

The Fall 1000

[Chapter 1000 - Joint Venture](#)

Zac wasted no time as he rushed across the island. If he pushed himself and used the glider when possible, he believed he'd be able to cross the whole disk in two hours. There were only six days until the next mission release, and he wanted to use two for his breakthrough. So if he couldn't find what he was looking for in the first two days, he'd either have to return or pick one of the left-over missions.

The latter wasn't the end of the world, though, and the others were already prepared he might not show up. For someone like him, there were always left-over tasks he could pick up and earn a decent chunk of Mana. And even if he somehow ended up empty-handed, he had other things to work on. Few guests had the energy and time to take on missions every month.

He wouldn't be surprised if he were the only mortal in this place, which had one small benefit. He didn't have to spend any time cultivating to form and upgrade the nucleus of his core. Instead, Zac could put that time toward collecting Mana or working on his other endeavors.

A sudden hint of dense Death made him stop in his tracks, and Zac curiously looked at a deep fissure. Most likely, it was a scar opened by the large peak that the storm had dragged off, and its passage had exposed something interesting. Zac peered down, and his eyes lit up at the exposed cavern.

Inside, five pitch-black rose-like flowers grew, each one emitting an incredibly dense aura of Pure Death. His Life-attuned cells screamed at him to destroy those things, which probably meant they were something good for his other half. Zac jumped down, a sniff enough to confirm the roses weren't poisonous. He carefully cut them off with a small axe imbued with the Dao of Pale Seal before storing them all in a treasure box.

There was nothing else inside the cave system, so Zac continued on his way, making a few more pit stops to pick items up from the dredged depths of the island. Most of the hidden caves were unguarded, but he had to take out a pack of peak E-grade insects guarding a stone that had formed natural runes of Life. It didn't waste much time, and Zac reached the island's edge on schedule with a few new interesting items in his bag. This was just the entry layer of the Calamity, so they weren't supreme treasures. But they were all rare Peak Quality Materials that might prove useful in the future.

To Zac's surprise, he wasn't actually the first arrival. A familiar face already waited at the edge, anxiously looking at the next island in the distance. It was one of the Beast Kings who had crossed the chasm with him before, one of the weirder ones. For one, it moved solo, but it also looked a bit out of place. It was essentially a seven-meter-tall death-attuned toad. It had no wings on its back and no other means of flight. Instead, its back sported a set of translucent pustules, where some black liquid sloshed inside.

The toad really was an odd one out. Without any means of flight, it would be landlocked on an island for centuries until it finally became a Beast King. Species that didn't even have the option to jump ship if a particularly nasty storm hit their island were bound to be disadvantaged in this environment.

But it was not a weakling. Zac had run as fast as he could, yet this Early D-grade beast had arrived ahead of him. Furthermore, it didn't look winded at all.

"You're pretty quick," Zac said with surprise as he walked over, and he laughed upon getting a disdainful scoff in return.

This Beast King was clearly a bit smarter than the average species. And upon thinking back, Zac realized it hadn't joined the fight. It somehow disappeared when the nomads and territorial beasts started exchanging attacks. It must have used some moment skill to start crossing the island while the other nomads kept the rabble busy.

It looked like the toad had planned to keep going, but its plan had hit a snag. There was another island not too far in the distance, but there was also a group of roving birds guarding the chasm. Seeing the situation, Zac had an idea.

"Want to make another jump before the storm gets too far away?"

The toad looked suspiciously at Zac before slowly nodding.

"How about this," Zac said, pointing toward the next island. "You saw my strength earlier. I'll deal with those flying things and any other beasts we can't avoid. In return, you carry me across the continent. I want to keep going until I find a drifting mountain."

The toad mutely looked at Zac, clearly with some disgust in its eyes. Zac gave it a thought before releasing his Branch of the Pale Seal to show was not just a being of life. His Death-Attuned Dao wasn't weakened when using his Life-Attuned Body, but it didn't have the sense of smoothness as when using the Branch of the Kalpataru.

The eruption of a powerful Dao Field made the toad shriek in alarm, and Zac looked on with interest as a black gust swallowed it, moving it hundreds of meters in an instant. It almost looked like Ogras and how he moved through shadows, though the method clearly was based around Death. And possibly Time, though Zac couldn't understand exactly how.

"I'm just showing we're on the same side!" Zac shouted, which made the toad hesitantly jump back after a minute.

It released an enormous black tongue over ten meters long, seemingly trying to taste Zac's Dao before looking down at Zac with confusion. Zac smiled as Death spread through his body, his eyes becoming pitch-black orbs of the abyss.

