

The Fall 1009

[Chapter 1009 - Final Gauntlet](#)

The air screamed, and a series of explosions ripped open a set of new wounds before Zac's blood calmed the storm in his immediate vicinity. He was almost dragged to the sky, but he quickly took out his bar of [Nightlight Alloy] to anchor himself to the ground. The huge block was twisted and bent, with most of its spirituality gone. The environment and collisions had already damaged it to the point that it had depreciated half a grade.

It should last him until he left this place, though. And if not, he had more heavy materials prepared in his Spatial Ring.

As Zac expected, he didn't need to travel far before reaching the island's edge. Visibility was so bad he couldn't see even a few meters ahead. He would probably have run right off the edge if not for his spiritual domain. The storm was even more ferocious at the shores, where the downdraft agitated the immense amounts of energy around him. Unsurprisingly, neither beasts nor cultivators were waiting for him, like when he first jumped islands.

Just scanning the immediate vicinity was difficult, so spotting the starter island far in the distance was downright impossible. The chaotic storm drowned out all sounds and energy. There could be an all-out war raging on the other shores for all he knew.

Zac found a crevasse partly protected from the storm, and his ichor helped it become a temporary harbor against the madness. The idea was to use the shrouding effect of the storm to his advantage as he made his way to the teleporter. He was confident in being able to elude most people in this environment. And even if he were spotted, he could probably outrun them when utilizing the calming effect of his blood.

It was disallowed to stay in the immediate vicinity of the teleportation pillar for more than ten minutes. So long as he made it within a few hundred meters, he'd be safe. As far as he was concerned, the biggest hurdle was the vast gulf between himself and the next island. The problem was essentially the same as what he'd encountered in the Twilight Chasm.

Jumping between the mountains had been a dangerous venture, where he risked being dragged into the depths by the powerful and erratic currents. Here, he faced a similar issue, and he didn't have a bunch of throwaway flying treasures that could take the brunt of the impact. He had three gliders—the main one and two spares—but he didn't expect them to last more than a few seconds before being ripped apart by the winds.

That didn't mean the crossing was impossible. He'd considered this problem since the storm descended. This time, he hadn't been suddenly dragged into the air like when he entered the Cataclysm, and he had already come up with multiple solutions. Still, Zac didn't move, instead opting to observe the storm for a bit longer.

The more Zac looked, the more he felt there was an order to the madness of the Calamity. Perhaps order was the wrong term, but there were rules to the lack of rules in the endless war between Life and Death. Zac couldn't pinpoint any patterns at all; it was more of an instinctual thing. He didn't know if it was intuition awarded by his path or lingering comprehension from the times he'd held true Chaos in his

body. Either case, he felt a weak connection to the everchanging vista in front of him, a connection which grew stronger as time passed.

Nothing special happened for the next ten minutes. Zac saw no one cross the chasm, and no cultivators had passed by his hideout. Neither was there any news forthcoming from the earth cultivator who managed to escape. If he hadn't gotten any Kill Energy by this point, he had most likely survived. He hadn't opted to send out a message like the leader of that other coalition he'd butted heads with. It was a shame. Zac was actually disappointed. A global message saying a lone Draugr was carrying the [Calamity Core] would have been a good misdirect.

Suddenly, Zac's eyes widened as he shot forward, the Void Energy in his body instantly transforming him into an abyssal wraith. It was intangible and the reasons were unclear, but this was his window of opportunity. Even the fierce winds slowed down as the Calamity was reduced to a dour monochrome hue. His intangible form moved with speed and precision, weaving an intricate web between the greater accumulations of energy as he followed the guiding beacon of the teleportation pillar.

One thing was different since he'd taken the leaps of faith between the mountains of the Twilight Chasm, apart from his strength being far greater. He'd since gained his Draugr Hidden Nodes, of which [Adamance of Eoz] was incredibly useful in this situation. The gales and unstable energies tried to destabilize his skill and rip him apart, but he refused to give in.

The Hidden Node made him an immovable stone in a surging river. The effect had even grown more pronounced after he'd improved his Heart Cultivation. Zac had long since realized that the Draugr nodes resonated with emotion. The more purpose that pushed you forward, the more the abyss would provide.

It allowed Zac to resist having his vulnerable spectral form destroyed as he moved across the gulf. Even then, he had to endure an agonizing baptism for every meter he advanced. Eventually, he couldn't hold on any longer, even if he hadn't moved more than half the distance. At that very moment, the surroundings darkened, and a bloodied Zac appeared in the air, grinning upon seeing a huge piece of rock falling toward his location.

The boulder was hundreds of meters across, its sheer mass subduing the storm around it as it fell toward him. Whatever kept the mountains and islands afloat was still acting upon the massive boulder, and it descended with less than half the expected speed. This was exactly what he thought he'd sensed in the storm and why he immediately shot out from his hiding place. His instincts had proved him right, even if his position was slightly off.

