

The Fall 981

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Null's explanation was music to Zac's ears. This was exactly what he'd hoped for. The opportunities and various treasure realms would certainly be useful, but Zac was more interested in the aspect of providence. Being able to use the energy of the world to contain and nurture his core while it was being built was a huge advantage for someone like him.

A cultivator would gradually form their core naturally by rotating their manual and making small adjustments. It was almost like a fetus that grew gradually and naturally in harmony with the Heavens. Meanwhile, a mortal's process was more like building a bomb inside your body by cramming more and more energy inside, all while trying to impose your blueprint on it.

"So Mana helps me form a core, but visiting the realms costs Mana?" Zac confirmed. "Won't that slow me down?"

"To use the Mana is to take a risk," Null agreed. "It might be a waste of time and a loss of resources, but you may also find unique treasures that will drastically help you with your Cosmic Core. You can rely on things you've brought or bought from others, but you know how it is with the best treasures.

Zac slowly nodded. Ultimately, many of the best treasures out there couldn't be preserved after being harvested. They relied on a unique environment to be born in the first place. The moment you took it away, the treasure would lose some of its spirituality. The Primal Dao he ate at the Twilight Chasm was a prime example of that. It wouldn't last a second after being freed from the purification array.

It was the same with many of the treasures he'd brought out from the Twilight Ocean. Some had lost most of their efficacy upon leaving the unique environment of the Twilight Ocean. Others had turned into complete trash. That was why Peak Quality items weren't the best things around per grade. They were just the best among what could be safely stored.

This was a big reason why even wealthy elites visited places like wild Realms and other unique places untouched by cultivators. It was the only way to access some of the best stuff. As for the supreme items, they were either top-tier resources that had retained an unusual amount of their efficacy after being removed or items forcibly sealed by high-grade cultivators. But they could never reliably be grown and harvested, at least not in the Frontier.

"Besides, this is the Perennial Vastness, not some random Mystic Realm," Null continued. "The System and boss have worked together to create a few opportunities and types of treasures you simply won't find on the outside. Even those with powerful backing usually end up spending quite a bit of Mana on excursions."

"Does the Quarry have things like that?" Zac asked.

"Yep!" Null said. "You can excavate something called Fate Kernels there. They're a unique resource of the Perennial Vastness. If you find a suitable one, it'll help with your core formation. It's pretty popular among less-talented cultivators since the stones can harmonize with Mana and your home base in a way that outside items can't."

It made sense Engo told him to go there. But Zac wondered if there was more to his hint since Zac would definitely visit a place like that after learning of it anyway. Were there perhaps some secrets beyond what you could see on the surface?

"Any idea why Lord Engo asked me to go there?" Zac ventured.

"Who knows?" Null giggled. "He maybe took pity on you because of your lacking affinities? You'll just have to check things out for yourself."

Zac snorted, knowing he wouldn't get anything more useful out of the guide.

"Whatever," Zac muttered. "So, how do I get more points?"

"Well, first of all, you will get 500 Mana every month in the beginning, though that's only until you reach 10,000. After that, you will instead be charged 100 Mana a month. At 20,000, we charge 200, and so on."

"What? Why?" Zac said.

"It's not cheap to maintain the benefits provided by Mana. The more you accumulate, the greater the benefits, but the higher the fee. Some use these rules to their advantage and keep themselves at lower tiers for years. But if you ask me, that's a loser's path."

Zac nodded. It made sense staying at the lower tier, getting 500 free Mana a month and use that to accumulate resources. But from how Null explained things, he could accumulate Mana and treasures simultaneously, which would save a lot of time.

"How much do the top people normally have at their peak?" Zac asked.

"The greatest elites usually accumulate over 100,000 Mana by the time they start forming their Cosmic Cores in earnest."

Zac quickly contrasted that information with what he knew before entering this place. He had fifty years to accumulate Mana at a maximum, but most elites left within a decade. In other words, they accumulated at least 10,000 points a year, most likely while using this place's various facilities and opportunities. Then, there as the fee to take into account, which meant it would get harder and harder to accumulate Mana.

He should probably be aiming at least double the number, especially considering he might need more than the 100,000 accumulated Mana talented cultivators used. Zac set a preliminary goal of gaining 2,500 Mana a month. That way, he should be able to push past 100,000 Mana within a decade while not denying himself the various opportunities in this place.

"I'm guessing there are multiple ways to accumulate Mana?" Zac commented.

"Of course, we've got it all!" Null said. "But you can boil it down to missions and robbery."

Zac smiled. Things were looking better by the second. The situation made him remember the Sovereignty-quest he undertook after dealing with the Mystic Realm. He'd been like a wolf let loose amongst a bunch of sheep when pitted against the other progenitors of the sector.

