

The Fall 1005

[Chapter 1005 - Calamity Core](#)

It seemed like the weight of the whole Calamity Mountain bore down on Zac's shoulders as he continued his climb. His arms strained from the pressure, and he would already have been thrown back to the bottom of the chute if not for the help of both Vivi and Alea.

He wasn't sure if it was the treasure itself or the crack it fell out of that generated the overwhelming gravity domain, but nothing seemed to work against it. Even [Void Zone] only weakened it a bit, at the cost of excessive amounts of Void Energy. Thankfully, he was almost there, and not a moment too soon.

Zac could sense a powerful presence just through the wall with his spiritual domain. It was clearly here for the prize, but it couldn't find a way through. Judging by the shudders, it had opted for the most straightforward solution—trying to force its way through, taking advantage of the large cracks that seemingly spread through the mountain.

And it wasn't the only one. He could hear roars from almost every pathway leading into the Storm Chamber.

Muscles bunched together as Zac climbed the last stretch. His body was screaming with hunger when faced with the incredible truths locked within the twinned crystal. The closer he got, the more obvious it was that this thing was far greater than some Attuned Crystals. It didn't seem to contain much energy, but it more than made up for it in Dao.

Even inside the time-dilated environment of the Perennial Vastness, Zac could feel the winds of inspiration buffet him as he looked at the flickering lights within. This crystal held the condensed truths of Pure Life and Death, refined over eons in the Calamity. Its Daos weren't at the level of the mote of Primal Dao he'd encountered inside the Twilight Chasm, but it was perhaps even more enticing.

Because this thing was almost perfectly aligned with his path. Not only that, but it seemed to still absorb the truths of the surroundings, showing no indication of losing its efficacy. It was a stark contrast to the white light that couldn't survive in the exposed environment, where Zac only managed to grasp onto a corner of its gift before it was gone.

The cracks spread on the wall as the shudders grew more frenzied, but Zac was already upon the treasure. He was showered the truth by the Calamity, and pure Dao burrowed into his body. Zac felt his mind glaze over, but he snapped back to reality. A large jade box appeared in his hand, and he threw in a couple of Cosmic Crystals with Life- and Death attunement for good measure.

The treasure was safely tucked away in his Spatial Ring a moment later. But Zac didn't run away, and instead gathered the lingering truths on a fractal leaf. The wall just beneath crumbled, and a golden insect with glistening mandibles crashed through it. Its eyes immediately focused on Zac, and the Storm Chamber filled with greed and killing intent.

Thousands of small scales stood up on its back before they shot toward Zac like a golden hailstorm. However, they were swallowed by two clouds, one containing the domineering radiance of Arcadia and the other the oppressive darkness of the Abyss. It was [Rapturous Divide], empowered by the incredible amounts of attuned energies in the Storm Chamber.

A golden viscous liquid poured through small holes in the thick chitinous shell of the ten-meter-ant. It formed a second layer of defense for the Beast King, but it was utterly incapable of dealing with Zac's strike. A surge of energy filled Zac's body as the Ant's head fell toward the bottom of the chute. Hundreds of more ants were in the tunnel, but they all fled upon seeing their queen die.

Zac channeled the Kill Energy into [Surging Vitality] while opening his status screen, sighing resignedly upon seeing the quest still there.

Mountain Heart (Global Event): Seize the [Calamity Core] formed in the heart of the Calamity Mountain. Reward: 5,000 Mana. (NOTE: Mission Considered complete upon leaving the Calamity.) (1/1)

He'd expected as much upon getting the mission, but it was still a headache. Zac had read about this very situation in Ventus' book, [Perennial Transformations]. The strategy proposed by Ventus was to, through visiting various realms and gathering data, use Numerology to estimate which realms would birth rare treasures and when.

