

The Fall 990

[Chapter 990 - Perennial Transformations](#)

A storm raged in Zac's heart upon hearing Ventus' grim proclamation of his demise. Even if Zac wasn't particularly close to Ventus, he didn't wish death upon him. But the fact that the elf, who was more powerful than virtually all of his followers, believed himself to be facing death was horrifying.

Where did that leave the rest? Was he sending Emily, Joanna, and the others to their deaths?

"How could you even calculate something like that?" Zac asked. "That place shouldn't be so easily divined."

"That's true, but that's also a problem for someone like me. Half my power will be nullified in a realm containing such powerful latent wills and truths. But while the details of the inheritance are unknowable, I can tell the odds of my survival are growing worse by the day. It's like my river of fate is turning into a trickle, leaving a parched hollow through time."

"So, what do you want me to do?" Zac asked suspiciously. "I can't just conjure storms and overturn the Heavens."

"Looked that way in the Twilight Ocean," Ventus smiled. "But all I ask is that you try to save me if we encounter each other inside the Million Gates Territory and let me follow you around."

"Why me?" Zac frowned. "You know I'm still just an E-grade cultivator. I plan to keep my head down and harvest some benefits before getting out in one piece. I've no interest in the main inheritance."

"Because you are Chaos incarnate. Staying next to you will sweep my fate up in yours, possibly opening a path to survival," Ventus said. "And the fact you're not interested in the main inheritance only increases my chances of survival."

"So you want to ride the coattails of my fate," Zac surmised. "And what are you ready to pay in return?"

"Two payments," Ventus said as a thick book appeared on the table. "The first is the fruit of two decades of labor. Today, I have 89,000 Mana, and I will enter the ninth echelon after finishing my final quest. That's not because I am the strongest person in this place but because I have discovered a few hidden rules.

"Such as?"

"You must have heard about events spawning, providing handsome rewards. But did you know that a global event would turn into a private opportunity if you stayed in the area where the triggering event occurred? And what if you could figure out which realms would release such an opportunity ahead of time?"

"You're saying," Zac said, looking at the book with interest.

"With my book of [Perennial Transformations], you will reach your destination quicker than working on your own. Your chances of finding some rare opportunities in this world will also increase," Ventus said as he took out a golden abacus. "You need to understand the Dao of Numerology to make full use of this book, but I have prepared a simplified method anyone can use."

Zac was tempted. If what Ventus said was true, then the book was a treasure. Zac had learned a few secrets of the Perennial Vastness over the past days, which had explained why most elites only stayed a decade or two. It wasn't that people didn't want to stay longer, but rather that they couldn't.

He'd figured it was just a mix of wanting to retain momentum and not wanting to linger too long inside a Temporal Chamber, but there was one more reason. There was something guests called Mana Sickness.

The more Mana you collected, the greater effect you'd have on your surroundings. For the cultivator, that was perfect since it allowed you to form your Cosmic Core more efficiently. However, you were essentially bending the fundamental laws of the Perennial Vastness, and the world started rejecting you.

The more Mana you earned, the greater the effect. Every piece increased this rejection and spending the Mana only partly helped. Some could withstand the sickness slightly better than others, but you were essentially fighting against time at the higher echelons. If you lingered too long, either by earning and spending too long or by hoping to reach echelons beyond your capabilities, you might actually lower your chances of forming a good core.

Though that was rare, you might even find yourself prematurely ejected from the Perennial Vastness. After all, someone feeling themselves struggling with Mana Sickness could spend a few echelons' worth of Mana to partly alleviate the pressure before quickly forming their cores.

Zac wasn't sure if this was related to the world's laws or intentional design by the Perennial Vastness. But the result was that the top-tier elites had to keep pushing themselves and rapidly accumulate Mana before the Mana Sickness reached dangerous levels.

Meanwhile, weaker cultivators at the lower echelons weren't as affected and could steadily work on the Perennial Vastness experiments to build up their Mana over a longer stay. However, having carried around Mana for decades, they accumulated more of the sickness, and their ceilings were much lower.

Ultimately, the speed with which you could accumulate Mana was the key to how high your Mana Ceiling was. The situation was a bit different for Zac since he needed to return within a decade in either case, but this [Perennial Transformations] was still immensely useful if it could improve his Mana Gathering rate.

So the book was tempting, yet Zac didn't immediately accept.

"You said there were two payments. What's the other?" Zac asked.

"I don't know," Ventus said.

"What?"

"Your fate is always in flux, and I believe it will continue to change during your stay here. So I will sacrifice a millennium of my Longevity to make a deduction just before entering the Left Imperial Palace, figuring out what you need. If you still don't think it's enough when we meet inside the inheritance, that'll be my bad luck."

