

The Fall 997

[Chapter 997 - Struggle Among the Heavens](#)

Zac looked at the distant ghost temple with desire burning in his heart. He could feel how fate was gathering within, and the special sense he'd gained from his huge accumulation of Luck indicated a powerful treasure was waiting within.

But how do you take something out from a temple that only existed in your heart? He'd tried entering the subsidiary temples multiple times on the way up. But any time he came in contact while running [Void Zone], the temple disappeared. Entering a meditative state from within the temple grounds hadn't worked either. It simply didn't appear around him.

Or had those rules perhaps changed?

Zac thought it over and released his Void State before making his way toward the temple on the other side. He stopped roughly at the midway point and entered his ethereal state again. However, the scene was so surprising he immediately lost it. It was gone.

The cloud of providence surrounding the temple, the swirls of fate. They were both gone, leaving the temple looking just like before Zac summoned his manor. Zac tried activating his [Void Zone] instead, but the result was the same. Worried he'd missed out on a huge opportunity, Zac ran back toward his manor before calming his heart. Zac breathed out in relief. It was back.

A few minutes and experiments later, Zac had managed to confirm a few things. The halo of providence only existed when he entered a Void State from within his mansion. At any other time, the sense of mystery and surging fate simply wasn't there. But the cloud would remain as long as he walked out of his manor while maintaining his state.

However, the whole peak transformed when approaching the temple this way. The Samsara Energy surged, and new additions appeared around him. A drum on a platform to the left, a bell tower with a golden bell to the right. Statues of Bodhisattvas and Devas guarding the entrances to the side temples. Anything he approached was elevated.

Furthermore, with every step he took toward the treasure on the other side, the more powerful the Dharmic pressure grew. It almost felt like the simple ghost temple contained a portal to the mysterious lotus flower he'd seen in the vision, and Zac was exposed to higher and higher Dharmic truths as he got closer.

By the time he reached the halfway point across the peak, Zac couldn't maintain his [Void Zone]. It was like the monastery understood he was "cheating" when using his Bloodline Talent and multiplied the pressure in response. His Void Energy was rapidly drained, and he felt his consciousness pulled into the Boundless Dharma.

His vision swam, and Zac could barely hear himself think over the roar of the Dao of Samsara. He felt that if he took another step, he'd enter the cycle of reincarnation. Zachary Atwood would cease to exist, even if his body remained. His survival instincts trumped his greed, forcing him to back down even if his mind was hazy.

Using his Void State went better. Since evolving his heart, it wasn't hard for Zac to maintain a Void State while walking around, so he didn't actually need to use [Void Zone] to move. Unfortunately, Zac still didn't get much further than the halfway point before he was unable to continue. The barrier between the self and the Cosmos was fraying at that point.

Zac reluctantly looked at the inviting temple door just a few hundred meters away. His instincts told him that he could take the treasure out as long as he could walk across the peak without succumbing. This was just like the Sangha. They didn't need to coerce or trick anyone into joining. They openly invited everyone to visit their holy sites, and people would succumb to their desires and grasp for too much.

He was greedy, but he did not need to go all out for that thing right away. He'd just broken through to Void Self, and Zac could somewhat sense that it was possible to improve the stability of the self even further. There were also protective treasures and talismans that were worth looking into. Anything that could give him an edge and allow him to walk a bit further.

Since taking out the treasure immediately was impossible, Zac returned to his manor and started exploring other parts of his home. There was a small scripture hall where thousands of scrolls were placed into cubbies. They didn't contain any cultivation methods, but Zac still found them interesting.

The scrolls mostly held historical accounts, describing the origin and history of the many zones in the Perennial Vastness. More than half of the environments in this Immemorial Realm had been absorbed from the outside, while the others had been born through various events. The information could shed some light on the various dangers of these places, but that wasn't why Zac spent almost an hour reading a random scroll.

There was a sense of mystery within the descriptions. They contained a unique charm that hinted at something grand. But unlike with the [Book of Duality], Zac couldn't figure out what. For now. He could sense there was something hidden within the flowing prose, and he had a lot of experience deciphering this type of text by now. Zac didn't know if it was related to Dao or something else, but he really wanted to get to the bottom of it before he left this place.

Zac continued into the main meditation chamber and was met by his blueprint floating in the middle of his room. However, this projection was far more detailed than the ones that appeared on top of his head when looking for fights. There were depictions of energy flows, Dao interactions, and even individual patterns.

He'd heard some of it from Catheya over the past days, and he pointed at a certain section as he walked over. The complete blueprint was suddenly replaced with a small piece, and Zac got a far-better look at that part. He played around with the array a bit more and found it far more incisive than he'd expected. Zac even found some spots that were candidates for improvement, using his most recent insights into Kalpataru and Pale Seal.

That wasn't the only thing the array could do. Zac activated another feature of the projection, and raging waves of flames suddenly assaulted the pathways. Being under assault by the Dao of Fire put the blueprint under pressure, and the energy circulation sped up. Zac looked on with interest as large amounts of energy were dragged out into the output channels, clearly simulating skills being activated.

