

The Fall 1017

[Chapter 1017 - A Rising Tide](#)

[Mana: 18,953]

Zac looked at the line appreciatively. Less than two months had passed since arriving, yet he was already approaching the third echelon. He was more than a year ahead of schedule, giving him much more leeway. Better yet, the Mana was only a cherry on top of his real gain—[Cosmic Forge]. And now, a final windfall waited for him.

"Alright, buddy, you've squeezed Mana out of all of us. Time to get this show on the road," the barbarian hollered, not even trying to hide his jealousy over Zac's good fortune.

"Why look so glum?" Zac smiled. "Didn't most of you discover new directions to improve your blueprints?"

"Sublime energy comprehension," the cold-eyed mage said while looking at Zac speculatively. "I am quite curious how you've reached that point as an E-grade cultivator. Especially when you do not follow a path utilizing that knowledge."

"If you want, we can postpone the auction while I regale you about my experiences?" Zac smiled, but he didn't get so much as a scoff in response.

"Guess not. Well, place your bids. Coins are fine, but I am also looking for Supreme Perennial Treasures."

Perennial Treasures weren't a true categorization but a local name for treasures found in the Perennial Vastness and useful in Core Formation. He was hoping to find something either for himself or his companions. If that failed, he'd take cash since he suspected he could get a tidy sum for the kernel. A few of the people in the crowd looked quite wealthy.

"100 D-grade Nexus Coins," a beastkin offered, but he didn't even have time to finish the sentence before being outbid.

"300."

"450."

A series of rapid-fire offers pushed the price tag upward, but Zac wasn't overly enthused. The item had crossed 1,000 D-grade nexus coins in seconds. It was a fair offer for what was essentially a Pseudo D-grade treasure, but not what Zac hoped to hear when faced with a bunch of scions from the inner regions of the Multiverse.

"I have a set of [Sundew Drops] found in the Red Zone Umber Steppes."

"I have an unnamed fruit I found in the Blackstar Ruins. It holds immense resentment."

"Pah, what good are those things? Neither are supreme treasures. Fifty thousand," the barbarian grinned, which made Zac look over in surprise.

It wasn't just that he had added a zero to the price in one go. Zac was surprised the man had so much money to throw around. He'd guessed the barbarian was a bit like himself regarding his background. The

warrior's raw power was quite impressive, but his combat style had some glaring flaws. Furthermore, his blueprint had been so rough that Zac gained 40 Mana from the bounty.

In other words, the barbarian seemed like a talented warrior who had gotten his hands on the Perennial Vastness Token through a fortuitous encounter rather than their family. Roughly a third of the guests had arrived that way, and they generally had weaker backgrounds and smaller purses.

Then again, while many of the scions had arrived in the Perennial Vastness with massive fortunes, that money wasn't for them. It was rather provided by their families to purchase various materials they were lacking or things that could be traded for profit. If they burned that capital on cultivation resources for themselves, they'd get punished upon returning.

50,000 D-grade Nexus Coins was a massive price tag for a single item, eclipsing most of his Cosmic Vessels. But it wasn't enough to make more than half of the guests back down. The price continued to climb toward 100,000 until an impatient snort echoed through the valley.

"1 C-grade Nexus Coin," the emerald mage said with not so much as a ripple in her eyes.

A silence spread across the crowd, and all eyes were suddenly trained on the human mage. A few looked at her like she was a fool, while most had ruminating or downright jealous expressions.

"One point five," the barbarian said with grit teeth. "Come on, darling? I'll owe you one."

"Five," the mage countered without missing a beat, completely ignoring the barbarian. "But on one condition."

Zac didn't immediately answer. Instead, he turned to the others, but everyone indicated they were out. Zac was disappointed, but he understood their thoughts. Fate Kernels ultimately had limited usefulness. Those who had the qualifications to arrive here were either extremely talented or connected. Forming a Cosmic Core was almost a given. A Fate Kernel could slightly improve the result, but the Perennial Vastness was already doing most of the heavy lifting with its Mana.

The kernel would save a few decades of cultivation in the D-grade at most. Paying multiple C-grade Nexus Coins for that simply wasn't worth it for most. Furthermore, few scions would carry that wealth for their cultivation. For example, Catheya only had a few hundred D-grade Nexus Coins until her experiences in the Twilight Ascent elevated her status. This young woman was no doubt a real big shot.

Five C-grade Nexus Coins was a massive windfall even for Zac with all his ventures. He'd hoped for 1 C-grade Nexus Coin if a heated bidding war erupted, but this woman threw out money like it was worth nothing. A smile tugged at Zac's lips upon seeing Ogras turn a shade greener on the sidelines. Perhaps he was even regretting absorbing his kernel instead of pawning it off.

"What condition?" Zac asked when it was clear no one planned to outbid her.

"I want to know the origin and nature of the opportunity you encountered," the mage said.

