

The Fall 985

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"You were here already?" Zac exclaimed while Catheya looked around warily.

"Who?"

"You know my friend from the Tower of Eternity," Zac explained.

"He's got a token as well? How?" Catheya muttered as she looked around. "And why are you skulking around in the shadows?"

"I figured it would be useful if at least one of us didn't create a large number of enmities the moment we arrived," Ogras said, still not emerging from wherever he hid. "Seeing as I could sneak inside by leaving a mark on your husband, I think it's best I remain hidden."

A few black veins spread across Catheya's face in what Zac had learned was akin to blushing as she took a step back. "What a pervert, spying on others."

"Hey, I have no choice. I promised his other wife to keep an eye out," Ogras snickered. "I don't want to get incinerated."

"What?!" Catheya exclaimed, looking at Zac with shock. "Who?"

"Ignore him; he's just messing around. He's talking about another friend of mine," Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

"Who's this woman?" Catheya asked, completely ignoring Zac.

"Fire and ice. How poetic," Ogras only answered with a laugh, but he stopped upon feeling Zac's killing intent spread through the small storefront. "Alright, alright. Jeeze."

"You've been busy over these past years," Catheya commented with a raised brow.

"I have literally been sitting alone in a cave over the past years working on my breakthrough," Zac grunted.

"I'm just kidding," Catheya laughed. "Don't you think I know what kind of cultivation blockhead you are by now?"

"Whatever," Zac said with some helplessness. "Is this place safe to talk?"

"These storefronts have no protections, except for the gateway to our manors. So anyone could eavesdrop on these places unless you watch out," Catheya explained. "I'm surprised your friend managed to elude my defenses. Maybe they're not as thorough as I thought."

"Can we sit down and talk somewhere? I still don't understand all the rules and just lost over five hundred Mana. If possible, I'd prefer to avoid doing that again," Zac said. "Can we visit your base? Shouldn't be anyone to eavesdrop there."

"That might not be a great idea now that you've brought your friend. My place is a bit dangerous for non-Draugr," Catheya said.

"Are all places like that?" Zac asked curiously. "I almost got myself killed setting up my base."

"It's usually like that if you get more than 2,000 starting Mana," Catheya nodded while taking out a healing pill. "Turns out those who perform well from the start have a perk; better starting options, though those places are all pretty dangerous. My environment is doubly so for your friend. Let's go to the incensary instead. It's on our way, in either case."

She followed up by eating the pill and crushing another one to let its medicinal aroma douse her, making it seem she had just used some powerful healing treasure to recover from her supposed internal wounds quickly.

"On our way where?" Zac asked as they emerged from her empty store.

"The mission hall," Catheya smiled. "You have good timing. New quests will be released in a few hours. We can catch up and get you oriented before then."

"Sounds good," Zac nodded, but he stopped upon seeing the headless corpse lying not far ahead.

No one had dared claim the body or its treasures, and Zac wordlessly walked over and put both head and body into his Corpse Sack—the first addition in years.

"Some improvement, at least," Catheya smiled. "Reattaching a head so cleanly cut isn't that hard for a talented Lich. The problem comes when you destroy their brains like you did in the Twilight Ocean. No rot, either. Please make sure you remember that during our stay here. Every single guest in the Perennial Vastness has the makings of a top-tier Revenant."

"Still as practical as ever," Zac smiled before looking around. "This incensary. Is it an actual shop or some other person's storefront?"

"A small number of the buildings in Vastness City are empty, much like in the Tower of Eternity. However, you have to pay Mana to rent places, so most don't bother. The Undead Empire has one such shop because we need a place to gather and organize, considering we're a small and exposed minority in this place," Catheya explained as she led them through the streets.

"I can't believe we got a shop as part of the guest package. People here are so free they're setting up stores?" Ogras asked from the shadows, clearly following them somehow.

