

The Fall 984

[Chapter 984 - Chickens and Monkeys](#)

Zac didn't immediately head out to explore Vastness City. He first spent a few minutes just standing in place, letting his heart return to the Void to avoid any lingering or hidden effects from the overpowering Dharmic pressure. He also activated [Void Zone], resetting his state even further.

"What now? How can I find the others?" Zac asked after having grounded himself.

"Two ways," Null said. "If your friends arrived at the same time as you, they'll appear here sooner or later if they haven't already. The city isn't that big, so go around and look for them. If that fails, you can check the buildings. You should understand the cultivation of your friends, right?"

"Sure," Zac nodded. "To an extent, at least."

"Well, look behind you."

Zac turned around, and he whistled at the domineering building behind him. It wasn't big, but a lot of detail had gone into the building, which almost looked like the temple of a war god. There were steel details, while the building was mainly made out of small golden and black bricks—clearly set in a pattern that reflected his path.

There was no time to get a good look at his manor back on Mount Illumination, but Zac guessed this house reflected its design. The building gave off an impressive aura, but it was clearly not a defensive structure as there were two large windows, one on each side of the entrance. They showed a small space within, roughly five by five meters.

The interiors had no furniture or items; the only feature was a single door Zac guessed led back to his manor. Null had mentioned he'd get a storefront in Vastness City. It looked like she wasn't kidding around.

In the middle of each window, an incredibly complex seal was engraved. And while it looked pretty odd, Zac could tell it was a representation of his blueprint. The scene made him frown and look over his shoulders for people spying on him. Thankfully, there was very little foot traffic in his neighborhood, and he only saw a few people walking in the distance.

"Your blueprint is akin to your stamp or calling card in here. You can modify the design if you don't want to show it," Null explained. "But you'll soon find out most people are open with their blueprint."

Having seen the nearby buildings, Zac knew Null wasn't making things up. Zac still felt a bit vulnerable, putting his Cosmic Core on open display like that. For now, he infused the building with a mental command. A second later, the two halves of his cores were split into separate engravings. The left window got an Evolutionary Core, and the right an Inexorable Core.

It looked a bit better than the confusing mesh where the Perennial Vastness had tried to distill his blueprint onto a two-dimensional surface, and it didn't give off any potential secrets of his. Having done so, he turned back to the street.

"Do all these buildings belong to other cultivators?" Zac asked, looking at the fiery-red building opposite his.

"Most of them," Null confirmed. "If you find one that matches your friends, you can infuse your will into its inner door, and the owner will be notified."

"Can you take me to any Shadow or Ice- and Death-attuned storefronts?" Zac asked, eyes scanning the street for anything reminding him of Ogras or Catheya.

"I don't have any features like that," Null said. "You'll just have to walk around. But since you came together, you should appear in the same section of the city. If you really can't find them, there are usually people who keep track of storefronts, including new arrivals."

"What's up with the storef-" Zac said, but he lost his train of thought upon seeing two cultivators walk past him.

It wasn't the fact they were some humanoid species he'd never seen before, but rather their discussion that drew Zac's attention.

"The Grand Firmament Coalition is harassing that black-eyed yin creature again," one of the two said. "This is the second month."

"She's unlucky to run into them right at the start," the other shrugged. "An undead should have known better than causing a scene."

Zac frowned and walked over to the two, leaking some of his aura so they'd take him seriously. "Excuse me, where can I find this undead?"

"A Newcomer? Perhaps an acquaintance of the young lord?" one of the two said with a respectful nod. "They're not far from here, close to the sixty-eighth."

"Thank you," Zac nodded and walked away.

"I'm on it," Null said before Zac needed to ask, and a guidance beam appeared in Zac's field of vision.

"What's the Grand Firmament Coalition?" Zac asked as he sped down the roads, the buildings around him turning to a blur as he only focused on the guiding line.

"No idea," Null said. "Probably some temporary alliance of guests. As I said, some people go at it alone while others team up. Some do it because they're weak and can't deal with the environments of the Perennial Vastness. But it's also common for top-tier guests to form factions that can help them complete harder but more lucrative missions."

Zac sighed. The Grand Firmament Coalition was probably the second type of group, going by that humanoid's comment about a 'young lord.' It looked like Catheya had found herself in a troublesome situation the moment she arrived. Was it because of her situation with the Undead Empire, or was she just unlucky?

Hopefully, he wouldn't be late to help his companion this time. Zac pushed some Cosmic Energy into his legs, but he almost stumbled upon feeling an intense resistance that prevented him from activating [Earthstrider].

"What's going on?!" Zac swore. "I'm restricted."

"Rotating Cosmic Energy is blocked in Vastness City to keep the order," Null explained. "There are exceptions, though. Look to the left."

