

The Fall 978

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The moment Zac infused his energy into the token, a deep hum like the moving of tectonic plates filled his ears as a series of runes sprouted around him. A storm of Cosmic Energy gathered above, almost covering the whole compound. It raged and roiled, and it only got worse when Ogras activated his token. It was almost like the sky was trying to eat itself.

Zac hadn't expected such a scene from activating the token, and he shared a look with Ogras.

"See you on the other side." the demon said before disappearing.

Zac nodded at the trio before rushing in the opposite direction. He only stopped at the edge of his compound and nodded in satisfaction upon seeing that the storm had stabilized and split into two. It was just a precautionary measure to ensure there wasn't any interference or issues with the teleportation.

The runes being conjured by the token grew more numerous by the second. They soon began attaching themselves to his body, forming a cocoon before a slit in space appeared below him. It wasn't some random spatial tear, though. It was lined with incredibly complex golden runes, far surpassing the patterns on any Teleportation Array he'd seen. Zac didn't get the chance to make any sense of them before being dropped inside, and he soon found himself launched through the Void of Space.

The experience was completely different from using the Teleportation Arrays. There was a palpable sense of speed even in the Void, and Zac suspected he was traveling hundreds, if not thousands, of times faster than when he was teleported with the standard arrays provided by the System in the Zecia sector.

It was a relief, though Zac was a bit confused. He'd expected that the System would perform one of its instant teleportations to send him to the Perennial Vastness, like when he visited the Hunt or the Tower of Eternity. Instead, he found himself shuttled at a speed beyond light for roughly thirty minutes until he saw light in the endless darkness.

A magic circle?

Was it something the token had conjured for him? No, if it had, why wait for half an hour? Besides, it was simply huge, at least the size of a planet, and it radiated such incredibly dense Spatial Fluctuations that the Void was pushed back. Something like that couldn't possibly be contained in his little token.

The runes on his body flickered, and Zac looked on with interest as a wheel turned in the middle of the circle. It almost looked like the gear on a bank vault, but the whole circle didn't open like a huge door. Instead, a small vortex, not much larger than Zac's cocoon, appeared right in front of him, and he shot through.

Zac didn't know exactly what just happened, but he believed it was one of those shortcuts Iz had mentioned. Looking back, he saw either the same or another magic circle shrink in the distance as Zac continued on his way. A similar scene happened twice more over the next two hours, until Zac saw an identical golden ring light up at his feet.

The next moment, the frantic movement was gone, and Zac found himself floating in endless darkness. It wasn't the Void, but rather a proper dimension that didn't try to rip him apart. He wasn't sure what was going on, but the token he'd held onto lit up, and a simple screen appeared in front of him.

[Please Wait]

So Zac waited for another ten minutes until he suddenly felt a vast presence descend upon him. It almost felt like receiving the attention of the System or the old Heavens, yet there wasn't the cold indifference of the former or the wrath of the latter. Instead, it felt like a calm ocean, almost soothing and welcoming.

Zac felt the consciousness spread through him, and he didn't try to fight it. For one, he knew there was no way he could, even if he wanted. Not even Mossy could compare to this presence. Secondly, he knew most of his secrets would be exposed when coming here one way or another. After all, he would potentially have to spend years forming his core, continuously swapping between his races.

What did it matter if his secrets were exposed now or later?

There was no other way. His chances at reaching Hegemony weren't great, even with the Light of Ultom creating an amazing Core Blueprint. Actually building it was simply too complicated, and he was just a Mortal. Even if he somehow succeeded in breaking through back home, he'd probably waste years in the process and end up with a Low-quality core at best.

By that point, the struggle inside Ultom might already have started, and he would have completely missed any chance at catching up with the elites who would enter.

The Perennial Vastness was his only shot at breaking through properly, forming a powerful enough foundation he'd be able to burst forth to the Peak Middle D-grade. At that point, he believed he'd be able to deal with almost any Frontier Hegemon, which would be an important lifeline for Earth.

So he watched on, fighting his instincts as he let himself get scanned, including his Specialty Core. Leandra's Array was active, but the presence saw right through it. Leandra had said it would work against most Autarchs, proving just how powerful this presence was.

The scan didn't linger too long on his Duplicity Core, though. It moved on after just a few seconds, leaving Zac with mixed emotions. Part of him just wanted to scream, 'Take a good look at the core! Isn't it amazing?' now that someone finally could see it. It was so powerful it was almost a cheat, and Zac had almost expected the owners of the Perennial Vastness to appear in front of him.