He gritted his teeth and repositioned himself with another burst of spectral movement. Suddenly, he was right out of the falling mountain's way, and a command to his Specialty Core prompted a surge of vibrant life spread through his body. The ichor painting his body black was suddenly joined by a coating of red. Zac had started falling already, but a patch of grass appeared beneath his feet. He stood upon the boulder a moment later and began running across its surface.

Five golden pillars were erected in his wake, right in the middle of the rock, while a golden wreath appeared on Zac's head. The five pillars were completely straight, with ancient steles fastened to them. Yet they seemed like the fingers of an empyrean God digging out from the ground to protect him. The

golden radiance of [Empyrean Aegis] joined the gold and black of the surroundings, but the life-attuned half of the storm was curtailed just like the death was.

Order and tranquility were imposed on the area, forming a sanctuary in a world gone mad. Zac didn't stay on the falling boulder after confirming the situation. He jumped off the edge, each step taking him hundreds of meters with [Earthstrider]. The environment severely suppressed his movement skill the last time he was caught in the madness. But with the help of the defensive domain awarded by [Empyrean Aegis], he could move almost half the distance of the skill's original capability.

The boulder and the pillars grew increasingly distant as they continued their descent into the depths, but it didn't matter. Reaching Peak Mastery of the defensive skill had fundamentally changed how it worked. It was no longer a defensive domain centered around the area close to the pillars. It was now two domains connected through some unknowable means. The laurel on Zac's head transmitted the energy of the pillars to his direct surroundings, and any damage was diverted and transmitted back to the pillars.

If he had stayed close to the pillars, the two domains would have superimposed, increasing the suppression and defense by almost half. The skill would also have worked even without the mountain piece acting as a foundation. However, the falling boulder created a small wind tunnel in its wake, protecting the pillars from taking too much damage from the ambient atmosphere. Thus, they could tank more damage for Zac.

The distance the skill worked was incredible. During his experiments back on Earth, Zac managed to keep the skill active with the pillars on one side of his island while he stood on the other. With the speed the boulder fell, he would long since have landed on the other shores before the pillars were dragged out of reach. Of course, he couldn't expect the skill to work as well in this chaotic environment.

Each step took him closer to the other shores, but Zac soon closed in on the limit of air steps permissible by [Earthstrider]. By that point, two pillars had already crumbled from forcing his way through the storm. Yet three remained, so Zac took out his glider, using the lull the empyrean domain had awarded him. Zac used every method in the book to force his way through the storm. Two broken pillars turned to four, and crackling sounds echoed out from his golden crown as the storm furiously tried to rip apart the empyrean domain.

Eventually, the final pillar crumbled, which unleashed a massive golden wave. The storm was pushed back for over a hundred meters, and Zac used the breather to take out a patch of soil to reset [Earthstrider]. Still, no land was in sight, though Zac knew he'd almost made it across. He steeled his heart as he plunged into the madness, using only his body to brave the explosions. [Ancestral Woods] would have managed to move him a good distance, but it was a landlocked skill.

The shallow cuts across his body were soon replaced with massive tears that released copious amounts of blood into the surroundings. Without his powerful constitution, he would have quickly been rendered unconscious from such a loss. Instead, it turned into a weapon that allowed him to fly a little bit further. But the wounds accumulated too fast, and Zac couldn't keep up any longer. He could only pray he'd made it far enough as he took out another heavy metal block and fell toward the ground.

Zac's prayers were soon answered as solid rock rapidly came up on him. A groan escaped his lips as he slammed onto the ground, his wounds worsening even further. The crossing had been deadlier than the

fight with the earth cultivators, and he knew he had to change his plans a bit. The teleportation array was still over an hour's travel away—a journey well beyond what he could endure in his current condition.

His body groaned in protest, but he scrambled to his feet and started running. He moved while scanning the surroundings, continuously using the trapped Kill Energy to run [Surging Vitality]. He needed to be a bit bloodied to stave off the storm, but the last stretch had pushed him far beyond what was needed or safe. After five minutes, Zac sensed a small crack in the mountain, leading to a hidden cave ten meters deeper in the foundations.

Death made a reluctant return and snuck inside using [Abyssal Phase]. Zac spent the better part of the next hour recuperating and recovering his Miasma. The moment he felt strong enough to continue, he moved out again, opting to stay undead. All skills but [Pillar of Desolation] could be used again, meaning he wasn't a sitting duck. Besides, his human form had probably been spotted entering the Calamity days ago, which meant people might be looking for him.

Zac flew out of the hidden cave, continuing his journey. His senses were stretched to their limits while he hid his presence with every tool he possessed. He sensed a few discordant auras in the distance, most likely arrays erected to brave the storm. Zac gave them a wide berth as he advanced, but a frown appeared on his face after half an hour. The storm was abating.