That way, you would get a leg up on the competition, gaining riches and Mana in one swoop. If lucky, you could even get a quest before it became a global event. However, Ventus also mentioned one situation to look out for. When the treasure was too valuable, it'd immediately create a global event, with no chance of sneaking it out of the zone unnoticed.

And for the greatest treasures that were only occasionally formed in the Red Zones, the mission wouldn't end even when he got his hands on the item.

It was a small difference, but one that drastically changed the fallout. For one, a persistent event meant the item was incredibly valuable. Secondly, the huge Mana bounty was still up for grabs. Five thousand Mana was half an echelon. Such a windfall was especially precious to the elites running against the clock.

It could give them the breathing room needed to form their core in peace or push them into a higher echelon that would allow them to activate the higher-tiered features a year early. Conversely, if the mission had ended, then most people would bow out, as the benefits didn't match the risks.

Now, the exit was probably already guarded by powerful guests. Clearly, the System's philosophy weighed heavier in the Red Zones, where struggle was just as important as exploring the Dao and forming new cores.

"You guys really are jerks," Zac muttered as he dropped back down toward the tunnel he entered through.

'Well, this is a Red Zone,' Null giggled. 'If the task ended the moment you got the treasure, who'd bother coming here to fight you for it? If you don't want the hassle, you can just throw the mountain heart away.'

Zac shrugged, but he knew there was no way he'd discard the [Calamity Core], even if it meant clashing with high-echelon guests. He'd known it the moment he held the treasure. This thing easily surpassed any of his prepared items for his upcoming core formation.

Forming a Cosmic Core as a mortal heavily relied on treasures, but not any old item would do. Some attuned treasures weren't suitable for core formation, while others had clashing spirituality or

unsuitable insights. He had mountains of attuned items in his Spatial Ring, but most had some defects that would impact his breakthrough if not refined. But refinement also meant the item lost some of its efficacy.

The [Calamity Core] was different. It contained incredibly pure Daos of Life and Death, completely unblemished by any outside influences. Furthermore, the core was completely unsullied by any lingering spirituality. Zac didn't know what happened to the Mountain Spirit, but it had fully severed its connection to the mountain and its core. It wouldn't need any refinement and could be directly absorbed.

And as such, the mountain heart had become the perfect item to set up the foundation for his incredibly complex core. It was even a twin-attunement treasure. The fewer treasures he used to create the nucleus of his Cosmic Core, the greater the cohesion would be. With the [Calamity Core], he only needed to add a supreme treasure with Pure Conflict, and he'd have all the pieces he needed.

This would drastically increase his chances of success and even improve his chances of forming a higher-quality Cosmic Core. A top-tier foundation would act as a stabilizer as he extracted the energies of lesser treasures and added them to his core. With the incredible difficulties he faced with his Void Core, he couldn't give up on something like that. The treasure even came with a massive Mana Bonus, so there was no way he'd throw it away.

Zac reached the tunnel, and he wasn't very surprised that no powerful current of Death poured through the pathway anymore. The shakes were persistent and increased with ferocity. Innumerable cracks already covered the walls. The outside energies were siphoned off long before reaching the heart of the mountain, if they were dragged into the mountain at all.

The tunnel turned to a blur as Zac rushed toward the surface with utmost urgency, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake. It was a mix of karma- smell- and energy-purifying dust that would hopefully throw the beasts off his trail. But the raging beasts were the least of his worries, unless the source of that terrifying roar before returned.

The Calamity Mountain was a sinking ship with the spirit gone and the core extracted. He needed to get out before it leaked too much energy, or it'd become his tomb as it plunged into the depths. A high-pitched screech echoed out ahead, but the Pseudo Beast King didn't get a chance to react before its head was split in two by a Dao-empowered swing of [Verun's Bite].

Upgrading his soul had once more improved his control over Mental Energy, and forming his crude Dao Braids was effortless and instantaneous. Not only that, but the current layout of his soul allowed for faster extraction. In his current human form, he could easily draw exactly the energies he needed from his Evolutionary Soul Core.