This feature was one of the biggest expenditures for most guests. The Perennial Vastness was an ancient Immemorial Realm with a direct connection to the System. There was almost no Dao or path it couldn't simulate, allowing cultivators to test their path and blueprint against any challenge.

Few could say they had a path that no Dao could restrain or was without glaring weaknesses in certain situations. In that sense, perfection could be considered an illusion, where you did what you could to improve your foundations. With the array running simulations days out and days in for years, you were bound to eventually stumble upon some improvements while deepening the understanding of your path.

Of course, duels were far cheaper in comparison. But it was a matter of luck and chance to stumble upon someone who not only had a set of Daos that could provoke a weakness in your path but also had the skill and discernment to spot it.

Zac chose to activate the premium simulation at 25 mana a day. He'd let it run for the next month as an experiment. Having visited the Keys of Ascension, Zac no longer felt the truth of Ultom omnipotent. It imparted theories far beyond the level of the E-grade with unmatched clarity, but it was completely separated from the Dao.

Who knew? Some of his so-called fake weaknesses might be real loopholes created by his imperfect understanding of Duality and his Daos. To spend 750 Mana over the next month, letting the array try out tens of thousands of scenarios was a small price to pay. Suppose the blueprint proved as impervious as he believed it to be, then great. He had paid a small fee to put aside his final worries. If not, Zac would know he'd have to adjust his plans.

After an hour of looking through everything, Zac was ready to leave. He hesitated but eventually teleported to one of the cheaper Green Zones. An hour later, after having rested and performing a few experiments with his improved Heart Cultivation, Zac teleported to Vastness City.

It was a small trick that allowed him to emerge in Vastness City as a human without going through his storefront. The feature was useless for most people, but it did allow Zac to keep the secret of his two races hidden for a while longer.

There was no way he'd avoid getting exposed sooner or later because of his blueprint, but he wanted to trick some more people into duels before that happened. The only downside was that it cost one day's worth of entry to the Green Zones he picked, but there were many which cost less than 30 Mana a day.

Zac emerged at the Teleportation Square, but he immediately turned back toward the pillar after it had closed behind him.

'The Calamity,' Zac said in his mind.

A terrifying golden hurricane appeared on the other side of the gate. A moment later, Zac was gone, off to deal with the next thing on his list.

Scar glanced down with surprise at the ball in his hand, but he forcibly kept his face impassive. He wasn't the only one sitting in the recovery area, and he couldn't ruin the princess' plans by giving something

away. One line. This was the marking he'd been told to always keep a lookout for over the past five years, the opportunity his mistress had been waiting for.

This was his chance as well. He'd emerged an elite recruit of the Empire after almost a century of hellish training, narrowly surviving where tens of millions had fallen to raise new generations of the Imperial Guard. Serving the Heavens was a great honor and a chance for his descendants to contribute to the Imperial Fate, but he also knew one's future was limited in this path.

He'd get to enjoy the greatest resources and training, gaining power most could only dream of. However, if Scar was assigned to one of the old imperials in seclusion, he might not leave the palace for the rest of his life. Dozens of generations could come and go before one of the ancient masters either emerged or passed on.

Right place at the right time. Scar was just in the upper segment rather than the peak of the guard, but the Princess needed followers who had yet to enter the Halls of Glory to form an Imperial Core. And Scar just so happened to have a useful bloodline, the one thing he was thankful to his traitorous ancestor for. If he managed to help the young Princess in this matter while seizing a seal for himself, he had a small chance of being promoted to a Sword of the Empire.

Leading the armies into the unknown ancient realms, looting the treasures of the Empire's enemies. Not having to seal his emotions and desires inside the Halls of Glory. Gaining the right to take a wife and form a lineage. The right to choose a true name of his own, not just a nickname temporarily given by the Princess because she felt the number 8376-56 was too much of a mouthful.

This was his chance to generate enough Imperial Merit to expunge his ancestor's sin in one go.

The minutes passed as Scar continued to scan any comers and goers while pretending to recover from his wounds. Not sending out a message, nothing. Luckily, he didn't have to wait long, as his replacement arrived one hour later through the gate. He was covered in blood and familiar wounds. Scar briefly wondered why 8379-35 did that to himself when the Princess permitted them to gain their wounds by hunting for treasures.

Scar guessed it was because 8379-35 was afraid he'd get himself killed, which would mean he failed the mission. Better maim himself than risk letting that happen. Scar inwardly shook his head as he stood up to leave, not even exchanging a glance with the man as he left. After all, they were only strangers who needed to rest after training, not people who shared a common mission.

"You are pushing the limits, keeping watch of the Teleportation Arrays for 48% of each day," Oldro said in Scar's mind.

'We are only following the restrictions you levied on us,' Scar answered the guide.

"Why'd I have to get stuck with a Deathsworn," Oldro sighed. "You should be working hard at your core, not wasting your time spying on others. At this rate, you'll get me killed."

'Your fate is not my responsibility. If you want to blame something, blame your bad luck that you were born a creature without control of your life and death.'

"Like you're any different," the guide scoffed before going silent.

