

The Fall 986

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Null had called Vastness City a Green Zone, which meant the Red Zone Ogras mentioned probably was a region with far laxer rules. As expected, Catheya immediately confirmed his guess.

"Green zones, like this city, disallow killing even during duels. There are a bunch of other restrictions as well, which is why I had to trick those fools earlier into challenging me one after another. For someone like you, you can just pick ten unlucky people and beat them up every month. But after that, your opponents can say no.

"In Orange zones, you don't need to bother with duels. If you see someone in your or an adjacent echelon, you're free to attack them. If you win, you get Mana like normal, including points for bounties. But if you kill them, you get nothing and instantly get thrown out of the zone. So deaths are pretty rare unless there's a grudge."

"And red are no rules?" Zac asked.

"Pretty much," Catheya nodded. "Anyone you see, you can attack, no matter what echelon they have. That goes the other way, though; people with huge repositories of Mana can bully newcomers there. Apparently, the effect is not limited to a simple shield when you've gathered enough Mana. You release something akin to a Dao Field, restricting your opponents while empowering yourself. Furthermore, you can fight to the death in Red Zones and get full payment for a win, so it's quite dangerous."

"Then why would anyone go to those kinds of places?" Zac asked.

"Why does anyone ever take risks?" Catheya smiled. "All the best stuff is in the Red Zones, be it opportunities for the core formation or missions."

"I read the booklet while you were scamming those guys earlier. My idea was to beat up ten weaklings in the city before heading to an Orange Zone to continue hunting until I gained enough Mana to move to the Red Zones," Ogras interjected. "Or is that inefficient?"

"Orange Zones are usually middle-tier zones and up. Meaning you need to pay between 25 and 100 Mana a day to stay there," Catheya said. "And with the size of this place in contrast to the number of participants..."

"Might be hard just to break even," Ogras frowned.

"Especially if you consider the fact that not everyone you encounter will be someone you can fight. Those who dare visit Orange Zones alone are usually pretty confident in their strength. Even worse, all battles have a winner and a loser. The defender will be crowned the winner if neither side can eke out a clear advantage. That's how I kept stealing Mana against those people before," Catheya smiled.

"How is advantage measured?" Zac asked.

"The guides are judges," Catheya shrugged.

"So hunting people for Mana is easier said than done," Zac muttered.

"The majority get most of their Mana from completing missions," Catheya said. "But there are occasionally opportunities to go all-out. For example, if you keep track of the larger coalitions, you might figure out which zones they plan on exploring. That way, you can hunt them from the shadows. There are also the events."

"Events?" Ogras asked with a frown as the orientation book suddenly appeared in his hands. "Didn't read anything about that."

"It's officially considered another form of mission, but timed public ones," Catheya explained.

"So what is it?"

"With so many environments, there is often something happening. Treasures being born, calamities, beast tides, and so on. These automatically generate time-sensitive missions; everyone gets a notification through their guides. I've been here two months, and I've already gotten three, though that's a bit higher than normal."

"Are these quests lucrative?" Ogras asked with gleaming eyes.

"Not all of them," Catheya smiled. "But some events are amazing treasures being born. You get to keep the item while earning Mana for snatching it and winning the event."

"And there'll be a bunch of little bounties running around looking for the item," Ogras said, his smile widening.

"Exactly," Catheya nodded. "Two of the limited missions I've seen were in green zones, but one was in an Orange Zone. I heard over three thousand people participated."

"Was that how you got in trouble with those Grand Firmament Guys?" Zac asked curiously. "Did you beat them up during the event?"

"I wish," Catheya laughed. "I didn't even dare go to that trial. It was just a few days after I arrived, and I didn't know enough to gauge the danger. But I still got in trouble with those Dreamers a few days later."

"It all started because of the Mission Hall. Only one person or group can take on a specific mission at a time. I found a very lucrative one perfect for my Daos. It paid well and was related to Death and Ice. Turned out it was a repeating mission a few leaders in the Firmament Alliance had claimed as their own. When confronted, I told them to eat rocks and went and took on the quest anyway."

"And they started to harass you as a result," Zac said.

"Two months now," Catheya nodded. "But I made almost a thousand Mana from it since I made sure to struggle just enough for them to keep coming back. Their meddling led to me missing out on the first pick of the quests released once a month, but I think it was a pretty good trade."

"So you must head into town monthly if you want to accept missions?" Zac asked.

"You'll also be able to get missions from your manor, but they appear three hours later," Catheya explained. "The best missions are usually snatched by that point unless they have some huge risks or requirements."

"So the owner of this place forces people out of their burrows if they want the best missions," Ogras snickered, glancing at Zac. "Planning on getting the duels out of the way? Should be a lot of targets on the streets soon."

"Might as well, right?" Zac agreed. "But how do I know which people are in the same echelon as me?"

"I can help," Null's voice appeared in his mind while Catheya said something of the same effect. "If you focus on someone, I can tell you their echelon. Only in Green and Orange zones, though."

"So what kind of stuff do we need to do on the missions?" Zac asked.