"Some come with instructions from their elders to trade, so they have to even if they want to focus on their Breakthrough," Catheya smiled. "Others offer various services as a way to earn some Mana. Most simply use their storefront to showcase their Blueprints in hopes of getting a challenge."

"What's that?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Didn't you go over the rules before visiting the city?" Catheya asked.

"As I said, I built my base in kind of a dangerous place," Zac coughed. "I jumped through the teleporter the moment it was erected, and then I heard about your situation from some passersby before I could learn about all the rules."

"Looks like you haven't changed at all," Catheya laughed. "It also explains why you tried to kill those people without challenging them. Still, it had a decent effect. It should make our life easier when

contending for better missions. Besides, I doubt I would be able to milk those guys for much longer in either case."

"So what are the rules?" Zac asked.

"One moment," Catheya said as she stopped. "We're almost there."

They reached their destination a minute later. It was a small tavern, but two small Unholy Beacons stood at its entrance, clearly indicating it was for the undead. They created a haze around the door, and Zac could tell the whole building was filled with Miasma rather than Cosmic Energy. He'd already seen that the Perennial Vastness didn't bother specifically accommodating the undead in the Vastness City, so leaving the Cosmic Energy of the outside environment felt like getting out of the rain.

Catheya nodded slightly at two Revenants sitting in a corner before heading deeper into the building. Zac's brows rose upon seeing the sigil of the Abyssal Shores on the door Catheya opened. Inside, a private dining room waited. Both Catheya and Zac installed a set of isolation arrays, followed by a shroud of shadows covering the walls.

"This place is safe. Relatively speaking," Catheya said.

"This environment," a disgusted voice echoed out as Ogras appeared from the corner of the room.

"I thought this would be our honeymoon, yet you've brought a chaperone?" Catheya pouted at Zac.

"With a bunch of Undead Monarchs scheming behind my back, I have to bring my resident schemer around as well," Zac smiled.

"I didn't expect the elders to be such troublemakers," Catheya sighed. "For what it's worth, I do think that the Umbri'Zi were sincere in their desire to bring you into the fold until things got complicated. As for the later arrivals, I don't know."

"It's fine," Zac said. "I'm not delusional. I know I'm not as important to them as an Eternal Heritage. I'll be careful. Hopefully, we'll emerge stronger on the other end. Maybe we can go back to the original agreement with the Umbri'Zi after the Azol and Reavers have left with whatever they came for."

"More importantly, are you okay? We got an odd message from the Undead Empire just before entering and were worried something had happened to you."

"Well, I think I was played for a fool," Catheya wryly smiled. "But for a moment there, I thought they'd kill me over my Seal."

Zac listened with a frown as Catheya shared her experiences, from exploring the Million Gates Territory under Tavza An'Azol. An image of a competent but cold leader soon emerged in Zac's mind, someone who always chose the option that would have the greatest odds of completing the mission, even if it meant losses in her ranks.

She had cut through a large section of the Million Gates Territory with the precision of a surgeon, leaving not a stone unturned in her hunt for remnants of the Limitless Empire. Eventually, Catheya reached the end, where she had been filled with a sense of impending doom and opted to flee on a stolen vessel while Tavza was occupied inside a fractured realm.

"No wonder they sent that message," Zac grimaced.

"I'm so sorry about creating such a mess," Catheya said. "I felt like a trapped animal; I had to get out."

"That's okay. Better safe than sorry," Zac nodded.

"I don't understand," Ogras commented from the side. "If it's as you said, it doesn't make much sense for her to kill you. Our side, or rather Zac, has been abundantly clear about how important you are to the cooperation. The value of moving a lower seal to a subordinate can't compare to the alliance with Zac. Are you sure a few years aboard the Cosmic Vessel didn't just drive you a bit stir-crazy?"

Zac frowned at the demon, who shrugged back.