"See? Same side," Zac said.

After showing his Draugr form, there were no more objections. Zac had found himself a capable mount, and the two jumped off the ledge toward the next island, not bothering to wait for any more nomads. The flock of birds shrieked with delight upon seeing two lone targets, but elation turned into horror as the corrosive links of [Love's Bond] snatched up one bird after another.

Meanwhile, Zac utilized the free movement of [Abyssal Phase] to catch up with two Beast Kings and destroy them quickly before moving toward the next target. The toad wasn't completely helpless, either. Its tongue suddenly became thirty meters long and snatched up a few peak E-grade birds. The birds were almost as large as the toad, but it somehow managed to squeeze them into its belly. The predators became dinner, and the two continued on their way.

This time, only a small group of beasts emerged when they were about to land on the other shore, and Zac made short work out of them without having to rely on any of his finishers.

"Alright, your turn," Zac said upon stowing away the corpses, and he was surprised to see a hole open up on its belly.

The toad actually had a pouch similar to a kangaroo, along with the ability to perfectly seal it. Or was it just a second mouth leading into its stomach? The toad stamped impatiently on the ground as it pointed at its belly.

"You want me to get into the pouch?" Zac frowned, looking up at the face of the huge toad. "You're not trying something here, right? You should know I'll blast a hole in you if you try to eat me or something."

The toad rolled its eyes in an incredibly human manner, once more pointing at the pouch before making a rapid series of signs with its hands that Zac couldn't understand at all.

"Alright, alright," Zac grunted as he walked over.

The situation was pretty weird, but Zac just resigned himself to fate as he crawled inside. The vision of him heroically standing atop the head of a Beast King as they crossed the lands was fast crumbling in his mind. At least the pouch was a lot comfier than expected. The walls were soft, and there was even an ambient atmosphere of Death that resembled a gathering array.

But then, something wet touched him. Zac shrieked at the sudden feeling, but he quickly calmed down upon realizing it was only a 2-meter baby toad who had buffed him with its tongue. The thing looked quite imposing, but it was only in Peak F-grade, probably unable to leave the pouch because of the environment.

Zac curiously looked at the toad, wondering why the Beast King had allowed him to enter a spot normally reserved for its offspring. Most beasts would guard their young with their lives and hide their presence as much as possible. Was it a sign of trust? Zac couldn't figure it out, and a sudden buff from the outside derailed his thoughts.

"What?" Zac said with annoyance as he peeked outside, only to find the mama toad expectantly looking down at him.

Then, a wave of Deathly Dao spread through the pouch, though it was only at the late Fragment stage.

"You want me to release my Dao for your child?" Zac said with a raised brow, getting a gentler buff in answer.

So the toad just wanted a Dao battery for its young. Zac wryly smiled as he released some of his Branch of the Pale Seal, letting it spread through the pouch. The baby toad released some excited chattering sounds as it nudged closer. A moment later, the surroundings turned to a blur as the toad sped across the continent with speed twice what Zac could muster.

The toad had sealed most of the opening to its pouch, but it had left enough space for Zac to peek outside, allowing him to confirm the beast was moving in the right direction. Though Zac could barely keep up with where they were going with how quickly they were moving. The surroundings kept shifting weirdly, making the view disorienting.

Rather than a skill, it seemed to be an inherited bloodline talent. Zac had already realized the black clouds it formed were made from blood, or rather the liquid it produced in its pustules. Zac also felt a bizarre pulse of Temporal Energy every time the surroundings shifted, confirming the toad was manipulating time to move faster.

'Hey Null, how is this affecting my time inside the Calamity?'

'This... creature isn't changing the passage of time, so it's like normal.'

Zac nodded in understanding, guessing the toad used time to speed itself up rather than create some Temporal Chamber.

The second continent was even bigger than the first, and the mountainous topography created incredibly ferocious gusts that could come out of nowhere. Yet it only took the toad an hour to pass the whole thing, at which point Zac got out to prepare for another fight. The two kept chasing across the Calamity like this, passing seven islands in quick succession.

The odds of running into another cultivator at this point were pretty low, and it was even less likely for someone to catch up to him if they followed him into the Calamity. Zac had a hard time imagining even a Dexterity-based E-grade cultivator keeping up with this pace for hours.

However, the speed didn't come without a price. The toad looked exhausted when Zac emerged from the pouch for the seventh time. The odd vats at on back retained less than one-third of its liquid, exposing a set of mysterious temporal stones sloshing about within. Moving at such speeds must have significantly drained its energy stores, and Zac glanced at the other shore.