Zac glanced over and spotted a number of people standing at one of the major crossings. There seemed to be a huge circle lined by a protective array. Inside, two warriors furiously were trying to break open each other's barriers, blood covering the ground around them. The scene proved that the blueprint-based barriers Null showed him earlier weren't infallible, and his worry for Catheya only increased.

Thankfully, Null was right. When rushing, it took Zac less than a minute to reach the street the guiding light indicated. Unfortunately, there was a small crowd ahead, proving something was happening. Zac couldn't see exactly what was going on, but after leaping into the air, he caught a glimpse of a scene that ignited a fire in his chest.

A scene of Catheya being surrounded by a dozen people, her aura erratic with ichor trailing down her ear and mouth. A few of her enemies were already seemed out for the count, barely standing with ice covering their bodies. But there were still six people with their weapons drawn at her. Just as Zac had leapt into the air, he'd seen her trying to veer away but was prevented from escaping by a human blockade.

She wasn't standing inside one of those battle circles but rather on a wide street, which meant she couldn't use any escape skills to get away. And being a mage, she was clearly at a disadvantage fighting using just her body and Daos. All the while, over a hundred people egged the attackers on, seemingly considering her situation a game.

For six years, Zac had restrained himself, hiding away in his cave as he worked on his foundations. Now, it felt like a seal had snapped, and cascading waves of killing intent roiled from his body as Miasma replaced Cosmic Energy. Even the Splinters locked in the depths of his mind hummed to life, singing with joy as Zac's murderous intent became so condensed it almost took on a physical appearance.

It didn't matter who these Grand Firmament Coalition were or what factions out in the Multiverse backed the 'young lord.' The scene in front of him dragged out too many bad memories, and this time he was neither too late nor too weak to make a difference. He hadn't planned on staying low in either case, and these people could serve as a warning to the rest of the Perennial Vastness.

A warning that blood would flow when his companions were targeted.

With each step, it felt like he was coming alive after years of slumber, the ichor in his body pumping with vigor. This was it, the true self that the Integration of Earth had awakened. His path was not one of secluding himself in cultivation chambers or staying hidden to avoid trouble. Conflict was at the heart of the road he'd chosen, and he let his Dao course freely through his body, becoming one with his purpose.

The air around him groaned, strained from his burgeoning momentum as he stepped forward. [Love's Bond] appeared on his back, and the metallic clatter of the fetters echoed through the streets. The links were forged with pure Death, which made their collisions sound like the death knells of a funeral procession.

"What the—" one of the onlookers muttered as he turned around, but his eyes widened in alarm as he saw Zac's approach.

He stumbled out of the way just as Zac's billowing killing intent crashed into the crowd like a tsunami. The shouts and jeers died out, replaced by an oppressive silence as the crowd parted like a sea. The scene came into full view once more. Catheya controlling six floating ice shards, facing off against a swordsman while the rest blocked any path of escape.

His anger reached another level upon seeing they were essentially toying with her, and he immediately shot forward.

"Ah! Wait!" Null's voice echoed in his mind, but Zac could barely hear the guide over the roaring buzz of his killing intent.

His whole being screamed for blood, and he wouldn't be denied.

"Who are you?!" the apparent leader shouted upon noticing Zac's entrance, but the only answer forthcoming was a gleaming axe crashing down toward his head.

Four chains simultaneously targeted the others still in fighting condition, each link targeting a vital spot. Eruptions of Dao rippled around him as six barriers sprung up to protect the defenders, and Zac frowned in annoyance upon feeling over 80% of his strength being sapped away as he tried to split his target's head in two.

The light emitted from the barrier was almost blinding, its squirming patterns drenching him in a yellowish gleam. The resistance was tremendous, but just 20% of his strength was enough to kill most Peak E-grade Cultivators. Unfortunately, the resistance slowed his opening move down too much, narrowly providing his target with enough time to react. He desperately backpedaled, his eyes wide with shock as [Black Death] cut down just half a hand from his nose.

"Stop!" the leader screamed as he backed away.

Unfortunately for him, they weren't standing inside one of the dueling circles. He couldn't use movement skills, and his attributes were nowhere near Zac's. If not for the protection of his blueprint shield, the first swing would have already killed him. Zac easily kept pace, his anger only growing after failing to kill a single one of his targets.

The chains had also been rebuffed, and he could only use them to restrict while he dealt with the leader. At first, Zac planned to keep pushing toward the inexorable end where his axe found flesh, but he suddenly saw something just as he was about to strike. Wasn't that wrong?

Zac didn't know why, but he felt something was off about a few of the runes among the hundreds of thousands that made up the yellow barrier around the leader of the Grand Firmament Coalition. As luck would have it, one was right at level with his throat.

"Stop! We surr—" the man screamed, but his sentence died out as his head flew into the air.

The silence was deafening as Zac stood over the headless corpse, blood slowly trickling down the edge of his axe to join the pool spreading around him. The spectators looked at him like he was a madman, everyone seemingly afraid to speak up lest they'd be targeted next. A few were already distancing themselves, while others were afraid to even move. Zac had seen similar expressions countless times, and he didn't bother with them after confirming no one was planning to step in and block him.