"That's... something I've been wondering myself," Catheya sighed. "It was so clear back then. I saw one hint after another and pieced them together into a conspiracy about to do me in. But just days after I stole the ship, I felt the memories were a bit odd. But since I'd already pulled the trigger, I still fled here the moment I could activate the token."

"What do you think now?" Zac asked.

"After two months here... I think I was played, for some reason," Catheya sighed. "A curse, an illusion, or something similar. I'm not sure if my actions were what they were hoping for or if they were aiming for something else. Perhaps they wanted me to attack Tavza instead of fleeing, but capturing that Kan'Tanu vessel threw a wrench in the works? Or maybe they just wanted to instill me with suspicions toward Tavza, which I would transmit to you? I'm not sure."

"What a mess," Zac sighed. "Well, what do you think? Can the cooperation continue?"

"I think so," Catheya said. "They have strict orders from the Primo himself. Any schemes between and within the Divine Races must be within bounds, not threatening the mission. And with you and your followers drastically increasing the odds of success, they can't harm you. I know the promised edict is real, though it doesn't guarantee your safety. The Primo is rarely a hands-on leader. His existence is more of a guarantee against outside pressure.

"As for who you're better off aligning with, I don't know. Tavza is Draugr, but I saw her sacrifice thousands of subordinates to scour as many pocket realms as quickly as possible, without even blinking. If she believed sacrificing you would secure the mission, she'd probably do it. Kator seems open and forthright, making friends among the locals and lower races. But I can smell trouble from him."

"If you were played, he's a top suspect, proving he can be scheming," Ogras added.

"We knew they consider us as tools to help further their goals inside the inheritance," Zac shrugged.

"We simply have to get much stronger quickly, so we get too troublesome to doublecross."

"You might need Tavza if you want to find the best treasures inside the inheritance," Catheya said after some thought. "She's an expert on the Limitless Empire. I hear she owns whole heritages dating back to that era. If someone can unearth any secrets in there, it's her."

"She's an expert on the Limitless Empire?" Zac surprised. "Why? The Undead Empire shouldn't have much to do with them, right?"

"No," Catheya said. "Only the Founders among the Five Races had any contact with the Limitless Empire before the System was born. It was just a private interest of hers, where she studied ancient arrays and fused them with the heritage of the Abyssal Shores. I think that's partly why she was picked as one of the candidates."

"What about the undead in here?" Ogras asked. "Are they involved in this?"

"Well, not those who have been here more than a decade," Catheya said. "For the rest, I can't tell. The undead here have an organization of their own, but I've stayed clear for now. Either case, I'm strong enough to earn a decent amount of Mana without teaming up. I'm not forced to join like those people you saw earlier."

"Anyway, what's going on with those humans, and why couldn't I kill that guy?" Zac asked.

"There are restrictions in place," Catheya said. "In Vastness City, you either have to challenge or be challenged to fight a proper battle. Just going around attacking people will cost Mana."

"There's more freedom in the various realms, though," Ogras added, snorting when he saw Zac's surprised look. "What? I'm not like you. I read the rulebook before coming out the gate swinging."

"Well," Zac coughed.

"Simply put, all guests have an echelon here, depending on their Mana levels," Catheya smiled. "Every 10,000 Mana increases your echelon by one. So we're all First Echelon cultivators, even if I have 4,600 Mana."

"What does Echelons matter?" Zac asked.

"Some of the best realms are restricted to certain echelons," Catheya said. "It's also important for duels. If you challenge another first-echelon cultivator, they can't decline. If they do, they'll be hit with a penalty of ten percent of their Mana."

"Conversely, higher-echelon cultivators can just ignore your challenges," Ogras added. "So we can't just find a bunch of the top people and steal their Mana."

"Actually, you can't even challenge people more than one echelon above you. You sort of have to prove yourself," Catheya explained.

"But I'll get Mana if I win a duel?" Zac asked.

"Sure, one hundred Mana per victory," Catheya nodded. "Taken out of the pocket of the loser."

