

The Fall 1012

[Chapter 1012 - A Mark on the Tapestry](#)

Innumerable broken fragments floated in the air, locked in orbit by the immense energy fluctuations and inherent gravity of the vast ancestral platform. Below, the fractures of broken space swirled, forming a vortex as vast as reality itself. The two were locked in an ancient struggle akin to a predator and its faltering prey. By this point, the platform was like a dying man with one foot through the door to the beyond, desperately resisting fate.

A whole civilization sat atop the ancient stones. Or rather the remnants of one. Hundreds of millions of bodies, the smallest reaching thousands of meters into the air. Yet there was no movement, no sound. They had all given everything in hopes some would see the sun on the other side. They were failing.

The Aether no longer answered their calls, their continents had been reclaimed to be reformed. The testaments to their spirit and ingenuity were gone, their creations swallowed and consumed. All that remained was the platform.

The poison spread.

The innermost circle of the marooned was made up of six giants, each one the size of a continent. The grand ancestors who had held up the vault of the heavens were broken and bent, shrunk from having their Aether siphoned to nurture the platform. And to protect their heritage.

The six ancestors were holding up a sphere shimmering with still-pristine Aether. Inside, a solitary building floated. In front of the ancestors, it was no more than a mustard seed. Yet it held their everything. Their history, their hopes, and their conviction.

Standing on the steps of the library, the caretaker stood, looking up at the enormous and distant faces. There was no anger, regret, or reluctance on their faces—only sorrow and release. Tens of thousands of years had passed since the last of the ancestors had fallen after enduring an eternity of loneliness. Now, only their lingering will maintained the platform and their heritage.

It was this accumulated will that had given birth to him, the corpse of the First People. Not living, not dead. He was locked in his prison of knowledge with no power to subvert the river of fate. A shudder rippled through the platform, and another set of cracks appeared.

"We're too late," the corpse sighed, its hollow eyes peering beyond the layers of the storm. Beyond reality itself. "Or rather, too early. No fate, no fate."

Only silence answered. To be the first was both a blessing and a curse. Now, they were out of phase. He could tell. It wouldn't have helped even if the ancestral will had managed to hold on beyond the curtain call. The poison was anathema to their being, yet the cosmos was to be remade in its image.

"If that is our fate, so be it," the corpse eventually sighed, turning to the library behind him. "But we shall leave our mark on the tapestry."

A light lit up within the innermost sanctum of the Kaltorum Halls, and the whole platform started to rumble. The outer bodies, now no more than withered husks void of Aether, collapsed into stardust. They formed the first layer of the storm that consumed one layer after another.

Outer Supplicants, Explorers, Startreaders, Cosmic Pathfinders. One by one, they joined the storm. Even the platform shrunk. The energy that was once used to resist the vortex now went into empowering the stardust. Of empowering the final ritual of their kin. Soon, even gargantuan ancestors crumbled, the Aether locked in their bodies igniting the stardust with their spirit. Endless energy poured out of the library, joining the storm outside the protective sphere.

The ancestral platform was gone, turned into a blazing galaxy that shielded the sphere as it fell toward the vortex. Even the poison was forced away, unable to eradicate the final ritual. The library shook, cracks spreading across the pillars that had stood for countless years. The corpse looked at the familiar halls one last time before he closed his eyes and joined the others.

The library exploded, erasing the last vestige of their civilization. But from within the destruction, 229 lights emerged. Each dragged enormous amounts of stardust to their side until all of it was consumed. Together, they formed a complex constellation that forced its truth on reality itself.

The constellation wasn't static. Each of the lights held a supreme truth, and they took turns becoming the eye of the constellation. As such, one constellation was 229. Even its revolutions contained a supreme truth, one that barely managed to stave off the maelstrom's hunger until the constellation flickered and disappeared. Left was a vortex no longer locked down and impeded, which rapidly consumed what little remained.

"Inheritor, we are the First People," a booming voice echoed through the cosmos. "Born from the Aether, returned to the Aether. For so long, we searched for answers, for others. We found none. We ask nothing in return for this gift. We only ask to be remembered."

The scene shattered and was replaced by a dried-out trough under an amber sky. Gone were the immense ripples of mysterious power. Instead, there was only poison.

"Aether... Void..." Zac muttered, his mind still awash with the scenes he'd just witnessed.

"I knew it."

Zac's glazed-over eyes focused, and he turned around. Ogras was standing just next to him with a victorious smile on his face. Zac's thoughts were still a jumble. He slowly looked around, trying to compute what had just happened. Just what was that vision?

