so many other of its opportunities. It didn't matter to Zac as he started walking toward the construct. What mattered was that the Keys of Ascension had the best cultivation chambers in the whole Perennial Vastness.

Zac had been given twelve hours in this place. After that, it would cost a whopping 500 Mana an hour, proving just how valuable this zone was. It could be considered the most valuable of all the free trials, and guests generally thought it a small accommodation because almost everyone who arrived had the same idea as Zac and Ogras. People were hoarding breakthroughs. With the Keys of Ascension, people could get that part out of the way and instead focus on gathering Mana and improving their blueprints.

The enormous structure didn't get any easier to understand even as Zac approached, but Ogras had already shared the experience of his visit. So the moment Zac reached the edge of the bridge, he released his Branch of the Kalpataru while starting to recite his Void Sutras. Zac felt a pull, and he curiously followed the calling as he walked toward the keys.

Rooms kept appearing and disappearing, whole castles came and went in the blink of an eye. But the confusing blur started to stabilize around him until Zac found a set of golden stairs waiting for him. Zac didn't hesitate as he stepped onto it, and his surroundings shifted. The bridge leading to the teleporters was gone, and he found himself in the middle of the confusing mesh.

Statues, arches, towers, and all kinds of buildings danced around him, each holding incredibly pure and powerful truths. It all meshed together into a tapestry akin to the Heavens themselves, but Zac didn't let himself be distracted. He never stopped channeling his Dao, and he kept most of his attention on the stairs. This place wasn't dangerous, but it wouldn't hold your hand.

If you stepped off the path or got confused by the powerful Daos, you might find yourself lost among the Keys of Ascension. Let alone wasting your twelve hours of subsidized experience, you might even end up deep in debt before you managed to find your way out.

His ears roared with foreign yet enticing Daos, but Zac staunchly kept walking up the stairs as it was created in front of him. Sometimes it felt like he was walking upside down. Other times he felt inverted. Yet he ignored his senses and kept walking until he finally reached a small golden pagoda. It was simple and unadorned, except for two statues depicting tranquil flames to the side of the entrance.

Zac breathed out in relief, and the chaos outside died down upon ascending its seven steps. The temple looked quite small on the outside, yet it was over one hundred meters across within. The floor was neither tiled nor made from wood. It was rather made up of a sea of gold nuggets ranging from the size of pebbles to fists.

Floating above were innumerable motes of golden life. The scene almost made Zac feel like he was walking into a grill or a cauldron, and that feeling was only reinforced upon passing the gates. An incredible wave of heat hit him when he stepped inside, a heat far beyond most of the volcanoes he'd visited.

Yet, it didn't feel uncomfortable at all. The heat was filled to the brim with the Dao of Life, and his partially Life-attuned constitution was enkindled rather than damaged. To his normal vision, there was no heat source in the temple, but the situation was very different upon activating [Cosmic Gaze].

In the middle of the temple, there was an empty circle. With his Dao-attuned gaze, he could see a raging golden fire within—a true spiritual flame of Life, completely unblemished and untainted by the Peak of the Grand Materia. The walls were covered in runes resonating with his path, but their function was clearly just to contain the incredible power hidden within that central flame.

Thankfully, there was not a hint of the Sangha in the chamber. The original method of [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] strongly recommended cultivating inside powerful Dharmic Flames, such as the Samadhi True Flames. Therefore, Zac knew the Keys of Ascension would produce a cultivation chamber with flames because of his chants, and he'd been worried he'd be forced to deal with pathbreaking Dharma while breaking through.

As luck would have it, the Keys of Ascension produced a chamber with an invisible flame of pure Life, almost reminiscent of the Void.

None among the guests knew whether the rooms were created in one's image to so perfectly match their cultivation methods or if the confusing mesh of chambers held far more rooms than one could imagine. Remembering the incredible scenes outside, Zac wasn't any closer to the answer either. But Zac soon cast away any doubts and confusions, instead focusing on what was important.

It was time to break through with the [Void Vajra Sublimation].