His heart did not so much as ripple as he turned to the remaining cultivators. He'd kept up the pressure with [Loves Bond] while dealing with the leader, but the chains weren't powerful enough to kill enemies through the pathbound barriers. The shields just sapped out too much strength.

Even if the piercing strikes of his armament had the strength to pierce the barrier, the remaining force was so weak that even a Middle E-grade Cultivator could rebuff it. And the people who had arrived in the Perennial Vastness weren't some useless people. Even the weakest people coming to this place were renowned talents or at least scions with impressive backgrounds who could source the coveted Perennial Vastness Tokens.

After all, the Perennial Vastness and the System only sent a few million tokens out every Cosmic Gallery, to be shared amongst innumerable peak E-grade cultivators. Zac still felt dealing with these five shouldn't prove too difficult after this initial kill unless they all fled in a different direction, but a sudden searing heat on his wrist made him stop in place.

'What is it?' Zac asked in his mind while maintaining his abyssal glare.

"Don't attack them! You can't just kill people in Vastness City!" Null cried. "Right now, you broke the rules, resulting in mutual destruction. Look at your Status Screen."

Zac opened his status screen and almost swore upon seeing his Mana.

[Mana: 1,978]

In one go, he'd lost over 500 mana, more than 20% of his total. The scene almost made him queasy, and he realized he couldn't continue. There were still five people remaining, not counting those Catheya had already dealt with. If he killed all of them, wouldn't he run out of all his Mana? If that happened, then what? Would he be kicked out of the Perennial Vastness?

Even then, Zac didn't regret it at all. These people needed a reminder they could not just act as they wanted, hiding behind the rules while harassing others.

"You lost ten percent of both your and your opponent's total mana for illegally attacking and killing that guy," Null groaned. "What kind of lunatic starts killing people the moment they arrive? This is a Green Zone. There are rules. This wasn't a death match. It was a duel for resources!"

'Undead will die if they run out of Miasma, even if the enemies don't land a killing blow,' Zac grunted, still angry upon seeing Catheya's pitiful expression.

"That's..." Null hesitated. "Well, that's true. No rules are perfect. But you still can't just kill these people. That won't save your friend."

Zac frowned. He had too little information. While climbing Mount Illumination, he'd been fully focused on solving the mystery of the ghost temples while protecting his Dao Heart. And the moment he arrived in Vastness City, he was distracted by the news of Catheya. Now, he was facing down a whole group of cultivators, unsure of his options.

The situation wouldn't wait for him to get a full run-down from Null, leaving Zac at an impasse. Thankfully, Catheya was quick on the uptake.

"You losers want to keep playing?" Catheya laughed as she walked up to Zac. "My husband will accept any of your challenges. I'd like to see how you deal with him. In fact, you can bring the whole coalition if you dare. We could use a couple of Revenant servants for our stay."

"He's a newcomer; he doesn't have unlimited Mana," one of them stuttered, but he shuddered when another wave of killing intent drowned him and his companions.

"Maybe not, but isn't the Grand Firmament Coalition planning a final excursion to the Hyr'Zen Tundra? No penalties there, and lots of places to hide," Catheya smiled. "Or do you want to stay and fight?"

The group had already lost their fighting spirit long before, and Catheya's nudge was all they needed to turn tail and run, even carrying their semi-frozen companions so they could move faster. After a pointed glare, the crowd dispersed, leaving just Zac and Catheya in front of a building clearly belonging to her.

Ice and black metal formed a beautiful storefront in gothic design, with a pitch-black ice blueprint hovering over the door frame.

"Are you okay?" Zac asked, his attention back to his old companion.

Catheya surreptitiously looked around as she dragged him into her storefront, which was already decorated with black ice furniture. A wave of her hand made the windows tint, and her aura suddenly stabilized.

"How can I be okay?" Catheya huffed as she lightly slapped his chest. "You scared away the little fishies."

Zac looked on with incomprehension as she wiped the ichor from her cheek. A few seconds later, one wouldn't have been able to tell she'd just been in a fight.

"It was fake?" he blurted.

"Did you think those guys could do me in? I was just after their Mana," Catheya glared, but her scowl soon turned into a radiant smile. "Still, your display was worth it. Who doesn't like the dashing prince coming to the rescue?"

"I-" Zac said, but he lost his train of thought as two arms snaked around him.

"I've missed you," a content hum reached him from below as Catheya nestled herself into his chest.

"I missed you too," Zac sighed as his arms enclosed her. "I've been worried about you over the past years."

Neither moved for a few seconds until a disgusted snort echoed through the room.

"Is this my lot for the next couple of years? Watching the springtime of others?" Ogras swore from within Zac's shadows, startling both Zac and Catheya. "Shameless couple."