It took a few minutes before Zac felt himself back to normal, able to process the vision. In a sense, it felt a lot like when he first came in contact with Ultom. That time, the vision had been triggered by the Cosmic Vessel passing through the inner barrier of the Void Star. This time, it seemed to have been triggered by him stepping onto the soil of the riverbeds.

Both had spoken of conviction and defeat. One had shown the broken-down castle wall of what Zac assumed was the Left Imperial Palace. The other vision depicted an ancient civilization's ark supposed to give them a chance at survival. Yet there were also some differences to the visions.

Zac still shuddered upon remembering the vision of Ultom. The power engraved into the castle walls. The small courtyard which seemed to supersede the Dao itself. Just grazing the concepts of Ultom had almost killed him.

Conversely, he was absolutely fine right now. The scene of those towering beings in this new vision looked incredibly imposing. The Orom would have been able to fit between the teeth of those six ancestors. And even if dead, they exuded nigh-incomprehensible power. At the least, they had to have been the equivalent of Late-Stage Autarchs, but Zac suspected they were even Supremacies.

Yet, neither they nor the ancient library gave off that unfathomable meaning. The whole vision felt more distant, like he had been watching something on television rather than experiencing it. Of course, that didn't mean these First People were weak. As far as Zac could tell, they were an incredibly powerful faction, but one that didn't quite have the strength to leave an Eternal Heritage.

But when did this happen? Zac doubted they were from the previous era. Then they wouldn't have called themselves first. Did their civilization actually spring up sometime during the Cataclysm, when the Dao was ripped apart and the Heavens gone? It would explain how they could cultivate the Void, or Aether as they called it. And the poison they mentioned was just the Dao.

Zac had never considered it before, but it was possible that the Cataclysm and the Heavens' reformation took billions of years. If Zac had to guess, there had been a lull sometime at the tail-end of the Cataclysm, one long enough for a Void-attuned species to appear. Then the final process kicked in as the Heavens began reforming, and these 'First People' died out.

The ancestral platform was supposed to have shielded the best and brightest until the Cataclysm finished, but they had underestimated the process. Instead, the corpse had split their inheritance into 229 parcels and forced it through the vortex. It was like a faux Eternal Heritage, one that only had to survive the formation of a Heaven, not the destruction of one.

Faux or not, Zac's heart beat with excitement. There was something amazing waiting for him here. Now, he just had to unravel the clues and unearth the truth.

"Hello?"

"Ah? What?" Zac said as he turned back to the demon. "Knew what?"

"That you were up to something," Ogras said. "What is it? An inheritance? A lingering will of a supreme cultivator? A corner of the Heavens whispering your name?"

"I saw a vision. I haven't confirmed it, but I think there's an inheritance here," Zac whispered. "A big one."

"Old-monsters-popping-out-of-the-woodworks-big?" Ogras said.

"Kind of," Zac said, warily looking at the sky.

'Do you take us for bandits?' Null scoffed. 'The boss has collected innumerable inheritances over the years. If it's been placed here, then it's up for grabs for whoever's fated.'

"My guide says it's fine," Ogras said.

"Mine as well."

"Your girl doesn't know you well enough yet. She should have known better than to go into secluded cultivation with you on the move." Ogras grinned. "Well, then, what are we waiting for? What now? Where to?"

Zac looked across the huge dried riverbed before looking down at the ground beneath his feet. Nothing here seemed connected to that ancient platform or the First People. Did the riverbed perhaps make up a formation mirroring one of those constellations? It was too early to tell.

"It was all pretty cryptic. Let's just look around for now," Zac said after some thought. "Can you fly up in the air and get a better look at the patterns of the rivers? I saw a bunch of constellations in the vision."

"Of course. But remember, the soldiers get soup while the generals eat meat," Ogras said before turning into a stream of shadows that shot straight into the air.

The demon never asked for details, and Zac wasn't sure if he should tell. The Void and his bloodline were essentially his last secrets, and this inheritance was clearly related to his hidden affinity. It wasn't that Zac didn't trust Ogras, but he had a weird feeling that if people knew about it, they'd be worse off. Swept up and harmed by his fate. It was one thing for Iz to find out. She had Supremacies in her family who could protect her fate from being harmed.

But there were some things he could do. Zac took out sets of wooden plaques and began to carve the constellations one after another in case the vision faded. By the time the demon returned, he'd carved all 229 of them. Thankfully, they weren't very complicated. With his experience in engraving, each only took a few seconds.

"Looks familiar?" Ogras asked as he threw over a recording crystal.