"Some are simple things like outer sect members would have to do. Harvest crops, maintain arrays, inspect various facilities," Catheya said. "Those have little dangers and low rewards. Most quests are more like what the two of us did in Twilight Ocean."

"What?" Zac asked. "Blow things up?"

"In a sense," Catheya laughed. "A Revenant who's been here for three decades explained it for me. The whole Perennial Vastness could be considered a laboratory where thousands of experiments are running simultaneously. The Perennial Vastness is testing various theories by reforging whole worlds based on certain concepts.

"We're just sent inside to ensure nature sticks to the plan. For example, the mission that caused my enmity with the Grand Firmament Coalition was a mission inside a glacier that had been infested by weird Death-attuned critters. Their bodies stained the ice, and they dug paths that impacted energy flow. The mission was to find and eradicate the creatures, while any tunnel I sealed provided bonus Mana."

"And that was better than most quests?" Zac asked with confusion.

"The critters had spread across a huge mountain range," Catheya laughed. "I only rooted up a couple of outer burrows and avoided the main hive, and I still earned just over 3,000 Mana in 18 days. Even if 100 people worked together, they'd have their hands full. It was a perfect quest for larger groups. I just didn't understand I was taking the food out of the mouth of others."

"What! Three thousand Mana in under three weeks?! So we can earn over 70,000 Mana a year with these kinds of quests?" Ogras exclaimed, his eyes veritably burning.

"You're forgetting the cost of staying in the special environment," Catheya smiled. "That glacier was a Red Zone costing over 100 Mana a day, so I was left with less than 1,000 Mana in profits. But that's still very good. Some barely break even, while a few unlucky ones take a loss by accepting a quest they couldn't complete."

"Even one thousand is good if you add on the duels and bounties," Ogras agreed. "So, should we head out? We can't miss out on the good stuff if we want to finish everything in a decade."

"We'll figure out the rest on the go," Zac said. "Let's try to pick a quest together the first time and then take things as they come?"

"Calm down," Catheya laughed. "The mission hall is only five minutes from here, and we're still a few hours off. No one will go over there for a while longer. Let's just relax and plan our next steps. Why don't

you tell me about your experiences since we parted in the Twilight Ocean? I've only gotten small scraps of information, and I've been dying to know."

Zac was a bit antsy, but he sat back down and retold his experiences, from entering the void and getting trapped by a Voidcatcher to eventually staying on Earth for a few years. They also planned a few tactics for getting as much Mana as possible, from targeting alliances like the Grand Firmament Coalition to setting up alliances of their own.

Eventually, two hours passed, and Catheya scoffed upon seeing both Zac's and Ogras' eyes continuously dart to the door.

"Alright, you two. Let's just go. People should start appearing around now because of the grace period."

The grace period was another restriction inside the Green Zones. You could reject challenges for one hour after being defeated in a duel. If you won, however, you could still be challenged again. It was a small protection for the weaker guests, so they didn't lose all their accumulated Mana every time they visited the city. As long as they accomplished their tasks within the hour, they'd lose 100 Mana plus a small blueprint bounty at most.

Ogras returned to the shadows while Zac and Catheya leisurely walked out of the incensary together, making sure to be spotted by at least a few of the undead Patrons. Zac wanted his appearance to be spread to any potential spies as soon as possible so that they'd know he'd already met with Catheya. Hopefully, that would lessen the risk of any further attempts on her.

Catheya led him toward the center of the city. The streets were by no means heavily trafficked by this point, but there were far more pedestrians compared to the occasional passers-by of before. Zac occasionally had Null divulge people's echelons, and the vast majority of those he saw either belonged to the first or second echelon.

"So I won't cause panic if I challenge someone, right?" Zac asked to confirm.

"As long as you don't overdo it," Catheya smiled. "Just break through their defenses, hitting weaknesses if possible. You can lightly maim, but what's the point if it's just strangers and for Mana?"

Zac nodded in agreement before flashing over to a human wearing a dress sparkling like diamonds. She wasn't hiding her aura and was clearly a notch stronger than the average first-echelon cultivator. Of course, that didn't matter to someone like Zac, especially after hearing that the Barriers weren't as strong when you fought through the proper channels. Instead of 80%, you'd only see a 50% reduction.

"You," Zac said, calmly looking at the youthful woman. "I challenge you."

The woman glowered at Zac, her expression indicating she had neither been through ten duels this month nor one recently.

"I accept. But I pick with skills."

Zac glanced at Catheya, who helplessly smiled. "The defender can pick either a real duel with skills or a martial duel like I did. Most want to fight with their energy unlocked because they find it easier to defend against a challenge with access to their skills."

"Alright," Zac nodded, and the two walked over to the closest dueling circle.

"Listen to your wife. This time, don't kill," Null entreated. "I don't want you getting kicked out on the first day."

"She's not actually my wife," Zac said. "So, I can just start?"

"In a bit," Null answered. "You'll see when."