Toad had actually managed to keep pace with the raging storm until now. Half the island was shrouded in a vast curtain of gold that prevented them from seeing anything of what lay beyond.

"We can take a break if you want," Zac offered, but the beast stubbornly shook its head and drew three lines in the ground before making another set of incomprehensible signs.

"What?" Zac said, trying to understand its gestures.

It soon dawned on Zac that they were on the left line, and the toad's destination was just two islands over. Zac could only let the toad keep rushing, and they soon reached the edge of the next island. This time, the scene on the other side was starkly different, and Zac gazed at the next island with marvel.

So the toad was looking for the same place as he was.

The mountain towered into the sky, hundreds of thousands of meters tall, with large swathes hidden by dense shrouds of both Life- and Death Attuned clouds. It didn't quite have the traditional pyramidal shape with a flat base, but it looked like a briolette with a rounded bottom. Its massive size beggared comprehension, and it wasn't the only thing that made it stand out. It had two of the miniature stars rotating around its base.

Not even the terrifying storms of the Calamity could dislodge the hegemony of this natural fortress, and Zac looked on with marvel as the storm they'd followed was forced to split apart to pass by. Between its massive size and its guardian stars, it drifted about in the Calamity like a lone titan.

This wasn't the only Calamity Mountain drifting about, but they were quite rare. Finding one was a matter of luck, and it was exactly what Zac had been hoping for. Only these mountains, with their mile-long tunnel systems and hidden pathways, could provide both enough energy and a safe enough environment to break through with his soul.

It was a stroke of luck he'd encountered the toad, and he finally understood why it was so stressed. The mountain was moving quite fast, and it might have drifted out of sight if they'd been even half an hour late. The toad must have somehow known the Calamity Mountain's route and rushed to reach it in time.

Zac was about to climb out to prepare for another crossing, but the toad pushed him back into the pouch.

"Stay inside?" Zac said, and the toad nodded.

The toad could fly much faster than his glider, so Zac was happy to oblige. It wasn't mentioned in the information missives, but the mountains were bound to be the main targets for most cultivators. They were massive and had a stable enough environment to rebuff most of the storms. Even forests could survive on its slopes, meaning the odds of treasures surviving were much higher.

And with this mountain being only half a day's travel away from the gate, there was a decent chance other guests would have ended up here. Zac would normally not be worried about being targeted. In fact, he would welcome it. However, he aimed to make a breakthrough, not fight and look for treasures this time. And by staying inside the pouch, he'd be able to sneak onto the mountain without being spotted.

The toad set off across the chasm, only stopping for a moment to let the side with the death-attuned star turn toward them. There were no beasts guarding against their arrival, and they landed in a deathly forest without issue. The toad was still wary, glancing to its left and right as it kept running for a few more minutes. Only then did Zac emerge, looking around with interest.

"Here," Zac said, throwing out a Death-Attuned Cosmic Crystal. "A small payment. You worked a lot harder than me in the end."

The toad eagerly snatched it and stuffed it into its mouth, letting out a satisfied croak. In return, it formed a rapid-fire series of signs again, pointing toward the top of the mountain.

"You're telling me something dangerous is living on the peak?" Zac asked, getting an affirmative nod and a series of following signs. "And to not make a lot of noise on the slopes?"

A minute later, the toad ambled away, much more relaxed now that it had reached the drifting mountain before it moved out of reach. Zac thoughtfully watched it disappear among the trees before he swapped to his human form and flashed away in the opposite direction.

There was something off about that beast. Not that it tried to harm him, but rather the opposite. It was a bit stand-offish, but it lacked the thinly veiled brutality he saw in the eyes of the other nomads. It was just too intelligent and didn't even seem native to the Calamity. Zac had no proof for this, but his instincts told him it wasn't actually a wild Beast King but a domesticated one.

But whose pet it was and why it had appeared here, Zac had no idea.

Zac was curious, but he had bigger fish to fry. He ran through the windswept forest before he found what he was looking for, a tunnel without any end. It wasn't luck to stumble onto one so quickly—these entrances were all over the place. The drifting mountains of the Calamity were essentially beehives with innumerable tunnels crisscrossing the whole thing. It was more hollow than solid.

Perhaps that was the only way for such a huge mountain to float about freely without getting too heavy. No matter the reason, the thousands of tunnels created a unique situation thanks to the constantly rotating mountain. Powerful gusts full of energy entered the tunnels, constantly dragging more and more into its depths.

Meanwhile, the innards were completely protected from vicious storms, creating an incredible environment. In other words, the real dangers and opportunities waited within. And it was here Zac planned on seizing a Cultivation Cave to undergo his fourth reincarnation.