Zac looked at the lines formed by the rivers, trying to match them up with the many transformations of the constellation. Nothing. He'd hoped for something to jump out at him, a clear direction, but the land barely managed to spark something vague.

"I don't think so," Zac eventually said with a shake of his head. "Do you see anything?"

The demon looked at the engraved plaques, a frown appearing on his face.

"Odd. These patterns don't seem like anything special?" he eventually said.

"It's hard to explain or draw out like this," Zac said. "These are all one while being distinct."

"Well, should we keep walking toward the center of the riverbeds? There's a small dried-out lake there. There might be something at the bottom. Should we rush it?"

"We're not in that much of a hurry," Zac said. "And there are no guarantees the answer is at the lake. I think the inheritance is related to the kernels somehow, so let's keep a pace where I can sense them. I need to digest the vision anyway."

The two continued, and it didn't take more than a few minutes before they stumbled upon the first kernel. After seeing—or rather sensing—the natural formation, Zac's suspicions grew stronger. He'd already had a strong suspicion the reason for his connection to the kernels was his bloodline. The kernels contained Dao but were surrounded by Void, which completely canceled their energy fluctuations.

There were still some pieces missing, though. For instance, he couldn't sense anything akin to his Void Energy from the kernels or formations. That ancient aura was completely missing, though that specific feeling might be related to his bloodline rather than the Void itself. Knowing the Fate Kernels were related to the Void didn't help him much. It didn't provide him any method to scan larger regions using his Void Energy or any clues to the location of the inheritance.

The two continued on their way, and it soon became apparent why the riverbeds were called a hotspot. The two couldn't walk more than a few minutes before Zac sensed a kernel nearby. Not much later, Zac could confirm he could tell the difference between low-quality and better kernels. The two walked over to an inconspicuous patch of dried clay, and Zac extracted a silver hairpin shuddering with power.

"Damn, close," Ogras muttered as he looked at the kernel with interest. "Middle-quality Dao of the Spear. Let me have a look at it."

Zac threw the hairpin over to Ogras, who played with the kernel while the two continued. Just 200 meters away, Zac found another low-quality kernel, but he didn't even bother extracting it. It was proof of how many kernels were hidden in the river and how bad the efficiency of the conventional methods was. Most cultivators could spend a day turning a whole riverbed upside down only to find a dozen kernels.

Interestingly enough, they'd found that Ogras could not extract most of the Fate Kernels Zac found. The moment the demon touched the hidden formation, it disappeared. He had managed to take out three kernels, though, so it was not an absolute rule. They tried figuring out if it had any bearing on the vision of the First People and their heritage but came up empty-handed.

Suddenly, the surroundings exploded with color, and a frantic series of images passed Zac's eyes. The images were abstract and incredibly complex, and Zac almost felt his head swell from having them crammed into his head. A moment later, they were gone, just leaving a headache behind.

Zac grunted and shook his head. "Ow."

"You okay?" Ogras asked.

"Saw something," Zac muttered before trying to explain what he'd seen.

"Weird," Ogras said as he looked around. "Might be a clue?"

"Let's look around," Zac agreed.

But after three hours of scouring the area, the two were forced to give up and keep going. There was nothing special about that region except for an elevated concentration of Fate Kernels. The two even mapped out where they found the kernels, hoping they were part of a bigger whole, but that didn't lead anywhere either. Then came another flash of images.

A whole day passed this way, with the two searching for clues while Zac was beset by increasingly powerful bursts of visions. Zac's head was a throbbing mess already. It felt like his thoughts were overwhelmed by a lingering white noise as images of the constellations forced their way back to the surface. It got so bad Zac was forced to speak, or better yet scribble down, his thoughts not to lose them.

But then, it clicked.

"Two sides of a mirror. Dao and Void," Zac muttered, his eyes gleaming as he spread out his stack of plaques on the ground in front of him. "Counterbalance..."

Ogras stood to the side with a frown, his eyes turning between the plaques and Zac.

"What do you want to do?" the demon eventually asked. "The lake is just an hour away. Better yet, why don't we head back to Vastness City for a break? You're looking a bit... unraveled."

"No need," Zac said as he gathered his notes. "I have it."

"Consumed by the search for truth. I know the feeling," a snicker echoed out as K'Rav appeared from Ogras' sleeve.

The goblin curiously looked at the constellations before turning to Zac.

"You remind me of myself when I found the direction for my research. Ah, those were the days."

"Like you? Well, that's not good," Ogras scoffed. "Help me talk some sense into him."

"Why would I?" the goblin laughed. "Follow the madness, kid. Sometimes you need to plunge into the depths to see the light."