"Can I buy Mana with treasures or Nexus Coins?" Zac asked.

"No," Null giggled. "And you should be thankful for that. Some very rich people occasionally find themselves in these parts. They'd be able to bully everyone with their wealth."

"What does someone buying Mana have to do with me?" Zac asked with confusion.

"I told you. Mana is everything in this place," Null said. "Watch."

Zac first didn't understand what Null meant, but a gold, steel, and black barrier sprung up around him the next moment. Zac looked at it with marvel, feeling a sense of connection. It was his Cosmic Core. Or rather, the barrier was based on the concepts of his core. It gradually rotated around him, shielding him from the surroundings.

The barrier remained for another five seconds before disappearing, and Zac breathed out in relief upon confirming his Mana was still 2,500.

"What was that?" Zac asked.

"The more Mana you have, the greater protection of the world you'll enjoy. That also means those with higher Mana have an inherent advantage in this place. So, work hard and quickly gather Mana, or someone with more Mana than you might be able to bully you when you're out looking for treasure."

So it turned out the Perennial Vastness wouldn't be a complete free-for-all where he could wantonly rob Mana to ascend quickly. There were checks and balances in place that allowed conflict but kept it within bounds. Before starting a robbing spree, he'd have to figure out how much Mana helped in battle.

"Are there people here who have stayed decades already?"

"Of course," Null said. "We call this event a Cosmic Gallery. It lasts for around 250 years on the outside, or 2,500 years in here. The current gallery has lasted for 67 years on the outside, so it's been running for centuries already. At any given time, there are around 100,000 cultivators in here."

"What happens after the Cosmic Gallery ends?" Zac asked.

"We close the Perennial Vastness until the next gallery a few thousand years later."

"Alright, so I need to gather more Mana quickly to remove my newcomer's disadvantage," Zac nodded.

"What about breakthroughs? I cultivate both my Soul and a Constitution. Do they provide Mana?"

"Not really. But also, yes?" Null said. "This place isn't a sect. You don't get contribution points for getting stronger. But there are missions related to creation. If you can create things like new Cultivation Manuals, Skills, or other auxiliary methods, you might be able to claim Mana Bounties."

Zac sighed with disappointment. It sounded like neither of his upcoming breakthroughs would do him any good in this place. Luckily, he wasn't all out of options. There was one more thing he'd held onto until now, even though he'd been ready for a while now.

He could create new skills from scratch.

The main goal was to shore up some weaknesses in his two kits and get the accompanying title, but getting some Mana would be a welcome bonus. Of course, there were no guarantees the skills he had in

mind would result in any bounties. Ultimately, his two sides on their own weren't that unique—there were trillions of undead cultivators who had fused Death and Conflict in their cultivation.

The odds of him creating a never-before-seen skill were not great, though he did have the benefit of pursuing Pure Daos. Furthermore, two "identical" skills could have some unique aspects. Even skills provided by the System could have slightly different features, depending on the cultivator's class, Daos, and pathways. Such a difference would only be greater with self-created skills.

Apart from creating skills, there was also his [Void Vajra Sublimation]. He had made decent headway in recreating the fourth layer of the method already. Perhaps he could finish the job here. That method was definitely unique in the Multiverse, and researching it now would leave more of his final Ultom insight in the future to something else.

Ultimately, it depended on how much spare time he would have and how much Mana it'd be worth.

"So what now?" Zac asked.

"You have left your mark, so now it's time to build your base," Null explained. "Follow me."

Zac was about to ask what Null meant, but a shimmering line suddenly appeared on the ground. It led out of the square and into an adjoining building. It reminded Zac of the guidance trajectories that his [Axe Mastery] created.

"Can others see and hear you?" Zac asked as he followed the tracking mark.

"No," Null said. "Guides are individual. My words and these guidance markers are formed through our mental connection. You don't need to speak out loud to talk with me; you can mentally communicate with the wristband."

"Can you help lead me to treasures as well?" Zac asked.

"You wish," Null giggled. "I can lead you to various regions where you can find treasures, though. Like right now."

The room he'd entered was almost like a smaller version of the circular square, except this room had a plinth at the edge. The pillars didn't seem to contain such powerful Daos as the ones outside. Instead, they had shimmering gates in front of them, though it didn't seem they were leading anywhere.

"First of all, take the guidebook," Null said, and Zac picked up a thick tome lying on the pedestal. "This thing lists all the realms you can visit, the prices, and so on."

Zac nodded and stowed it away. He could look through the index of interesting places later. For now, he wanted to get set up so he could meet up with the others.

"So we're teleporting again?" Zac asked.

