

## The Fall 1046

### [Chapter 1046 - Drifting Snow](#)

The islands looked like glimmering jewels, slowly bobbing about on the horizon. With the perpetual snowfall, they created an ethereal scenery. Of course, these small isles were actually the backs of huge beasts, transformed into death traps meant to capture and harvest the snow spirits. The Everfrost Titans were a type of ice-attuned tortoise, but they shared quite a few similarities to some insectoid species.

Atop their shells were the islands while a huge hive hid inside, which was where its descendants lived. The titans even birthed different types of creatures, only a scant few of which were true Everfrost Titans. Most were different types of helpers who took care of the Titans every need, allowing them to stay in a torpid state where they communed with the Dao.

Between each titan was a sea of black pebbles, each emitting an intense chill. It was a shame almost all of these things were useless for cultivation. It was the environment that was magical, not the stones. Only a few pebbles had managed to turn the icy Dao of this world into something permanent, but finding them was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Catheya sat unmoving, releasing her Dao while Miasma cycled through her body. Her thoughts were empty as she turned herself into a beacon of ice. The falling snow was changed as it entered her proximity, transformed into sharp ice holding the chill of death.

It was odd. Not the transformation of the Dao around her but how the world reacted. It didn't try to rebuff her; it felt like it wanted to commune. It was a fleeting sensation, coming and going. One moment, she was Catheya, and her Dao was the Dao. The next, she felt like the vast ocean, stretching toward infinity. Ancient, powerful, vast.

Eruptions occasionally rocked the island, but Catheya barely noticed it. She was trying to make sense of the feeling. Initially, she feared she'd been led astray by the powerful Dao inside the Red Zone, prompting her to push toward the next stage of her Dao. But that wasn't the case. She had long since sealed her mind from the distorted truths of the Temporal Chamber. This was something else, an opportunity.

She just needed to figure out the root of the feeling.

The island tilted as an incredible shockwave almost threw Catheya into the ocean. The outburst had scared away whatever truth hid inside the area, and Catheya looked toward the inner regions of the island with helplessness. A minute later, Zac emerged, having transformed back to his Draugr form.

"That's all of them," Zac said as he stepped through the arrays. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Catheya realized her expression was a bit off and donned a smile. "More than okay. I think I just figured something out."

"As long as you're alright," Zac nodded while handing over a sack. "Only two of them this time."

"Thank you," Catheya said and stowed away the quest item. "It'll be a bit before the next one gets close enough. It must have fed recently. It hasn't responded to my signal at all."

These lumbering hives usually only drifted about on the pebble sea. If you waited around for two to get close enough on their own, you risked being stuck on the same island for days. The best way to speed up the process was to turn yourself into bait—broadcasting your Dao to make yourself look like a particularly tasty morsel.

If everything worked, it would make the Everfrost Titans curious and instinctively swim closer to investigate. Of course, the practice had borne a different kind of fruit today.

"Guess we're taking a break, then," Zac said as he took out a set of furniture, adding an environmental array to the dampening array.

The very breath of the Titans created a deep hum that had a hypnotic effect. It made the snow spirits lethargic as they dropped down on the island, and it had a similar effect on cultivators. Even powerful warriors risked falling asleep without dampening arrays to counteract the hum. And that was a nap you likely wouldn't awake from.

"This one was pretty stingy, so I had to use a lot of force. It shouldn't be able to send out any more workers for a couple of days."

"I heard," Catheya laughed. "I thought you would finally sink one of these guys."

"I can't believe how deep their sleep is," Zac wryly smiled. "I cut into its back with [Arcadia's Judgment], and it only stirred for a few seconds."

"It seems almost impossible to wake them up as long as you stay out of the tunnels," Catheya agreed. "I guess this zone would be too dangerous if it were any different."

The two talked for a while but eventually turned to their own matters. Zac continued going over his Core Formation Method while she tried to clear her head and recapture that feeling. But her thoughts weren't as calm as her face let on, making it hard to even enter a meditative state. The notes in Zac's hands were a constant reminder of the inescapable reality they faced.

"How many left now?" Catheya eventually asked, breaking the silence of the past half hour.

"Of what?" Zac said with confusion. "Mutated Chillhearts? As many as we can find."

"No," Catheya said, shaking her head as she gazed at the sunset. "Things for your tool."

"Oh," Zac said. "Just two. This one and one from the Peak of Chaos."

"Which you can get any time you want," Catheya sighed, feeling a bit lost.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"You know... We've never talked about what we'll do later. On the outside. We just keep skirting the subject. Now, three years have passed, and you're getting ready to rush for the finish line."

Zac froze for a second. Catheya could tell he was about to play stupid again, but he shook his head.

"Then let's talk about it," Zac said.

"Are we kidding ourselves, playing house inside a Time Chamber?" Catheya said, and it felt like the chill of the world crept into her heart. "Does our relationship have an expiration date?"