"Only one hundred?" Zac grimaced.

"Also, you can only issue ten binding challenges a month," Catheya said. "After that, your target can just say no without sacrificing Mana. You can still be challenged and accept as many challenges as you want. The guides are keeping watch, though; any Mana-laundering schemes will result in steep penalties."

"That's..." Zac frowned.

With such rules in place, there was simply no way he'd be able to snatch a bunch of Mana quickly and start working on his core.

"There are bounties, though," Catheya added. "I didn't think you'd be able to get any based on your skill set. But I may have been wrong after seeing you thrash that guy."

"What?" Zac asked, and Ogras looked over curiously as well.

"Do you remember what happened back there? Your first swing met powerful resistance, but your second one moved much quicker and went straight for his throat. Why?"

Zac thought back to the feeling back then. "The resistance from that barrier was pretty strong. But I felt some of the patterns were weak, like a loophole in an array. After I targeted that weakness, the resistance was a lot lower."

"That's a bounty and why people showcase their cores on their storefronts. We're just E-grade cultivators, and our understanding of the Dao and energy is ultimately flawed. Even if our elders give us a blueprint, we still need to modify them to fit our pathways and Dao. So most people arrive in this place with minor imperfections. Some even have failed blueprints with glaring problems."

"Imperfections that others can point out and get awarded?" Ogras surmised.

"Exactly," Catheya nodded. "If you hadn't broken the rules, your strike would have given you a bonus of between 10 and 100 Mana for finding the weakness. The guy you hit would get the weakness marked on his Dao Tapestry in his manor, allowing him to start fixing it. This way, people will emerge with much-better cores than if they just worked on it alone."

"Why don't people fix their weaknesses before?" Zac asked. "Like asking their elders."

"Most don't have elders to fix the mistakes," Ogras shrugged. "No D-grade force would have a heritage that can lead you to a perfect core. I doubt even most C-grade forces on the Frontier would. Seems most of our Monarchs manage to take that final step thanks to lucky encounters rather than a strong foundation."

"Others have elders who don't have the understanding required to perfect the blueprints. Even small differences in paths can result in wildly different Cosmic Cores. What is perfect in the eyes of the elder may be riddled with problems for the descendants," Catheya added. "It's also quite uncommon for elders to get so involved with their disciples. It harms them in the long run."

"If they don't find the answers to their path themselves, they have no chance of reaching Monarchy. That's how established factions work. They raise one generation after another, hoping someone will stumble onto some opportunities and inspirations that will let them climb to a stage where they can contribute to the clan or sect."

The sentiment echoed what Iz told Zac before, though Iz's vantage was quite a bit higher, even mentioning things like Earth Immortals.

"This is also what makes the Perennial Vastness so Unique," Catheya continued. "Any imperfections you find will slowly be improved by the Mana you accumulate. You can even spend some of it to visit places that speed up that process, so you don't have to wait decades."

"So almost like the energy from that place," Ogras whistled before his face scrunched together. "Damn, did that mean we wasted our epiphanies on something we could have gotten here?"

"I don't think it was a waste," Zac said. "I would never have spotted that weakness if not for the epiphanies or all that Lake Water."

"The what?" Catheya said with a blank stare, and Zac explained the situation about the Lost Plane and his encounter inside the Void Star.

"That's just like you," Catheya scoffed. "And I don't suppose you saved any for your beautiful friends?"

"Girl, don't even think about that," Ogras snorted. "I took a dip in that water myself, and I almost had my mind twisted and Dao deviated. I don't understand how this monster could bathe in it like it was some sort of elixir."

"He's pretty annoying that way," Catheya agreed.

"Finally, someone who understands my plight," Ogras said with a long-suffering look.

"Whatever," Zac groaned. "So what's the plan if I can't just go around and rob people of their Mana?"

"You can," Ogras grinned. "You just have to head to the Red Zones."