

The Fall 1013

[Chapter 1013 - Inversion](#)

"You hear that? This lunatic is cheering you on," Ogras sighed, referring to the Goblin Tool Spirit. "You have to understand that's not a good sign."

"As I've said, I'm not going crazy. It's just those visions overloading my brain," Zac said with a roll of his eyes. "Let's go. I want to deal with this before my head explodes. Of course, if you feel this is a waste of time, you can always head back."

Truthfully, Zac wasn't sure Ogras had much to gain from a Void-related Inheritance. Of course, there was a chance there was more to the gift of the First People. Perhaps there were other treasures apart from Void items and skills. Or techniques that could work with Cosmic Energy. After all, the corpse seemed to have realized which direction the universe was heading. Would they have bothered if he thought the inheritance was useless for such a world?

There was also the matter of the kernels. A huge Void Formation spread across the riverbeds, possibly the whole Quarry. Most likely, it was related to their formation as well. Where would the best kernels be if not by the inheritance?

"Maybe it's me who's going mad," Ogras muttered, but he still followed Zac as he sped away.

Zac didn't run toward the lake that was the source of all the rivers—it wasn't the true core. He had finally realized what was going on. The rivers didn't look like a pattern at first glance, but that was because it wasn't the whole picture. The riverbeds were the Dao, and the Void of Dao hid beneath, like the two sides of a coin.

Superimpose the environment with the right constellation, and they formed a whole. The theory was shockingly similar to his blueprint with his Cosmic Core, to the point Zac almost felt a bit annoyed. Would he have saved himself all that effort in secluded cultivation if he'd come here a few years earlier?

No, it wasn't as simple as that. Seeing something and understanding something was different. If he just came here and stumbled upon these arrays, he'd just be copying someone else's homework. His path had cost him a few years, but he far better understood his path as a result. Besides, there were no guarantees he'd ever realize what was going on if not for his research.

Zac had no idea what the enormous pattern meant, but he could tell where the center lay. The lake was one of two main eyes. The second eye hid on the other side of the riverbeds. Right between the two was the widest river, and Zac knew the answer was there.

It only took two hours to reach their destination since the two no longer looked for answers or kernels. They encountered two groups of cultivators on their way, including the cultivator searching with earthquakes. They only exchanged some information before moving on, continuing until they reached their destination.

Zac walked around, trying to feel something, anything, from the river. Ogras closed his eyes and kept them that way for over a minute until he opened them again.

"Nothing underground, even a hundred meters down," the demon said. "Almost pure bedrock. You sure this is the place?"

Zac barely heard him over the white noise filling his mind, but he nodded affirmatively. "This is it. It's the heart of one of the revolutions. I can feel it."

"Whatever you say," Ogras nodded, though Zac noted the demon's skepticism and concern even in his muddled state.

Zac didn't bother. The best way to prove he wasn't going mad and getting the demon back on board was to find the inheritance.

"There," Zac eventually said and turned to an empty spot that hid a natural formation.

It was the same as the others, yet it wasn't. It was the opposite. The Fate Kernels were Dao hidden by Void. This isolated spot was rather Void hidden by Dao. It didn't sound like a big deal, but Zac knew it was. This was Void brought to the Main Dimension, kept stable in defiance of the Heavens. It should have been consumed and nullified by the ambient Dao and Cosmic Energy, yet it somehow formed a perfect camouflage.

Perfect against anyone not attuned to the Void.

He stretched out his hand, but it passed right through. Zac frowned for a second before releasing some Void Energy around his hand and trying again. This time it worked, and space rippled similarly to when he picked Fate Kernels.

"What is it? A clue? A pathway?" Ogras eagerly asked as he walked over. "Is it—wait, is that what I think it is?"

Zac had already found what he was looking for and pulled out his hand. It was a small glowing orb looking like stardust. It emitted a weak fluctuation of the Dao of Stars. And nothing else.

"A low-quality kernel?" Ogras frowned, his eyes slowly turning to Zac. "Dao of Stars? That's it?"

Zac didn't immediately answer. His eyes were glued to the Fate Kernel, or rather what masqueraded as one. It emitted the same energy as a normal kernel, but it was just an outer layer hiding the truth. Its core was made up of Aether, or rather Void Energy. An ancient seed full of possibility.