"I don't—"

"How would it even work?" Catheya pressed on, the words she'd held back over the past year spilling out of her like a broken dam. "You can't even visit the Kavriel Province because someone might target you. And I'm constantly afraid I'll be forced to act against you or hide things. I'm just a pawn.

"And even if everything works out, would it change anything? I can't keep up. I've tried. I've tried so hard, but it feels like you're getting further and further away. I've crushed both my and my family's expectations of me, but so what? Most of my accomplishments are thanks to my leaning on you. The Abyssal Shores. The Left Imperial Palace. The Perennial Vastness. All of it."

Catheya felt drained after unloading the misgivings in her heart.

"I don't want to be a blip on your journey before you move on to bigger and better things," she whispered. "But I can't see this ending any other way."

Zac said nothing for a few seconds, and Catheya didn't dare to look him in the eyes. It felt like an eternity passed. Then, she felt a thick arm wrap around her and drag her closer.

"I keep worrying about the future as well," Zac sighed. "I've been wracking my brains, but I don't have any answers or solutions."

"I'm sorry," Catheya whispered as she leaned against Zac's shoulder. "I wasn't planning to—"

"I only know one thing; I'm not satisfied," Zac interjected, and the determination in his words made Catheya shudder. "A few years with you isn't enough. I want more. Centuries, millennia. I'll do anything in my power to make that happen."

Chill turned to warmth, and Catheya found herself unable to say anything for a few seconds. She just wanted to sit like this forever.

"I'm not satisfied either," Catheya eventually said. "So what do we do?"

"Well. We just need to get through the trial in three years," Zac said. "After the Undead Empire has what it wants and some ancient faction has claimed the Eternal Heritage, my identity as a Flamebearer will be useless. It'll give us the breathing room to figure these things out. Perhaps we can go to the Abyssal Shores?"

"It doesn't change the fact that you're progressing with terrifying speed," Catheya said. "And I feel that the gap between us will only increase inside the Left Imperial Palace."

"So continue to lean on me," Zac said. "My accomplishments are not because I'm especially hard-working or talented. Part of it is dumb luck, and another is because people have helped me out or paved the way for me. You said many of your accomplishments are because of me. So what? That's how it's supposed to work."

"Still, our fates—"

"The universe has its plans, but we make our own fate," Zac said. "Only we can decide what this is and how it'll end. Even if I would progress faster than you, who cares? It would allow me to protect you. And there's no way the only successful couples out there are those whose Cultivation Level is at the same stage. What, it's impossible for a Late-Stage Hegemon to love a Monarch?"

Cathey took a steadying breath, her messy thought slowly calming down. That's right. So what if he grew stronger than her? What was wrong with having a powerful partner to lean on? Couldn't she live with his avatar inside his Inner World if his cultivation left hers behind? There were plenty of couples living that kind of lifestyle. With his dual races and mysterious ability to shield the heavens, he could even bring her to the kind of regions she'd always dreamed of seeing.

"Besides, it's not because of your strength I love you," Zac added, a mischievous smile spreading across his face. "It's because of your big—Ow!"

"Perv," Cathey huffed as she retracted the icicle from his side, but a small smile spread across her face as she straightened her back.

It felt like a knot in her heart had been undone, a weight on her shoulders lifted. He wasn't satisfied. It wasn't just a fling. She had just been influenced by his almost insane drive as he conquered one Red Zone after another, making her focus on their cultivation rather than their relationship.

Of course, that didn't mean everything was solved. If nothing else, there was the issue of them being apart for years. They say that distance makes the heart grow fonder, but it also brings danger. Accomplished men never lacked women trying to sneak into their hearts and into their bedchambers. She trusted Zac, but she didn't trust all the little skirts around him.

The biggest threat was obviously Iz Tayn. She had a terrifying background, and the bits and pieces she'd managed to extract from the demon indicated she was beautiful beyond compare. Her sheltered upbringing seemed to have left Iz naïve to the matters between men and women, but it was just a matter of time. What if that seed of friendship bloomed into something else?

Cathey would have to sear her image into her man's mind, so all the temptations on the outside would only make him think of her, of their time together in this place.

She eventually resumed her cultivation, releasing her Dao into the surroundings. It didn't take long for that feeling to return. Cathey didn't know what had changed, but it felt even closer. Clearer. And she didn't reject it. Cathey opened her heart and let the world connect.

Vastness, power, and stability filled Cathey as she felt her Dao resonate with the world. The falling snowflakes slowly started to rotate, and their gentle swirl soon turned into a massive vortex that spread further and further. Soon, it covered the whole island, yet it hadn't reached its limits. It felt like she could sweep through the whole world for a moment, but a painful sense of exhaustion prompted her to drag back her consciousness.

The connection was cut, yet Cathey felt she could reinstate it whenever she wanted. She looked up at the dissipating winds with interest, not caring that she'd just lost more than half her Miasma.