Yet, the presence seemed to deem it not very interesting. It actually spent twice the time looking at the constellation of Soul Cores dancing around in his Soul Aperture. Ten seconds later, both tendrils and presence were gone, leaving Zac alone in the emptiness of space. The screen telling him to please wait appeared once more until the darkness suddenly cracked.

"Welcome!" a bubbly voice said as the world was filled with color. "Welcome to the Perennial Vastness!"

"Uh, thanks," Zac said as he looked around with confusion. "What's going on?"

Zac didn't know what he'd expected of the Perennial Vastness, but it wasn't this. The name conjured images of endless plains or oceans stretching toward the horizons. Neither of them matched reality. Instead, he found himself in the middle of a swarm of cosmic fireflies, thousands of them all around him. Everything was hazy, making it impossible to know whether the lights were the size of a person or if they were suns far away in the distance.

"Some things are being prepared for your arrival, so you will have to wait a bit," the voice answered. "You can consider this the orientation."

"Alright," Zac hesitated as he looked around. "And who are you?"

"Isn't it polite to introduce yourself first?"

The voice was a bit childish and mischievous, making Zac think of Emily when she was still a teenager.

"I'm Zac," Zac said, not bothering to come up with another pseudonym.

From what Zac had gathered, the compulsions that guarded the secrets of this place were extremely thorough. The whole visit was subject to a confidentiality clause enforced by the System and empowered by whoever ran this place. Zac wouldn't even be able to discuss things with Ogras afterward, apart from the cultivation aspects and his gains in this place.

Not even the Undead Empire elites knew what was happening inside. Any attempts at breaking the restriction ended with the whole visit to the Perennial Vastness being wiped out—including your memories of your core formation and other gains. An A-grade Eidolon had tried to uncover the secrets without success, proving just how exquisite the seal was.

The Monarchs of the Undead Empire might have been holding back on him, but Zac doubted it. This place had been around for hundreds of millions of years, yet not a single piece of tangible information had spread out. It was safe to say that most things that happened here wouldn't leave the trial. As such, he'd decided not to be overly secretive, especially considering he'd be forced to showcase his two forms in either case.

Just as importantly, Zac was tired of running around taking on fake identities, hiding who he was while fearfully looking over his shoulder. That kind of behavior completely clashed with his path. In a sense, the Perennial Vastness was the perfect place to gauge the reactions from people all across the Multiverse as he showed more of his true self.

Of course, only an idiot would flaunt all their secrets for anyone who could see, but there had to be a middle-ground between paranoia and carelessness. While Zac wouldn't share his full name, he could at least go by Zac. He'd also modified his appearance so that no one could easily connect his identity to Zachary Atwood of the Zecia Sector.

"Zac, huh? You're kind of a weirdo, Zac of the Frontier," the voice giggled. "Then again, I shouldn't complain. I wouldn't have been born if you hadn't been a weirdo. Hum, since you're so weird, what should I call myself? Alright, you can call me Null."

"Null," Zac asked with confusion. "What does that have to do with me?"

"Look around you," Null said. "See all those lights?"

"Of course."

"Some of those are guests like you waiting to be sent down, others are beings entering the Perennial Vastness for other reasons. The lights are guides such as myself. Normally, we're sent to guide guests with matching affinities."

"Oh," Zac said with a wry smile upon realizing there was no light around him.

"Exactly," Null laughed. "The boss had to specially create me since you're a weirdo with no affinities. Don't worry, though. I have been imparted with all the knowledge I need. I won't be any worse than the others. Perhaps even better since I was handcrafted."

"Can I ask who the boss is?" Zac asked.

"Huh? It's the Perennial Vastness, of course."

"I know, but who owns it?"

"No one. The Perennial Vastness is the Perennial Vastness."

"The world itself is sapient?" Zac said with surprise.

"Something like that. It's beyond me, but the lines get blurred at the top. Either case, it's the Perennial Vastness that's reached an agreement with the System, and it's the one who sends tokens into the universe."

"Can I ask why?"

"Isn't it a bit late for that after already coming all this way?" Null snickered.

"Humor me," Zac smiled, feeling no animosity from the odd guide.

"Simply put, your cultivation system is imperfect because the Dao is yet imperfect. But with every generation, the Heavens mend and evolve, and the paths of cultivation evolve with it. Furthermore, this recovery process can be sped up, and the boss is one of the System's helpers. And you, in turn, are helping the boss with his task. In a sense."

Zac exhaled, finally putting two and two together. If what Null said was true, it was no wonder no faction had claimed this place, even if it was a top-tier Immemorial Realm—something that would attract even A-grade factions. Trying to snatch this place was to steal from the System, and few were foolish enough to do something like that.