At first, Zac didn't understand what Null was talking about, but his eyes widened slightly as his vision shifted. The surroundings were muted, including onlookers and storefronts. Only the duel circle was fully lit, creating an illusion there were only the two of them in the area. A glass-like barrier split the arena in two to divide them, and a star-shaped pattern appeared above his opponent's head.

It was definitely a blueprint, and Zac saw his own float above his head when looking up. It was clear what the Perennial Vastness was looking for in these bouts. It didn't care about exchanging pointers or settling grudges. The Perennial Vastness wanted to pinpoint and remove imperfections from Cosmic Core Blueprints.

Many, including Zac himself, found enlightenment during battle, even more so than when visiting special cultivation grounds. That was probably why the Perennial Vastness had arranged this kind of ruleset. A clash might shake loose some ideas and epiphanies, leading to better Cosmic Cores.

Why the Perennial Vastness cared about some D-grade blueprints, Zac had no idea. He guessed it was part of a larger effort to unravel the secrets of the Grand Daos, similar to what the System arranged during the Twilight Ascent. The quest back then was to "Perfect the Tapestry of Twilight," with various actions furthering that goal.

In a way, you could look at the Perennial Vastness and the Twilight Oceans as experiments by the System. Only one focused on a specific path, while the Perennial Vastness seemed to look at the Dao as a whole. Perhaps that was the case with most trials controlled by the System.

Zac shook his head, focusing on the battle at hand. There was a short grace period where he could observe his opponent's core without any distractions. His opponent's expression was pretty weird as her face alternated between elation and suspicion. Zac inwardly laughed, realizing she was trying to make heads or tails of his unique blueprint.

The grace period lasted ten more seconds before the transparent wall between them disappeared. The duel had begun. Zac's opponent hadn't figured out the meaning of his blueprint or his path, but she still rushed forward as a shroud of stars covered her. She had opted to go on the offensive from the get-go.

Zac didn't have the same problem as his opponent. There were no mysteries to the two Daos making up the woman's path or blueprint. She cultivated two Daos, with the Dao of Stars taking the lead. It belonged to the Stellar Peak, also called the Unattuned Peak, because it governed most of the basic Daos of energy. The Stellar Peak didn't specifically refer to stars, but stars were included in the list of Stellar Objects that generated the Cosmic Energy planets later absorbed.

But the peak also included all kinds of mysterious things, such as the odd rivers through space he'd seen in his Bloodline Vision. There were even whole feeder dimensions that fed the main dimensions terrifying amounts of Cosmic and Attuned Energies through the void. Still, normal stars were the most common Stellar Objects, and also what his opponent's Dao was fashioned after.

However, her Dao was nothing like the path of Ventus, the Radiant Temple elite he met in the Twilight Ocean. The calculative elf had combined Star Patterns with the Dao of Numerology into some sort of Astrology that actually worked. In contrast, the Stellar Mage in front of him had fused her Dao of Stars with a Dao from the Peak of Impetus—the peak governing emotions and desires.

The Dao of Wrath.

Zac had never seen a fusion like this before since she was a combatant rather than something like a Hexer or Mentalist. It was extremely rare to see Daos belonging to the Peak of Impetus in the Frontier. The only one he knew with such a Dao was Vilari, who had been influenced by the Crown of Despair inheritance.

There were no weaker or stronger Daos, but it was harder to get direct results on some paths than on others. It was like how most of the combatants on Earth leaned toward warrior classes like himself. Intelligence-based mages weren't as common since they only hit their stride in the D-grade.

That was fine for a high-grade established force, but not for weaker places on the Frontier where Hegemons was a rarity. The same was most likely true with Daos. Some, like the Peak of Conflict, helped you increase your lethality from day one. But the Dao of Order or Impetus? The Dao Seeds and Fragments that made up such paths might not be very useful in early-grade combat.

A combat-oriented Cultivator might not dare delve into a Dao, even if they knew they had a high affinity for it. Neither would many forces want to incorporate them into their heritages since they wanted immediate results for their armies.

Clearly, the woman in front of him hadn't let herself be limited like that. Her Starry Dao was a Middle Dao Branch, supported by an Early Branch of Wrath. Together, they formed a shimmering shroud that continued to spread through the arena. It almost seemed like she had become the Old Heavens, becoming a force of nature with an inherent desire to destroy everything.

Her eyes glowed with manic light as her hands became beacons of destruction. Even the sky above darkened as an overbearing domain spread from her body.

Zac wasn't worried as he walked forward—he was elated. His duel with Iz had showcased one of his most critical weaknesses; his lacking experience against the unconventional paths and means Multiverse Heartland elites may have. Even the cultivators inside the Orom were almost exclusively from Frontier Sectors or adjacent factions.

Conversely, the guests in the Perennial Vastness were talents from every corner of the Multiverse, including the huge ancient factions at its core. Catheya had estimated that no more than 10% of the guests came from the Frontier in this place. Now, his very first real opponent showcased a skillset and path completely new to him.

This was not just a place to form his core. It was a perfect training ground where he could broaden his horizons.