"What was that?" Zac said with shock. "Was that you?"

"Harmonization," Catheya muttered to herself before turning to Zac with a grin. "You're really my lucky charm. I really should repay you."

Zac looked confused, but a smile spread across his face as he glanced at the titan far in the distance.

"You said he'd just fed?"

"We have some time."

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Zac stepped through the gate, appearing on the teleportation square in his Draugr form. He couldn't even remember the chill of the Everfrost Isles, only the heat. Catheya had always been passionate, but she had really gone all out the past month. They had spent two extra weeks inside the Red Zone, but he hadn't even noticed.

"I need to enter seclusion," Catheya hummed to the side.

"Ah?" Zac said, dragged out of his dreamlike state.

"Will you be okay on your own?" Catheya asked with a smile that spoke volumes.

"Maybe one more mission?" Zac ventured, his blood stirring at the thought.

Catheya playfully fiddled with his fingers as she leaned closer, but Zac froze when he only got a small peck. "Next time."

Zac inwardly grumbled, but he knew she had to do this. Catheya had grasped a great opportunity and needed to figure out how to make the most of it. To think she'd suddenly learn the elusive ability of Earthly and Heavenly Harmonization. It was much rarer than intent or technique and generally considered impossible to train. Attaining harmonization was considered a matter of talent and fate, like stumbling onto a lucky opportunity.

The ability was quite impressive. It had felt like Catheya had become one with the world when she entered that state. More importantly, it allowed her to draw upon a small part of the environment's power, augmenting her strength while saving on energy consumption. Even when just having grasped the new ability, Catheya's skills had gotten around ten percent stronger. Given enough time, that number was sure to increase.

It was a free boost akin to having a second Cultivation Manual, but it wasn't without limitations. The biggest problem with Earthly and Heavenly Harmonization was that it wasn't always useful. In Catheya's case, she could only really draw upon the skill when the Heavens and Earth were aligned to her path. In other words, icy and deathly environment. The better the match, the more power she could extract from her surroundings. In contrast, the effect was almost negligible in environments not aligned with her Dao.

But what if you could turn the world around you into an image of your Dao?

That was the best solution they had come up with while traversing the Everfrost Isles. To form a bridge between the environment and yourself, allowing you to draw on its power even when you didn't have a natural affinity. This wasn't something new or groundbreaking. Catheya wasn't an expert on the subject, but she'd heard it was a popular method, and she had two ways to accomplish this.

The first was through using items, such as formations. She already had some experience in that regard, engraving simple arrays onto icicles she formed. Of course, it was only a small interest on her part and mostly geared toward Lich Arts. But she had talent in the subject and could quickly pick up the required techniques. The Earthly and Heavenly Harmonization could even alleviate one of the biggest drawbacks of Formation Masters; the large energy expenditure.

The second option was to work towards forming a Domain. Catheya had always had one of the greatest Dao Affinities of her generation in Clan Sharva'Zi, and her various encounters and opportunities had pushed those even further. Yet, she hadn't formed intent, a Domain, or something like his Techniques.

This was an intentional choice on her part. Her cultivation path had been in flux since the Twilight Ocean, where various opportunities had opened new doors for her. She was also unsure what role she saw herself taking—being more of a supportive caster and group leader or being an outright mage combatant. As such, she had been reluctant to transform her understanding of Dao since it was hard to undo something like that.

However, now that she'd attained Earthly and Heavenly Harmonization, it was time for her to pick a direction. Forming a Dao Domain now seemed superior to intent or technique. It was also a much simpler solution than working with Formations since it didn't force you to rely on equipment.

The problem was that this solution was extremely difficult. Harmonization internalizes outside Dao to elevate your own, while Domains externalize one's Dao to enforce it onto the world around you. They were essentially opposing theories; practicing both could be considered a paradox. Yet it was possible, and Catheya believed she had already taken the first steps in this direction.

Both Domain and Formations were great options that would not just create synergy with the Earthly and Heavenly Harmonization, but also directly improve her strength. She could even pick both to create an incredibly powerful cultivation system where all fed into each other. However, it was probably better to focus on one or the other before Ultom. It was better to master one aspect than have middling accomplishments in two.

Either way, she had finally found her path forward, and Zac's heart sang from seeing the unadulterated joy in Catheya's eyes. But even then, their discussion weighed heavily in the back of his mind. He'd so grandly proclaimed they'd make their own fate, but you needed power for that. Power that they didn't have, even if everything went perfectly in the Perennial Vastness and beyond.

Thankfully, he'd already found a solution; the Hollow Court. The problems that had kept them both up at night could be solved with one word from the Primo. Not even the Supremacies of the Undead Empire would dare have any differing opinion if he sat his foot down.

It was an easy trade; a treasure for freedom. He just needed to survive snatching it.