

The Fall 989

[Chapter 989 - Small Actions](#)

Zac didn't know whether he should be happy or disappointed after having toured Vastness City for three days. Altogether, he'd managed to attract 38 challenges, just 17 more than he received in an hour before the warning went out. And only 4 of those were on the third day.

Certainly, the global message warned of a Draugr, meaning he could always turn into his human form and continue. But Zac wasn't in a hurry. Vastness City had quickly been vacated in the first hours after the missions dropped. A few cultivators had arrived an hour or two after the initial mission release, aiming to get a second pick before the missions were released to the manors across the whole realm.

But they weren't enough to waste such a good opportunity on. People who didn't even dare compete for the missions weren't too likely to challenge strangers out of the blue. Better save that scheme until the next mission release, when the streets were full of people again. He'd probably be a second-echelon cultivator by then, but he could always spend some Mana to get sent back to the first.

One interesting thing about the past three days was that only two of his challengers hadn't read the notice. The rest of the challenges came from cultivators confident in their strength, who didn't care about 100 Mana. For them, the announcement was marketing rather than a warning. They appeared more interested in the fact he hadn't lost a single martial duel than they were in claiming bounties.

Everyone wanted to be the first to defeat Zac's Inexorable Stance or at least land a solid blow. Half of the challengers actually got close, and Zac didn't have to pretend to be weak. Ten of the challengers had entered the Integration Stage themselves, though only one had reached Middle Proficiency. Most of the remaining challengers had other advantages, ranging from intent and domains to powerful constitutions.

However, not one could match up to him in raw attributes, giving Zac an edge in most fights. This wasn't the Orom World, where people's attributes were equalized.

A few cultivators moonlighting as information merchants had long since started following him, recording the fights to be sold later. As such, people got a better understanding of where his ceilings lay, and the challengers grew more powerful. And after three days, Zac had finally encountered someone capable of pushing him to his limits.

Zac wasn't sure if the woman in front of him was a golem or a humanoid with stone-like skin. She almost looked like a marble statue, with mysterious grey patterns covering her muscular, exposed arms. Of course, Zac had no time to figure out any hidden meaning within, considering he was busy just withstanding her unrelenting barrage.

The woman was a spear wielder, and Zac felt like he was trapped in the middle of a hurricane as he furiously rebuffed swipes, stabs, and slams. Not even the chains of [Love's Bond] were enough to seize the momentum, forcing Zac to play by his opponent's rules until he found an opportunity to turn the tides.

Even if their Daos, paths, and weapons differed, Zac felt connected to his opponent. They both were infighters focusing on Strength. Both had three daos, of which conflict was one. Both had reached

Middle Proficiency in their Integration Stage Technique. Zac even suspected she cultivated a constitution to match his [Void Vajra Sublimation].

There was one difference, though. While Zac had an attribute advantage, his opponent had one more card up her sleeve. Intent. She had actually mastered both a pathbound technique and Dao Intent, which proved to be an incredibly difficult combo to deal with.

Something like that was normally impossible. Both were expressions of Dao, based on how you looked at the truths of the universe and related them to yourself. Some internalized the Dao, becoming one with it. These people embarked on paths such as Techniques and Harmonization. Others saw it as something external to be controlled, leading to Dao Intent or Domains.

Neither path was better or worse than the other. It was more a matter of affinity and personality. But to have both was almost a paradox akin to his being both living and undead.

Each attack of hers contained overpowering intent, and Zac couldn't find any weaknesses to exploit. The only reason he hadn't been overpowered even after 9 minutes was because her intent wasn't as developed as her technique. He could barely maintain equilibrium thanks to his superior attribute pool, though his opponent had already pierced his supposed weaknesses a few times.

Since his supposed loopholes were actually solid, her attacks had all been weakened to the point Zac could turn the situation around. But the statue woman was like an iron dome, her blueprint completely solid. Zac had tried striking a few odd spots, but they were just concepts foreign to him.

Zac was wracking his brain to figure out a way to break the stalemate, but the only thing he could think of was to use his [Void Zone] to snuff out his opponent's intent and destabilize her. But Zac obviously wouldn't use any hidden aces on a random duel, which led to an impasse lasting until Zac suddenly found the familiar force pull him back.

Neither side had a clear enough advantage to be considered a winner, which meant Zac was awarded the 100 Mana as a defender after ten minutes. The victory didn't bring Zac much joy, though. At least, it served as an important reminder that he wasn't infallible in this place. He'd mostly fought newcomers and weaker guests over the past days. There were definitely powerful people among those in the higher echelons, and he couldn't lower his guard.

Just like Zac wasn't happy with his win, his opponent didn't seem to care much about her loss.