Zac thought it over for a while before slowly nodding. "I can't guarantee anything since I have no idea how things will play out inside. But if a situation appears where I can accept you without giving up one

of my people, I'll do so. However, I won't fight to the death trying to free you from whoever is coercing the Radiant Temple. You'll have to figure out a way to get away yourself."

"That's fair," Ventus grinned as he stood up. "And thus, our fates align."

"It should go without saying, but if this book turns out to be a scam, the deal is moot," Zac added.

"You should find it useful, as will your two friends," Ventus smiled.

Zac didn't bother asking how Ventus knew about Ogras. His ability to blend into shadows was pretty hard to spot, but it wasn't some invincible ability.

"By the way, which seal do you have?" Zac asked.

"I'm a Threadwinder of Ultom, a sealholder of the Daedalian Court," Ventus said.

"Figures," Zac snorted. "I guess I'll see you in a couple of years."

"Work hard like your life depend on it," Ventus smiled. "Because it does."

The elf left after that, heading toward the mission teleporters. The shimmering runes covering the storefront dissipated a minute later, returning it to its original state. Zac had already stowed away the book and abacus by that point. He briefly looked at the door leading back to the mountain but ultimately shook his head.

There was nothing he urgently needed to check out back in his manor. If everything went according to plan, he'd reach the second echelon from the mission in Sinner's Lament. And if he left a week early, he had time to break through his Soul and Constitution before the next batch of missions were released.

By that point, the storm of fate atop Mount Illumination would hopefully have calmed down, allowing him to check things out. So instead of risking his life, Zac sat in meditation for the better part of the hour, going over his numerous battles and the inspiration they brought.

Eventually, Zac left the storefront and noticed a few people observing him from a distance. Zac didn't care and instead headed toward the teleportation array. This was the price of earning thousands of Mana in a few days.

By the time Zac got close to the teleportation square, he saw the shadows flicker.

"Did it work?" Zac asked with a low voice.

"I've broken through," Ogras confirmed. "My attacks should be harder to deal with now that I've inherited the features of another shadow creature, and I gained some attributes as well. Hopefully, I'll be able to find the third spirit in this place and infuse it in a couple of years. It is the first true threshold of the method."

Zac nodded in understanding. Ogras had explained his [Spiritlock Technique] before, and it sounded a lot like his own [Void Vajra Sublimation]. After completing each layer, Ogras could break through by sealing another spirit into his body. Having already sealed two, the demon was now working on the third layer of the method. Another breakthrough was the equivalent of Zac's Minor Sublimation.

"It's your best bet," Zac agreed. "The creatures we'll run into here don't exist on the frontier. You might even want to get a second beast if you can figure out a way to store it."

"I'm thinking the same," Ogras answered. "Oh, your little girlfriend is on her way. What's going on there, anyway?"

"I'm not sure," Zac said.

Cathey had always been flirtatious, but the situation was obviously different now compared to when they first met in Twilight Harbor. She had clearly indicated a real interest over the past days, and Zac's arguments against new romantic entanglements grew more tenuous by the day.

"She might have orders from above, you know," Ogras commented. "To seduce you."

"I know her," Zac said. "If that were the case, she would have made a perfunctory show of it to warn me."

"Well, so why not give it a go?" Ogras asked. "We're going to be staying here for years. You can have a short vacation fling. The girl has the looks, provided you can deal with those eyes and her being dead."

"For one, this isn't a vacation," Zac said with a pointed look. "Secondly, there is a life after the Perennial Vastness where things are more complicated."

"For a netherbeast like yourself, this place almost seems like a vacation. And why do you need to approach everything like they're permanent commitments?" Ogras countered. "Cultivators live for eons. How many can actually say they've found a soulmate that can follow in step on their journey? It's too, too rare. Why not just have fun for a while like the rest of us? If your paths later diverge, so what? It's not a failure. It's just life."

"We'll see how things pan out," Zac sighed. "Let's focus on blowing up some cursed mounds or whatever."

"Can't cut your way out of this problem," Ogras snickered, but he dropped the topic before Cathey walked into earshot.

"You're back," Zac smiled. "How was it?"

"Not too bad," Cathey said. "I have an idea of how to fix the problems you pointed out already. I'll just have to think about it a bit longer. Are you ready to go?"

"Sure," Zac said. "I've been hearing about these environments for days now. It's about time I get to see one."

"Your friend is..?"

"I'm here."

"It's weird how good you are at hiding," Cathey muttered. "You have absolutely no scent when you've entered someone's shadow. Well, I guess that's a useful skill set for an assassin or scout. Let's go."

Zac nodded and walked over to the teleportation pillars. Over a hundred of them were placed on a square, looking almost like an art installation. Zac picked one at random and placed his hand on it.