But it was too small and too weak. It wasn't enough to carry the weight of that constellation or the gift of the First People. There had to be more. Zac muttered to himself for a minute, ignoring Ogras' looks as he tried to understand what he needed to do.

Only after a while did he realize that the pressure in his head was gone, and he could hear himself think. With his faculties finally returned to him, Zac soon realized something. Why the Dao of stars? Why this specific hotspot? If there was a Void Kernel here, why not in the others?

"Those dry veins, how many are there?" Zac asked.

"Ah? The dry veins?" Ogras said, his brows furrowing. "There's seven marked on the map I bought, but there may be more. Why?"

"Thrones and Seals, balance and counterbalance," Zac muttered.

"Buddy, you need to calm down and get some perspective. Your eyes have been looking a bit like the fifth elder back home. He had a deviation and suddenly became obsessed with a mountain on our planet, a mountain on a competing clan's lands. He believed his Dao hid inside. One day, he snuck out and murdered a whole village on the mountain slopes, convinced they hid the key to his breakthrough.

"Of course, there was no key, and his antics created a huge incident until he was eventually killed."

"I'm fine. The disturbances stopped the moment I extracted this thing," Zac said, his eyes not leaving the Void Kernel. "I now know what keeps these things hidden and why I can sense them. I also know this one is different, masquerading as something it's not. It's a key, a part of the puzzle."

Time was running out. The outer layer of Dao wouldn't be able to protect the inner layer for much longer. It would crack, and the Void would be washed away by the Dao in the environment. At the same time, it was just one of many. There had to be more nuclei waiting for him in the other hotspots and dried veins. It was the only thing that made sense.

There was only one thing he could do.

"Just wait!" Ogras urged as Zac moved the shimmering ball toward his chest, looking at the kernel like it was poison. "Think this through!"

"I have," Zac said. "This is it. This is the solution."

"If the answer is to imbue that shitty kernel, then the question is wrong!" Ogras shouted. "That thing will absolutely obstruct your core formation."

"You might be right, but it's the only way," Zac said as he pushed the orb into his body, where it would find sanctuary.

The Dao of Stars immediately melted away when it entered his body, leaving a small illusory rune. It flickered precariously, but it stabilized when Zac extracted some Void Energy from his cells. The rune immediately became a glutton, forcibly extracting over 10% of Zac's Void Energy stores. And as it consumed, so did it grow. It unfurled like a flower, displaying thousands of unfamiliar patterns that together formed a complex seal no larger than a button.

Zac expectantly looked on, waiting for some sort of impartment to take place. A burst of information, new visions, or perhaps even the appearance of a teleportation device. But his excited smile turned crooked as the rune made a quick circuit through his pathways before settling in his left leg. It shuddered, and Zac suddenly found his soul suppressed and his Cosmic Energy sluggish. Altogether, his strength had been restrained by almost ten percent.

"Uh..."

"Ai," Ogras said, clearly sensing the changes to Zac's aura. "You're in it now."

Zac waited for the rune to settle, trying to understand its meaning. But it was like an eldritch onion, layers and layers of incomprehensible patterns. His [Primal Polyglot] was utterly incapable of making heads or tails of the unfamiliar scripts or the proto-fractals that made up its inner workings. His work on

his blueprint didn't help him any, either. The script only sparked a vague recollection connecting it with the vision, but that was it.

"Let's continue," Zac nodded.

"Continue what? Crippling yourself?" Ogras muttered.

"Nine by eight," Zac said. "Seventeen keys will open the inheritance."

"You're going to absorb seventeen garbage kernels?" Ogras said, looking at Zac like he was a lunatic.

"Let alone seventeen, just two is dangerous. Haven't you heard what happens when you absorb two Fate Kernels? They'll clash, ruining both while damaging your foundations."

"It was not a Fate Kernel," Zac said.

"Sure looked like one," Ogras countered, prompting Zac to give the demon an even stare. "Alright, alright. You're not deranged—you just act like you were. I guess it's fine. With your weird body, so what if you eat a couple of kernels? I bet you'll digest them and walk away with a Dao Epiphany."

"That's the spirit," Zac smiled as he took a deep breath. "Let's finish this off quickly; it's not a great feeling carrying this thing in my body."

"Who could have known?"