"So that's how it was," she said, a large pearly-white smile spreading across her face as she looked at Zac appreciatively. "I don't understand what you've done, but I can tell it's extraordinary. I've never heard of anything like it. It's a shame you're undead. Otherwise, I'd invite you to join my sect."

"I didn't expect there were low-echelon cultivators with such strength," Zac commented. "I guess you just arrived as well?"

"Ten days ago," the spear wielder nodded before turning away. "I lost this one, but we have many years ahead of us. We'll see who leaves their name behind in this place in the end."

With that, she left, heading in the direction of the Market.

"You done?" Catheya asked as she walked over, her odd Natural Treasure already in hand.

It was inconvenient to walk around with arrays to block out their conversations from the observers, so Catheya had bought an odd natural treasure that had a similar function. It created a sphere of three meters where sound was isolated. In return, they couldn't hear anything outside, making it a double-edged sword.

"I doubt anyone will dare duel me after this fight," Zac shrugged. "Did you recognize her?"

"No, but someone like that won't stay unknown for long," Catheya said, looking at Zac suspiciously.

"What, you have the guts to look at other girls while having beauty accompany you? Is Lord Emperor already thinking about his royal harem?"

"How could she compare to you?" Zac smiled.

"That's better," Catheya winked. "You've really improved since Twilight Harbor, and not just your cultivation. So, what's your plan now? It's over an hour until we meet up with your friend."

"I don't have any plans," Zac said after some thought. "I'll check out my storefront to see if anyone has messed with it and rest a bit."

"You're still not ready to visit your manor?"

"I'll let things calm down a while longer," Zac wryly smiled.

"I can't believe you put your manor atop a Buddhist mountain," Catheya laughed. "You're asking for trouble. And how am I supposed to visit when it's like that? I don't think I can deal with the pressure you described."

"Sooner or later, I'll have terraformed the peak," Zac said. "You can visit then."

"It's a date. I'll go freshen up and observe my blueprint a bit. We'll meet at the teleporter in an hour," Catheya waved before sauntering off.

Zac smiled as he watched Catheya's receding back. Cultivating in seclusion was fine in shorter stretches, but it ultimately couldn't compete with exploring the universe with friends. He'd had more fun in the past couple of days just catching up with Catheya while exploring Vastness city than he'd had over the past years.

And it wasn't like one had to choose between friends and cultivation. He had learned a lot fighting against all kinds of experts over the past few days. His recent breakthroughs into his techniques had been completely stabilized, and he'd learned all the basic knowledge of the various realms of the Perennial Vastness.

And it was finally time to check out one of the realms for himself. Zac returned to his storefront but froze upon seeing its interiors had been completely rearranged. His little shop had gained an exquisite set of furniture, and even the walls were decorated with artwork that meshed well with his path.

At first, Zac had thought it was something Null or the undead coalition had arranged, but he realized he was wrong upon seeing a familiar face sitting at a table inside.

"The place looked a bit downtrodden, so I spruced it up. I hope you don't mind."

"You?" Zac said as he stepped into his storefront, a small frown appearing on his face. "I thought I told you to be careful when meddling with fate."

Sitting at a small Parisian table by one of the windows was Ventus Kalavan, the elf he'd met in the Twilight Ocean. The last time Zac saw him was after he'd killed Uona. Ventus had been a captive of the Havarok Imperials by that point, but Zac had freed him because of the help and clues Ventus had provided.

Since then, Zac had barely thought of the elf, though he kept the invitation token to the Radiant Temple. It had even become one of his more important escape treasures in case Zac was forced to leave Zecia altogether because of the mess with Ultom.

"Well, turns out your warning came too late. I dipped my feet in the well of Chaos, and my fate was indelibly altered," Ventus sighed with some helplessness as he pointed at the free chair. "Can we talk?"

'What echelon is the man in front of me?' Zac asked in his mind.

'Wow, eighth echelon! This guy's not bad,' Null answered.

Zac was surprised at Null's exclamation. Ventus cultivated a powerful path and was quite talented, having two Dao Branches while still in the Twilight Ocean. That was over a decade ago, and Zac could tell Ventus hadn't been lazing around since then. His aura was more condensed and mysterious, though Zac didn't believe Ventus was stronger than the woman he'd just fought.

Ventus Kalavan was a genius, but he was ultimately just a member of a weaker B-grade force near the Frontier. And he wasn't even the strongest one in his generation of the Radiant Temple, from what he'd gathered. How had someone like him encroached the levels of Mana that only the most powerful guests reached?

Was it thanks to his insights into Numerology?

"Can we even talk here?" Zac said as he looked around. "I'm sure you've followed my actions. I bet some people have bugged my storefront."

"Being an eighth-echelon guest has its benefits. I can pay 10 Mana a minute to completely seal my surroundings," Ventus smiled as a shimmering wall enclosed the storefront.

"There. Now, no one but the big guy upstairs can hear us."