"Do you want to open a gate to Sinner's Lament?" Null asked.

It was an automatic feature since he had an active quest, though he could also tell Null to open a gate to any environment he wanted.

"Yes," Zac said, and the pillar split in the middle to create a doorway.

Zac wordlessly walked inside, with Catheya in tow and Ogras in his shadows. There was an identical pillar on the other side, and it closed after they'd entered. For the next ten minutes, it would be impossible to teleport to Sinner's Lament for anyone else, providing a headstart for those who wanted to avoid trouble.

Their party wasn't in any hurry, though. Zac stepped down from the platform, his arrival greeted by a deep rumble from above. The sky was almost black, with dense rolling clouds stretching as far as he could see. There was a suffocating atmosphere, and not just because it somehow felt like the Heavens were bearing down on him. Something was rising from the ground.

Something sinister.

It felt like death profaned by madness and fell karma. It was like a mix of the influence from the Splinter of Oblivion and the cursed energy of the Lost Plane rolled into one. Of course, the aura wasn't a perfect match. It seemed more like the environment had been soiled by some sort of unorthodox cultivation path.

Judging by the name of the environment, some evil cultivator or cult might have been killed or buried in this place, and their cursed cultivation had bled into the ground. It wasn't too bad, though. The energy burrowed into Zac's body like Twilight Energy, but his Hidden Nodes easily dealt with it.

He did, however, note that [Immutability of Eoz] had woken up, and it radiated soothing darkness through his body. It was the first time Zac had seen the Hidden Node wake up outside various experiments, proving the environment didn't just have a problematic form of energy. The whole area was cursed, literally.

"I took a lap," Ogras suddenly said as he appeared in a puff of shadows. "I can't find anyone lying in wait."

He wore a black hood obscuring his features, and a swirling haze of darkness around him made it impossible to even make out he was a demon. Just standing next to two Draugr, most would most likely take him as another undead cultivator since his path or clothing did nothing to say anything to the contrary.

"It's not worth targeting us in an Orange Zone," Catheya shrugged. "If I were them, I'd lay low a few months before striking when we entered a Red Zone."

"Makes sense," Ogras said, his voice almost drowned by a deafening clap of thunder as hundreds of lightning bolts rained down on the ground in the distance. "Some place I picked. That kind of lightning shower can turn most E-grade cultivators into ash."

"We'll have to keep watch on the skies," Zac agreed. "Are the two of you alright in this environment?"

"For now," Catheya frowned. "But I doubt I can stay the whole month unless something changes, considering this is just the edge of the Zone. It's usually worse further in."

"What about you?" Zac asked, glancing at Ogras.

"I'm fine," Ogras laughed. "Actually, this environment is quite useful for my weapon. It absorbs the bad stuff, leaving the rest for me."

The demon's handling of the [Shadewar Flag] was a source of worry, but Zac wasn't about to interfere. He'd be a hypocrite if he tried to enforce orthodoxy on the demon after having turned his follower into a Tool Spirit.

Besides, it wasn't like Ogras was sacrificing innocent mortals. The demon was just making use of the sinister atmosphere, like Zac did with Lake Water or other weird treasures he picked up.

"I'm guessing you're fine?" Ogras asked.

"Yes, no problem," Zac nodded. "Be careful, though. I have a Hidden Node protecting against things like curses, and it's active right now."

"My Tool Spirit said as much," Ogras smiled. "That long-nosed bastard even said I can use it to upgrade some of my spectral followers into Sinner Wraiths. I have no idea what that is, but it sounds interesting."

"...What?" Zac said upon seeing Catheya's look.

"[Immutability of Eoz]," she sighed. "I can't believe you're really a descendant of the Vanguard. How can one person have so much luck it spills over on their surroundings?"

"Why complain?" Ogras shrugged. "Just grab onto the coattails and start picking stuff up."

Zac laughed as he surveyed the seemingly endless wastelands. Neither [Cosmic Gaze] nor his normal vision could provide clues about where the nearest Sinner Mound was. The only hint was that the storm seemed to weaken on the horizon in one direction.

"So what now?" Zac said, pointing in the direction where the storm was more furious. "Just head in that direction?"

"Most teleporters take you roughly 10 to 20% into the environment," Catheya said. "Those who want it safe can stay in the outer band, but the mounds are bound to be sparser there."

"Into the storm, it is," Ogras grinned as he turned into a streak of shadows.

Zac smiled as he started running as well. They were paying 65 Mana a day to stay here, so there was no time to waste. They'd have to figure things out on the go. The ominous environment couldn't quell the excitement in Zac's chest. This was what he'd been yearning for while stuck in his cave.

The sky rumbled, the ground bled, and adventure was calling.