It didn't directly improve his combat strength, but that was mostly because he hadn't yet investigated the limits of his spiritual control. He should be able to create better Dao Braids after forming a Three Fates Soul, perhaps even forming a simple Dao Array. The spiritual domain that he could naturally form was also a huge help.

It stretched hundreds of meters around him, even passing through the mountain walls with their strong energy-isolating properties. Better yet, it barely required any energy to run. It provided an additional

sense that helped him scout the path ahead for dangers. And being a passive domain, Zac suspected that only Mentalists would notice it, in contrast to Domain Skills that would give off clues from how it used Cosmic Energy.

Zac continued with breakneck speed, each step with [Earthstrider] moving him hundreds of meters through the tunnels. But soon, he opted to swap back to his undead form, using [Abyssal Phase] to squeeze through the cracks that had appeared all over. It saved him hours, but Zac was still worried. The situation grew increasingly dire, with whole tunnels collapsing.

More than one path had collapsed, to the point not even his wraith form could squeeze through. And he could tell that the mountain had slowly started to sink, though it still was a gentle descent. And there were still miles and miles of tunnels he needed to push through before he reached the surface.

But eventually, a talisman hummed to life after the fiftieth attempt. Zac breathed out in relief and infused Miasma without hesitation. He was swallowed by aquamarine light a second later, displaced by the top-quality escape talisman. The dour tunnel was replaced by the glowing radiance of the thousand suns of the Calamity as he appeared a few thousand meters away from the crumbling mountain.

The two attuned suns had started to drift away, and boulders fell like rain from below. Zac couldn't pinpoint the reason, but it looked like the mountain had died, if such a thing was possible. A hint of decay and mourning gripped the whole thing, and huge clouds of stockpiled energies leaked out from the thousands of tunnels.

A huge maw suddenly appeared right in front of him, but the jagged edge of [Gorehew] rebuffed the beast long enough for five putrefying chains to dig into the body of the winged salamander. The beast shrieked with pain as flesh started to slough off from its body, and it fell into the abyss a moment later.

The danger was averted, but the salamander was just one of innumerable beasts all around him. The sky was filled with animals fleeing the mountain, forming a deadly beast tide. There were hundreds of Beast Kings and thousand times that number of E-grade beasts who possessed the ability to fly. Many had already trained their gazes at Zac, but they quickly looked away as Zac released his murderous aura and Daos.

Zac had already confirmed there was no Middle-stage Beast Kings in the tide. There was no sign of the leader of the mountain either. Its aura had suddenly disappeared just before he seized the [Calamity Core]. Zac almost wondered if it was connected to the mountain somehow, and died when the mountain did. Of course, it was also possible it left for the higher reaches of the Calamity after its home was destroyed.

That wasn't an option for most of the remaining beasts, and Zac knew huge upheavals would rock the lower layers of the storm for the coming months, possibly years.

As for Zac, he had no interest in staying on to see the fallout. The Beast Kings had better things to worry about than Zac, and he was in no mood to waste energy fighting a mountain's worth of beasts. The glider had already appeared beneath his feet, and he had it fly away from the tide, heading for the vast emptiness beneath.

As luck would have it, the starting island was actually not that far away. He and the toad had essentially moved in a huge circle while moving toward the mountain, climbing a bit higher with every jump. Now,

the exit was just two islands over one layer down, so there was no need to go back the same way he came.

Thousands of beasts followed in his wake. Not to hunt him down, but rather to reach the islands below. But most seemed somewhat lost, just hovering around the crumbling mountain, perhaps hoping it would stabilize again—a futile hope.

The air screamed around him as Zac followed Null's guidance beam. Occasionally some agitated beast would succumb to its instincts and try to attack him, but they were swiftly turned into bloody warnings for the others to stay clear. The real danger was the environment itself. Jumping down wasn't as dangerous as climbing higher, but the attuned winds grew stronger by the minute.