In a perfect world, he would also have broken through in this place with his [Nine Reincarnations Manual], but the breakthroughs of his soul took quite a while. Just the first step required him to channel the full cycle, and most breakthroughs had taken a couple of days. There was no way he'd manage to break through in 12 hours, and he didn't have the luxury of spending all his Mana on this place. Thankfully, he already had a plan for his soul, so it wasn't like he was out of options.

Zac let his mind fuse with the surroundings as he walked toward the central circle. He was fast becoming Life in its purest form. The dancing motes around him, the nuggets beneath his feet. It all filled him with inspiration. Every breath took him further away from the harsh environment of Sinner's Lament and gave him the gift of Life. Even if Zac somehow failed with his breakthrough in this place, he would most likely leave with a hundred years of recovered longevity.

One piece of clothing after another was stripped and put away, which let Zac get even closer to the Dao. His movements were slow and deliberate, yet they were filled with meaning. It was like the Dao of Life guided his hands. His mind soon emptied of everything except the Dao of Life and the [Void Vajra Sublimation].

Everything else faded away. His struggles, his worries, his past, and his future. In comparison, Zac felt the [Void Vajra Sublimation] had never been as clear in his mind, not even when he created it with the truths of Ultom. The environment in the Keys of Ascension obviously couldn't compare to an Eternal Heritage, but the light of Ultom was bereft of Dao.

Here, the Dao of Life was infused into his understanding, like color suddenly added to a black-and-white image.

Zac painted one rune after another onto his body, each imbued and perfected by the golden motes fusing into them. Soon, he was covered from head to toe, glowing like a golden Buddha. He took a deep breath and finally stepped into the central circle. The scorching heat of the invisible flames licked his skin, but the flames that would instantly have incinerated most E-grade Cultivators only helped activate the medicinal paste on his skin.

The chants of Void echoed in his mind. Zac didn't know if a minute or an hour had passed, but he suddenly felt the world align. Zac's eyes shot open, and he took his first step toward Minor Sublimation.

The whole room shook as he stomped down on the ground, and the lazy motes of golden light in the temple suddenly kicked into a frenzy. Life surged to unprecedented heights around him, creating a powerful restrictive force. Yet years of arduous practice had made heart and body as stable as mountains, and he smoothly finished the first stance.

Like the two previous times he broke through, a rune holding an aspect of Life was left behind. But this time, it didn't feel like a feature made real by his heart alone. It shone in gold, seemingly instilled with the very essence of the Heavens. There was nothing intangible about the rune—it was so real it almost made the rest of the temple feel lacking in corporeity.

An unending stream of Life poured into the rune, and Zac was inwardly relieved he'd chosen to wait rather than breaking through back on Earth. The quantity and quality of truths the rune absorbed from the temple far surpassed what he'd be able to produce back home, no matter how many Divine Crystals or natural treasures he took out.

Even if he'd managed to break through, it wouldn't be as perfect as it would in this place, just like he'd barely squeaked by in some of his breakthroughs of the soul. The cost of 500 Mana an hour was steep, but Zac felt it was definitely worth it as one golden rune after another appeared inside the Spiritual Flames.

Two hours later, Zac's hands clasped together, forming the 189th and final Sutra of the third layer. Each one contained enough energy to turn a Hegemon into ash. Together, they formed a cocoon of life, the key to his transformation into a Life-attuned Constitution.

This time, the runes didn't fuse into the body themselves. Zac could feel how they resisted the pull, almost like the Heavens was trying to prevent its secrets from being stolen. Zac already knew this would happen, and not a ripple could be seen on his face as he started to pull.

Having completed a full cycle of Minor Sublimation, Zac had fully entered the ethereal state of the Void. His will was unbendable, and the runes were dragged closer and closer while a storm of Life raged through the temple.

Finally, the runes touched his body, branding themselves on his skin and forming another set of mysterious pathways. For a moment, Zac felt like he'd formed a bridge between the Heavens and himself, and he felt a sense of awe as he peered at the very heart of the Dao of Life.

But marvel soon turned into pain. Unbelievable pain and a sense of impending disaster.