And even if they dared, did they have the strength to do so? The System alone was enough of a deterrent, but the World Core was most likely monstrously powerful on its own. If the World Core had evolved to the point it could freely control the energy of its realm like a cultivator, it could absolutely steamroll any cultivator.

"So it was like that," Zac muttered, feeling more confident about his plans for this place. "Are you here to help me during this trial? Like a Tutorial pixie?"

"Yeah, that's a good analogy—a Tutorial Pixie, like on the outside. I'll be your guide and administrator until you leave. If you do good, my life will get upgraded. If not, I'll die."

"What?" Zac blurted. "What's up with those rules?"

"I don't know, I was just born," Null said. "My memories tell me that some of us prefer to hide it and then tell it later after we've bonded to get a better effect. But why not tell you from the start? In either case, let's work hard at creating your core. I'll do my best to guide you in the Perennial Vastness. You just focus on cultivation."

"Just to be clear, will anyone find out about my actions in here?" Zac asked.

"You're planning on creating trouble?" Null giggled. "That's fine. The Perennial Vastness is neutral, and we will help sever any Karma and remove any tracking marks before you leave. Of course, even if the other guests can't talk about you, they'll certainly remember certain aspects of you. So you'll have to figure out a way to kill them before they leave or bear their grudge."

"I'm going a bit ahead of schedule here, but I can add that the boss has covered the whole place in a couple of special arrays. People will not be able to remember your face or name on the outside. So even if you pass each other on the street, you'll not notice each other. But if you two clash and expose your auras, you'll be able to tell."

"I understand," Zac said. "Killing is allowed?"

"There are some rules and restrictions in place, but essentially yes. Struggle is Heaven's Law," Null said.

As expected, it seemed like you couldn't just seclude yourself for a couple of years and form your core without a care in the world. Even then, Zac wasn't planning on staying low-key. Trying to stay unnoticed might just end with him not getting the resources he needed to form his incredibly complicated Cosmic Core.

Furthermore, this trial wasn't like the Twilight Ocean. There weren't any old monsters around who could turn him into ash with a look. Secondly, he wasn't the same person as he was back then. He'd entered the Twilight Ascent as a Middle E-grade cultivator with mostly F-grade skills, imperfect techniques, and Dao Fragments rather than Dao Branches.

By this point, almost all of his skills were already pushed to E-grade Peak Mastery, he had three Middle Stage Dao Branches, and his Combat Technique was already at Middle Integration. Even if he couldn't guarantee he was the strongest participant in this place, he was definitely up there. This was doubly true when you considered that many peak factions, like Iz's family, had their own unique methods of forming Cosmic Cores. Iz could obviously get her hands on a Perennial Vastness token if she wanted it, but she had no interest or need to go to a place like this.

He was at the top, and most of his actions here would be sealed away. So why shy away from taking what he needed to succeed in his breakthrough? Even if he had created a blueprint after years of work, only half the battle was won. And nothing came for free in the Multiverse. Why would the Perennial Vastness be any different?

He would have to be both ruthless and shameless to snatch as many benefits as possible.

"You have the aura of a bloody conqueror," Null said, but there was no reproach in her voice. "That's good. I think I'll be one of the survivors. But don't get ahead of yourself. The place is not completely lawless. Are you ready for the tour?"

"Absolutely," Zac said, inwardly relieved that his unique constitution seemingly hadn't elicited much of a reaction except getting a tailor-made guide.

Zac hadn't gained much from the Undead Empire regarding the Perennial Vastness over the past years. If there were any factions with an inside scoop, the Undead Empire wasn't part of them. Instead, they had been forced to infer what little they knew about this place. For example, people knew it was a time-dilated trial by measuring the temporal energy inside the bodies of those who had returned.

According to the delegates from the Undead Empire, the average cultivator seemed to have spent 17 years in this place, at a temporal ratio of 1:10. Oddly enough, there didn't seem to be a strong correlation between how good a core the people got and how long they stayed in this place.

In fact, those who stayed the full 50 years generally emerged with suboptimal results. Conversely, there had been many examples of people emerging after just a few years with great cores. That was exactly Zac's goal so that he could return before the war started in earnest.

"Just one question, though. I want to join up with two other guests. Is that possible?"

"Of course. Some choose to go at it alone, while others team up. Both are viable options as you fight for Mana."

"Mana?"

"That's right," Null said as a gate opened in front of Zac. "The next few years of your life will be spent obsessing over Mana. Of how to get it and how to protect what you have. Only with enough Mana can we both reforge our fates. Now, let's go."

Roiling clouds shrouded the situation on the other side of the gate, but Zac almost blanked out from the incredibly dense energy that wafted over him.

So far, the Perennial Vastness lived up to its name.