Scar calmly walked toward the street where he and the Princess had been placed. The thought of getting similar treatment as an imperial was extremely unsettling, doubly so after their first encounter. She'd decided their proximity meant they were fated and temporarily elevated his status to a Royal Advisor.

A role he was woefully ill-equipped for. What did he know about strategy, schemes, and the great undertakings of the ancient masters? He had been slated to remove all thoughts in a few years, completing his transition into an eternal guard. He only knew how to fight and how to protect.

Still, he could only do his best to follow orders, and he sent a weak tendril of energy into a talisman upon entering his storefront. A few minutes later, a warrior emerged from a nearby structure, walking over to Scar.

"The Princess requests your presence," the guard said, and Scar bowed and wordlessly crossed the street.

A moment later, Scar appeared inside the living room that had become familiar by this point, where he spotted his master sitting at her usual spot at the workbench she'd brought over.

"How ostentatious, always asking you to waste Mana by visiting her manor. She is a Seventh Echelon guest. She could have come to your place for free," Oldro scoffed.

Scar ignored the guide's grating voice. He'd long known what it was trying to do. It wanted to drive a wedge between himself and Princess Valsa Planur, to enkindle a desire for personal progress. Only through gathering enough Mana would Oldro survive, and it didn't care about what happened to Scar after he left the Perennial Vastness.

"I greet the Princess," Scar said, kneeling five meters away.

"Come, sit," Valsa lazily waved.

Scar inwardly groaned. Sitting down at the table with an imperial was punishable by death for someone of his standing. But so was refusing orders. So Scar could only comply and pray Valsa wouldn't mention her way of management upon returning to the First Heaven.

"What happened?"

"By Princess' grace, I found another one," Scar said, trying not to color the report with excitement. "Furthermore, the resonator showed one line."

"What?" Valsa said, her lazy demeanor gone as she looked up from the schematics in front of her. Another component for her Regalia, it looked like. "One line? Are you certain?"

"I am certain, Princess," Scar confirmed.

"A Flamebearer. It looks like fate is conspiring against my scheming cousin," Valsa said, her mouth curving upward. "When did this happen?"

"One hour ago. I am sorry for belaying the report. Other people were recuperating at the square, including individuals suspected to be informants. I dared not do anything that might expose the identity of the Flamebearer."

"You did the right thing." Valsa nodded. "This is why I wanted to bring people who had yet to sever their past. Continue."

"It was a Human male of interminable origin. He wore no markings of any known force," Scar said. "He entered The Calamity. Does Princess wish to activate the coalition?"

"No," Valsa said without hesitation. "Those chosen by the Left Imperial Palace are all bound to be tricky people to deal with. We cannot act hastily. We might only get one chance to strike, so we have to make it count. What do you know about this person?"

"Reporting to Princess, I have never seen him before. Furthermore, he is a first-echelon guest. He should be a new arrival," Scar said. "I failed to confirm his Daos, but I am guessing he has one related to Life. He does not have the dourness of a living practicing the Dao of Death generally carries. And I felt an odd sense of stability from him."

"Stability?" Valsa repeated with a raised brow.

"As though I was looking at a calm lake," Scar said before bowing. "I beg your forgiveness. It is just foolish ramblings of this servant."

"No, you have the [Planar Pulse]. Thanks to your Bloodline, your instincts should rarely be wrong," Valsa waved. "There are various things that can give you such an impression. The fact that he can block out your senses and Hidden Nodes is a clue. All the more reason to be careful on how we handle this."

Scar nodded, inwardly hesitant whether he should be giving suggestions at this point as the appointed Royal Advisor or wait for orders as he was trained to do. Was he failing the Princess? Thankfully, he didn't have to wait for long.

"Over the next three months, start investigating the target. But don't forget about the others. I don't think it's a coincidence at least five sealholders have appeared over the past year. We might have an advantage with our history and connection to the Pillars, but others also have the means to expose these people."

"Princess wishes to change her target from the one who appeared two months ago?" Scar asked.

"Of course!" Valsa grinned. "I can't believe a Flamebearer showed up! So what if the Emperors picked my cousin? So what if he carries more fate with the Fifth Pillar? Fate can be seized. If the Heavens want to keep me away, I'll just break down the gates and force myself inside."

"Of course," Scar nodded, hesitating a bit.

"What?" Valsa frowned. "Spit it out. Remember, you're an advisor now. Advise."

"It's just..." Scar hesitated. "35 brought an update from Imperial Prince Yzum Tobrial upon his arrival. Prince Yselio of Seventh Heaven has already succeeded in becoming a Flamebearer. Taking a seal is Princess's right, but becoming a Flamebearer may create problems for the First Emperor and tension with the Seventh Heaven."

"Oh, that," Valsa laughed. "Well, don't worry about my Imperial Father. Who do you think gave me all these tokens and told me to go seize fate?"

"Forgive my foolishness," Scar quickly bowed while inwardly crying.

He had just heard something he absolutely wasn't supposed to. And if it was one thing that could drag you and your whole Bloodline into an early grave, it was knowing the secrets of a Supremacy.