"I can divulge the origins but not what I got my hands on," Zac said after some thought.

"That's fine," the mage said as she walked over.

Meanwhile, the emerald barrier around the valley dissipated, and Zac was surprised to see eight people standing outside. The barrier had looked transparent, but it had been manipulated not to show Zac that more people had arrived. He wryly smiled, not too broken up about it. The sudden windfall was already better than he'd expected from his impromptu scheme.

"Should've asked grandma for more money," the barbarian muttered as he strolled away. "Hey, dead guy. If you're planning to head to one of the war zones, bring me along, yeah? I could use your luck."

"Sure," Zac smiled. "But we'd be in contention for the treasures."

"You bring the chaos, and I'll fish in the muddy waters," the barbarian laughed before he jumped away.

One by one, the rest left as well. The opportunities were gone, but everyone knew this place would get more volatile as time passed. They had already been scammed out of some Mana and weren't interested in bringing more trouble down on their shoulders. A handful stayed on, refusing to give up based on just Zac's words.

The mage erected a barrier around the two, which far surpassed any of the isolation arrays Zac possessed. He couldn't sense a thing from the outside, like the array had formed a separate dimension.

"I'm Arcaz Umbri'Zi, by the way."

"I've heard of you," the mage nodded. "Asta Ar."

"Do you sell these arrays?" Zac asked curiously.

"This one has proprietary solutions, but I sell slightly depreciated versions. They only lack 8% strength and lack the defense against a few types of advanced spying methods," the mage said. "However, they do not run on Miasma."

"That's fine," Zac shrugged as the canister floated over. "Give me a couple and deduct the price from your purchase."

"I studied the pillar for two hours before it dissipated," Asta commented. "This glass case is fake."

"Sure, but the kernel is real," Zac said, not too surprised an array master could figure out his scheme.

"How did you prevent it from dissipating?"

"Just filled the canister with the weird energy inside the inheritance. I figured I'd notice if it started to break apart."

"I see," Asta said, clearly not buying Zac's explanation. "And the origins?"

"The First People," Zac said and recorded a translated version of the primer's first chapter.

"The First People, how extraordinary," the woman sighed, her face softening quite a bit. For a moment, she reminded Zac of Vai, brimming with academic curiosity. "Where did you get this text from?"

"I found a book with historical accounts rather than skills or cultivation manuals."

"It's really one of the 229," Asta muttered, prompting Zac's eyes to widen.

"You knew of this place?"

"I didn't know it was a precept of the First People, but I have read about their heritages. A few of their remnants have appeared over the years, including one in a neighboring empire. It had collapsed, and the inheritance was lost, but the explorers found a book. Eventually, some of the contents were leaked and spread. Are you amenable to selling the book or making a copy?"

"You can come and get a translated version after I've read the book in full," Zac said after some thought. "I want to ensure there are no hidden impartments within before letting it spread."

The First People's greatest desire was to be remembered, so Zac felt he could just as well spread the primer. It was just a small act of reciprocity in the face of the massive gift they'd given him. But he'd keep the original for himself, just in case.

"That's acceptable," Asta said. "I'm a member of the Tranquil Moon Pavilion. Please let me know if you find any other items or writings of historical significance during your stay. We are always searching for lost and ancient knowledge."

"Sure," Zac waved.

He had no idea what the Tranquil Moon Pavilion was, but he guessed it was a powerful sect from the heartlands. It wasn't often Zac met sect disciples. Most regions were dominated by clans rather than sects, which wasn't surprising. A family had an easier time maintaining cohesion against outside threats, and they had a cultivation advantage regarding bloodlines. Besides, the Limitless Empire was governed this way, which created echoes across the Multiverse through the system.

Still, many regions were fully controlled by sects, who maintained their dominion by ensuring no families grew too powerful. They held rigorous testing across their lands, making sure to bring talented children into the fold long before they could grow up and become pillars of a family.

Asta left, and Zac followed suit after confirming Ogras was already gone. He ran through winding paths for a few minutes before activating [Abyssal Phase]. The mountain range turned to a blur as Zac pushed the skill to its limits, crossing vast swathes in minutes. When he couldn't maintain the skill any longer, he reformed and kept running for another twenty minutes.

Zac eventually stopped before a seemingly normal wall, but he passed right through it after scanning the region as best as he could. A series of tunnels would lead to the other side of the mountain, but Zac simply took out a chair and sat down. It was a meet-up location he and Ogras had prepared before heading toward the final seal.

Twenty minutes later, Ogras stepped through the illusion array, grinning as he saw Zac sitting in meditation. "Everything went well?"

"No complaints."

"No complaints," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "Heaven-touched bastard. I thought I made off like a bandit, selling information packages and recordings for 18,000 D-grade Nexus Coins. Clearly, my ambitions are too low."