'Is what he says real?' Zac asked in his mind.

"It's real," Null said. "But you can actually do it from the sixth echelon onward. I think he's just bragging about his rank."

"Alright, so what's all this?" Zac said, waving his hands at the interiors.

"These items were all made using native materials from Red Zones. They'll elevate your storefront. Don't worry. No one can steal them," Ventus said. "I felt it a shame they'd go to waste since this is the last time I visit Vastness City."

"Last time?" Zac said. "You're about to seclude yourself?"

"Just so," Ventus nodded. "I have been here 23 years. Accumulating. Calculating. And waiting for you."

"Waiting for me?" Zac said with suspicion. "What scheme are you cooking up this time?"

"No scheme, just an exchange born out of desperation," Ventus sighed. "Because I don't want to die."

"Die?" Zac frowned. "What's going on?"

"In three real years, I will be entering the Left Imperial Palace as a sealbearer," Ventus said.

Zac's heart thudded, but he kept his face impassive. "Am I supposed to know what that means?"

"You don't need to bother," Ventus smiled. "After we parted, I had years to pull various threads of fate together. Layers and layers, making up the grand calculation of the Heavens. And you should have heard that Alvod Jondir is now part of the Radiant Temple. That allowed me to glean a few critical variables connecting the past with the future.

"And to be clear. I wasn't planning on investigating you. It was just that my calculations all led back to you. To the Draugr Arcaz Umbri'Zi. And to the Human Zachary Atwood."

Zac tensed up, hesitating as he looked at the elf.

"It's too expensive," Ventus smiled. "You should be around 300 Mana short. Killing me will get you kicked out."

"You?" Zac growled. "Was it you who sent out that missive to prevent me from earning Mana?"

"No, that was Holy Son Serku," Ventus laughed. "He's still only at the sixth echelon, but his goals are lofty. He's very sensitive to slights to his prestige because neither his strength nor backing is at the top of this place. So the coalition he's created isn't as stable as some others. I just benefitted from the side.

"I wouldn't ruin your good things like that. After all, I'm hoping to cooperate with you down the road. The stronger you are, the better."

Zac wordlessly looked at the numerologist, unsure what was true and what were lies that helped push the conversation in the direction Ventus wanted. People meddling with fate were the most annoying people to deal with.

"I should add that only I know about your odd situation. And possibly Alvod Jondir, though I don't have enough information to make a definitive statement," Ventus continued. "In fact, the events of Twilight Ocean have been sealed in the Radiant temple, precluding anyone from discussing them. After all, what our new Grand Deacon did came uncomfortably close to unorthodoxy. The identity of Arcaz Umbri'Zi is known among the elders, but there is nothing about your human half."

"And why should I believe you haven't sold me out for some contribution points?" Zac asked.

"Why would I do that?" Ventus said with a helpless face. "Maybe if it would have gotten me out of this mess. But since the Radiant Temple treats my generation as fodder, I'll just keep this to myself. If anything, you're welcome to bring some Chaos down on the heads of those bastards. Let them feel what it's like to be thrown into a hurricane of fell fate."

'Now that we're both guests, will the information seals of the Perennial Vastness stop this guy from spreading information about me?' Zac inwardly asked.

"Maybe. Our seal only blocks things gleaned here. So, if he figured out your real identity while in here, he would not be able to share it. However, whatever he deduced before entering will not be covered," Null explained.

"Alright, so you're a sealbearer," Zac grunted. "How the hell did that happen?"

"You probably know your Sector is sealed," Ventus said. "However, the seal doesn't treat everyone the same. It's not as powerful for locals, by which I mean those from neighboring sectors. A certain faction ordered the Radiant Temple to send some youths into the Million Gates Territory to test their fate. I was among them and got a seal in just three months. After that, I was immediately sent here to break through."

"What faction?" Zac frowned.

"I can't say," Ventus said with a shake of his head. "Suffice to say, I wouldn't have gotten mixed up in this mess if I hadn't been forced. There can only be one role for subordinate factions in an event this important, especially when it's just a bunch of junior-generation cultivators."

"Sacrifices," Zac sighed.

"Exactly. The Radiant Temple won't be damaged in the slightest, even if we all die inside. My elders have probably already collected a valuable reward for providing their superiors with a sealbearer. If I actually survive the event, it's just a bonus."

"So, what kind of deal do you have in mind?" Zac asked. "It's not like I can take your seal off your hands without killing you."

"For two decades, I have run simulations and calculations for my future," Ventus said. "Almost all of the divinations end in the same result; death. The odds of me surviving the inheritance are essentially zero. But to cultivate is to go against the Heavens—I'm not willing to surrender to fate."

"When we last parted, you told me that small actions can turn into a storm that swallows all in its path. Now, that's exactly what I hope for."