He was forced to put the glider away a few times and brave the winds with his body until he fell through a rough patch. Zac's heart was beating like a hammer all the while. He was essentially parachuting without a parachute inside a raging storm. But one hour later, Zac finally saw the edge of an island below. It wasn't the starting continent, but it had to be a neighboring one.

Zac landed on the island's edge, partly hidden among a vanguard of fleeing beasts. Deafening roars greeted him, and the bloody air was proof the great reshuffling of the Calamity had already begun. Each island could only support so much life, far less than the massive mountain had housed. Zac didn't join the mayhem, instead keeping a low profile as he ran toward the other side.

After some deliberation, Zac opted to stay in his Draugr form. There was a high risk of a rough battle waiting for him up ahead, and he didn't want to expose his human side if not needed. In contrast, his Draugr persona already had a reputation as a top-tier expert thanks to the global message, which might make some people back down. After all, this was a Red Zone without any safety nets.

Even then, it only took half an hour before Zac felt a weak pang of danger as a bolt of nothingness shot toward him with incredible speed. It was launched from a dead angle, not creating so much as a ripple of energy. Zac could still sense it with his newfound domain, allowing him to adapt even faster than just relying on his Danger Sense.

Zac dodged as layers of death spread from his body, kicking up a storm in the environment that swallowed the forest around him. His spiritual domain was strong, but it didn't have the reach of his Peak-Mastery [Fields of Despair], which exposed two warriors—one hiding in the distance whereas the other was almost upon him, moving at breakneck speed.

The projectile passed him by with incredible momentum, punching a fist-sized hole straight through a nearby boulder. It had to have contained incredible force to destroy the hard rocks of the floating islands so effortlessly. Even Zac wouldn't have had an easy time absorbing such a blow. But there was no time to worry about the hidden archer.

Four chains dripping with corrosion shot forward, forming a deadly prison as the jagged edge of [Gorehew] appeared. The skill hadn't changed much since reaching peak mastery. It only built upon what it already had. The jagged edge was sharper, heavier, and could absorb blood far more efficiently in a protracted war.

Instilled with the branches of Pale Seal and War Axe, it carried terrifying weight as it cut toward the incoming warrior. However, Zac suddenly swirled around, cutting empty air as a chain impaled the

hooded attacker. His swirl repositioned the chains, allowing them to slightly divert three more projectiles launched from the shadows. Zac growled with annoyance upon seeing cracks appear on the chains of [Love's Bond].

The incoming warrior shattered like a broken mirror when [Love's Bond] pierced him, and the real warrior appeared where Zac swung his axe. The jagged edge crashed into a refractive barrier. The shield was completely incapable of stopping Zac's momentum, but the warrior was already gone by the time he'd cut it through.

A scream in the back of his mind warned of danger, but there was no time. A huge conflagration swallowed Zac, but its force wasn't enough to leave more than shallow wounds on his frame. The flames were cut apart with a swing of [Gorehew], and a stomp quenched them altogether. After looking around, Zac snorted and continued walking.

The two attackers were already gone after their ambush failed. He'd sensed the melee fighter teleporting to the edge of [Fields of Despair] when his defensive skill failed. Then he was gone before Zac could catch up, and the ranged fighter similarly chose to back away. Without using [Pillar of Desolation] or [Arbiter of the Abyss], there was no way to make the two assassins stay.

The two clearly hadn't gone all out, only testing the waters to see if it was a worthwhile fight. Witnessing Zac's strength, they instantly chose to back down. Unfortunately, it was a very real chance the two were only scouts, and the real fighting force was somewhere close by. Zac was confident in his strength, but he didn't like the idea of fighting a whole faction so soon after breaking through, with his soul still in a fragile state.

He was about to flash away with [Abyssal Phase], but a rumble made him pause and look up. A smile spread across Zac's face as the sky darkened. He might be alone, but at least he had the environment on his side.