"Well, that's not too bad a haul for some information," Zac said. "Where's Catheya?"

"She's not too far from here," Ogras said. "She opted to move closer to the teleportation pillar after the first group of people arrived. She could send a warning in case there were some big movements that way, and I guess being a solo undead in this kind of situation is a bit precarious."

Zac nodded, and the two set out through the mountain, soon emerging on the other side. Ogras appearance had returned to how he'd looked while the two toured the Quarry, while Zac was in his human form. They suddenly looked like the two random cultivators who had entered the Quarry in search of Fate Kernels 11 days ago.

"So, what did you get in there?" the demon eventually asked.

"I'm surprised you lasted a whole 20 minutes before asking," Zac laughed.

"Well?" Ogras said, not looking even slightly shamefaced.

"Well, nothing that would help either you or me in the short run," Zac said. "But come see me when you get a piece of War Regalia on your hands."

"What's going on?" Ogras asked with interest.

"I got a pretty interesting craftsman inheritance," Zac said. "Only part of it is unlocked, but I think it has amazing potential."

"Of course you did," Ogras sighed. "Now you're just lacking your sister's unnaturally precise Dao Control. Then, you can finally make everyone burn with envy."

"Don't be like that," Zac laughed. "A rising tide raises all ships."

Luckily Ogras didn't know about Jeeves and how Zac was meant to have exactly the ability he described. He'd never stop complaining.

"I guess that's true," Ogras nodded. "So, what now? I need to know which realm you'll turn on its head if I want to visit it beforehand."

"I need to go over my plans before making a decision. This encounter changed some things. It looks like I have to enter the Red Zones of all the Dao Peaks to advance my craft," Zac said.

"Might want to reach the fourth echelon first," Ogras offered. "That way, you'll at least have a weak Mana domain to help you withstand the environments. Some of those places are no joke, even for someone like you."

"We'll see how it goes," Zac nodded.

"Not even two months, and you've already caused so much chaos," Ogras sighed as he looked up at the sky. "I wonder, can the Perennial Vastness even survive ten years of your presence?"

One hour later, the two stopped and turned to look up at a mountain peak. Catheya stood there, lit up by the evening sun. Zac forgot to breathe for a second but was woken up by a snicker to the side.

"You're okay. I started to get worried. More and more people are coming," Catheya's voice echoed out, and Zac spotted an ice crystal floating nearby.

"Thank you for keeping watch," Zac nodded.

"How can that compare to your gift?" Catheya's voice echoed through the crystal. "Why not visit my place tomorrow? I didn't get a chance to thank you before properly, so let me act as host."

Zac looked up at the Draugr, a smile spreading on his face. "I'll see you there."

Catheya winked and was gone the next second, leaving a shimmering cloud of ice in her wake.

"A proper 'thank you,' huh? Lucky duck," Ogras grinned. "Don't come expecting that kind of gratitude from me, buddy. My spear doesn't stab that way."

"Thank the gods for that," Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

"I guess I should follow your lead," the demon muttered, scratching his chin. "There are quite a few women here who'd cause mayhem if they walked down the streets back home. Noble ladies finally out of the overbearing watch of their ancestors."

"Have fun. Just don't get yourself killed," Zac snorted. "I'll be going on ahead."

"Go, go. Get your reward. I'll see if I can sell my information packets to a few more people," Ogras waved. "And Zac? Thank you."

"You're welcome," Zac smiled as he disappeared.

A day later, Zac stood in his manor, infusing his will into the teleportation array.

"Catheya Sharvai'Zi," Zac said.

Twenty seconds passed where nothing happened until a teleportation gate finally opened. A cold wave blasted him the moment he stepped through, though there was a current of warmth burrowing into his pores. Death. Even then, it wasn't enough to sustain his Draugr form, and he had to constantly circulate his Miasma and Dao to stave off the creeping frost of Catheya's mansion.

The building itself was a series of quaint connected pagodas made of ice and black stone that stood on a hill overlooking a vast landscape that was essentially flat. It was a blistering tundra under a cold-blue moon, where swirls of ice gave the environment a mysterious sheen. The ground was pocked with pitch-black circles, and Zac soon realized they were ponds with deathly waters.

Just looking at them made Zac's mind shudder. For most, they were likely a death trap, but Zac suspected their depths were cultivation havens. That was doubly so for the small pond right before the pagodas. It didn't look much different from the other black spots on the horizon, but it emitted an intense chill. Furthermore, small ripples appeared on its surface, even with no wind. It was Dao.

"You're here," Catheya waved as she walked over.

She was not bothered by the cold, wearing a beautiful blue dress Zac hadn't seen before. With the ethereal backdrop, she looked like an ice goddess who'd walked out of a painting.

"You look nice," Zac croaked after realizing he had been staring a bit too long.

A smile played on Catheya's lips as she grabbed his hand. "Come. Let me show you my place."