"The Perennial Vastness is big. Like really big," Null explained. "Even if you started running from one side, you wouldn't even be close to halfway across after fifty years had passed. The place is too big for low-grade cultivators. So the boss has chosen to remove the restrictions of space. You can pick a region that feels suited to you, and your manor will be built there."

"This room is connected with all the available regions where you can build your manor. If you infuse your will into the array, you'll be able to browse their information and open gates to get a hint of the energy within."

"And if I want to build a base close to my friends?" Zac asked.

"You shouldn't think like that," Null said. "Everyone has their own path, and you should pick a place suitable for your core formation. The manor will be connected to several hubs, and using most portals will cost you some mana."

"So I can just teleport over to them," Zac hummed.

"Exactly. There is Vastness City. The path to your manor will turn up like a storefront there, and the same is true for your friends. Shouldn't be too hard to find them there, especially if they're looking for you as well," Null said.

Zac put his hand on the pedestal, and he almost groaned from the deluge of information that flooded his mind. Null wasn't joking around when saying this place was big. The Orom World was just a backyard compared to this place that seemingly had endless environments. A casual glance indicated over five hundred different environments related to the Dao of Fire.

Altogether, there were tens of thousands of options, each accompanied by a string of information. Zac even spotted the ruins of a technocrat capital, where crazy robots still walked the streets. Of course, there were also environments related to his three Daos. Hundreds of them, to the point the options made Zac dizzy.

"You've seen my core," Zac eventually said. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Smart. Always listen to Null," the guide laughed as the seventeen empty gates were replaced by four real ones.

Each one radiated incredibly dense energies, and while none of the four was anything like the others, they all contained something that attracted Zac.

"Your situation is difficult since you incorporate opposing elements and two different peaks. But you have options. The first is the Nimbus you just visited. The Nimbus is a blank slate; you can form it however you like," Null began. "Settling on one of its floating islands is a decent option for people with complicated cores."

"The second is the Sezho Battlefield. This should be the best suited out of the dozens of ancient battlefields sealed in the Perennial Vastness. The Sezho were a civilization that fought the Limitless Empire before the System. Boss got his hands on a realm where one of the most heated battles was held. Even today, an extremely powerful aura of conflict lingers, and war is always a struggle of life versus death. The Sezho were even brutes, and the axe was one of their main weapons.

"It has extremely dense energies and should provide a good start. But the anger and defiance of the Sezho still linger. If you're weak-willed, you'll turn into a madman. Even those with stronger convictions will have a hard time focusing on their core formation."

Zac nodded thoughtfully. If you considered your choice of manor a starting zone, then the Nimbus was a neutral start. No negatives, but it would require more terraforming to suit his needs. The battlefield already had ample reserves of the Dao of Conflict, but Zac could feel the incredibly dense bloodlust and fell Karma through the gate.

It wasn't at the level of what he'd sensed upon seeing the wartorn Left Imperial Palace in his Vision back when entering the Void Gate, but it surpassed the Bloodwind Planet's environment.

"What about the others?" Zac asked.

"Mount Illumination," Null said, and Zac turned to the gate that almost seemed to release Buddhist chants. "A consecrated mountain formerly belonging to the Sangha. The temples are gone, but a nimbus with the providence of Samsara remains. There's both Life and Death. You just have to infuse your conflict into the harmony to forge your path. As for the downside..."

"Pathbreaking," Zac nodded.

"Some have come as fierce warriors and left as baldies," Null giggled. "Well, they still made their cores, though."

"What's the final option?" Zac asked, looking at the final gate, a pitch-black vortex releasing an incredibly ominous feeling.

"The Storm," Null said. "A remnant piece holding a whisp of the Primordial Chaos of the previous Era. You're walking the path of purity, and there are hints of its terminus in there. However, that place is scary. The peak is still broken, and Chaos cannot exist in a stable state, creating an incredibly volatile atmosphere. Settling there will cost you 25 Mana a day, while other places are free."

"All the places kind of have downsides?" Zac commented.

"Well, yes," Null said. "The top-quality environments generally do. If your path was something simple like "fire," you could just have built your base inside a volcano. But you had to make it complicated."

"I guess that's on me," Zac smiled.

"Do you see one you like, or do you want to keep looking around?" Null asked.

"I think I know what I want, but let me double-check," Zac said, and he spent the next ten minutes opening over one hundred different gates to inspect the energy they emitted.

Zac could soon confirm Null's picks were right on the money. While many of the places he'd investigated seemed good, none were as good as the four she chose. There were a few without any downsides, but the Dao and energy emitted from those places were far worse than the four top options.

The gates closed and were replaced by a singular one. "Alright, let's go with this one."