His protective cover was about to disappear, and his senses could already reach twice as far as before. It helped him navigate the dangerous terrain, but the risk of discovery increased by the second. Zac shredded all pretenses as he started running as fast as his legs could carry him, opting for speed over stealth. But he got an increasingly bad feeling as the minutes passed until he sensed a minute ripple.

A tracking array. Zac stopped in his tracks, and three corpses appeared on the ground. Each was pierced by a chain, soon forming a macabre entourage floating behind Zac's back as he closed in on the teleporter. He only managed to proceed another five hundred meters before the expected blockade appeared.

"That's far enough, Draugr," a booming laugh echoed as a glittering barrier sprung up around him.

It shuddered when faced with the abating gales but held in the face of the storm. Zac frowned as he looked at the approaching figures. Six beastmen, led by a white-and-gold furred lionman. A large sapphire was fastened on his forehead, and hundreds of smaller gemstones were connected by intricate golden links in his mane. He exuded a powerful aura that partly harmonized with the environment: Life and Nature.

"I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me when I saw the son of Azra desperately flee toward the teleporter, looking like he'd been chewed and spit out by a Hellmaw," the lion laughed. "I guess it was true. It looks like you're even more dangerous than we thought. But you've already fought one battle, and you're all alone. Hand over the [Calamity Core], and you can be on your way."

Zac inwardly swore. He'd hoped his gruesome display would have at least given anyone second thoughts about targeting him. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to subdue this beastkin, and Zac wasn't surprised. Zac felt the lion give off an even greater pressure than the earth cultivators, even if he was only a sixth-

echelon guest. Either a new arrival or someone who intentionally kept his Mana low to enjoy the opportunities of the Perennial Vastness a bit longer.

It looked like another battle couldn't be avoided. This time, Zac wasn't confident in finishing the job with his undead form alone. He would probably have to find a chance to swap races and fight on as a human. It would expose his second identity ahead of schedule, but getting out of the Calamity with the [Calamity Core] was more important than scamming some people like he did before the previous mission release.

But the barrier exploded just as Zac prepared to activate his skills.

"Who said he's alone?" a stern voice cut through the winds as the area was filled with a storm of blood.

Death was no longer Death, and Life was no longer Life. It was fused into Blood, the grand heritage of the Eternal Clan. In the heart of the storm, the two vampires walked, accompanied by three Revenants, two Corpse Lords, and what appeared to be a Death-cultivating human. The two Vampires were the very same ones he'd seen at a distance in Vastness City, who he later learned were called Ysaya and Solomis Noz'Serasta. It was Solomis who had spoken just now, and his face was a cold mask of murderous intent.

He'd also seen a Zoris Noz'Visku in the Vastness City, but he wasn't present today. It didn't matter. Ysaya and Solomis were the two stronger of the three, each having an aura that matched the lion's. Furthermore, they were barely restrained by the unstable environment, just like how Uona had thrived in the Twilight Ocean. The individual auras of their followers weren't at the level of the beastkin, but by adding Zac, undead outnumbered beastkin nine to six.

"Your dream must have muddled your senses," Ysaya added with a smile, though killing intent veritably poured out of her body.

One by one, an array of sanguine icicles formed around her. Each one contained enough energy to annihilate most Peak E-grade cultivators, yet the vampire seemed to have no problem forming over thirty.

"Maybe it's time for you all to wake up."

The lionman frowned at the not-so-veiled threat, hesitantly looking at Zac, who mutely stared back. His eyes briefly shifted to the three bodies hanging from the chains before he shook his head with a sigh.

"Whatever. Guess luck's on your side," the lionman said as he motioned the others to back down.

"Who's to say who the lucky one is today?" Zac countered as he walked over to the two vampires, stowing away the corpses before the environment damaged them too much.

The woman looked at Zac curiously before shrugging, and the group turned back toward the teleporter. Zac was technically among kin, but his vigilance only increased as the minutes passed.

"So, are you here to search me as well?" Zac eventually asked after they were well out of earshot. "I doubt you came running out of the goodness of your hearts."

It was certainly true that while the Undead Empire had internal friction, they stood united against outside pressure. However, his experiences in the Twilight Ocean had already proved unity collapsed in the face of opportunity. That was doubly true in secluded places like Mystic Realms, and the Eternal Clan

was the most mercurial of the Divine Races. For them to stick out their necks for him was highly unlikely, even if they wouldn't necessarily go out of their way to rob him.

Something was wrong with the situation. Two sets of sanguine eyes turned toward Zac, giving him an appalling sense of Déjà vu of his desperate battle with Uona.

"True," Ysaya grinned. "You've given us some prestige in the short window since you arrived, but that's not enough for us to come running to your aid. We do have ulterior motives."