It didn't take long to plot a path between the hotspots and dry veins. There didn't seem to be a particular order that needed to be followed, so they'd move in a large circle around the teleportation pillar. And with eight hotspots and seven dry veins already marked on the map, it wasn't too difficult to infer the final spots with the help of the constellations. Altogether, it would take around ten days to visit the sixteen locations, depending on how difficult it was to figure out the locations of the Void Kernels.

The two left the riverbeds, heading west toward a sweltering swamp. It wasn't a hotspot but rather one of the dry veins. Zac was greeted by a series of confusing flashes when he set foot on the region. The pain returned, but Zac was invigorated by it. The vision confirmed his theory was likely correct, and the two spent a few hours mapping out the region. Zac soon found which constellation the patches of land of the swamp matched.

Two hours later, he emerged from the murky waters, covered in grime but with a smile on his face. In his hand, there was held a small pebble. It was another Void Kernel masquerading as a normal one, this one covered in a sheen of Dao of Water. The noise in his mind had grown deafening once more, so he wasted no time as he absorbed the kernel into his body.

The process repeated itself, and a second seal soon stabilized in his left arm. The two seals formed a mysterious resonance that Zac couldn't quite understand. It was like they were strengthening each other. In addition, his strength had been further sealed. By this point, he probably wouldn't have won the battle against the earth cultivators without risking everything.

"You're alive?" Ogras said after Zac opened his eyes.

"Why do you look so surprised?" Zac snorted.

"Well, you can't blame me. You've been playing it fast and loose."

"So you'll stop your bellyaching and just help now?"

"Sure," the demon grinned. "If the only price I have to pay for access to an inheritance is you getting weaker, then I'm game."

Zac scoffed, and the two set out again, heading toward the next hotspot. The days passed, and the two picked up one Void Kernel after another. In return, Zac's aura weakened as the seals amassed in his body. By the time Zac had absorbed five, his aura was on the weaker side of the guests. By the time they'd gathered ten, Zac looked like someone that had just recently entered the E-grade. His movement speed was so slow that Ogras had to carry him around, and the two started to keep watch for guests.

His energy-hiding bracelet and robe hid his weakened state, but no disguise was perfect, and they didn't need the hassle. This was a Green Zone, and Zac could sacrifice some mana to surrender, but it was better if they dealt with this inheritance before that. Luckily, they didn't spot too many people, partly because of the mission release and partly because they spent half their time in dry veins.

Eventually, they approached the final piece of the puzzle. Zac's energy was all-but-gone, and he felt almost as weak as after winning that lucky roll all those years ago. However, his body was still that of a powerful Peak E-grade cultivator. His cells screamed for sustenance, but the Void Kernels had everything on lockdown. Unless something changed, he'd likely die from energy starvation in a few weeks.

Ogras realized the issue and kept a frantic pace toward the final place. Ogras was already familiar with the process, and Zac had a detailed sketch of the area and energy flows before he'd even taken out all the plaques. And then they found it. The last region was a dry vein somewhat close to the exit, where a complex series of mountains and crags made up the formation. The final Void Sphere hid within a withered tree in a secluded valley just ahead, but Zac didn't immediately get it.

"Wait, go get Catheya," Zac said in a weak voice.

"Are you crazy? A gust will knock you over," Ogras said. "It'd take me almost two days to head to vastness city and return with her."

"Still," Zac said. "If this is the final key to an ancient inheritance, then she should be here."

"Fine! Fine, damnit," Ogras swore. "But if you start seeing a white light at the end of the tunnel, ignore us and get that final piece."

"Sure," Zac smiled.

Ogras dug out a hidden cave, grumbling while setting up a series of defensive and illusion arrays before bolstering them with his Daos.

"Do you have something that can kill an interloper?" Ogras asked.

"I got Vivi, Alea, and a whole pile of bombs," Zac nodded.

In addition, he had his Void Energy. Most of it was siphoned off by the seals, but he had enough to launch a few furious attacks that should be able to kill most people in the Perennial Vastness.

"Try to sit tight," Ogras said. "Though knowing you, I'm fully expecting a calamity when I return."

"Go, go," Zac waved before closing his eyes.

The demon disappeared in a puff of shadows, allowing Zac to focus on withstanding the seals. It was hard to find center when his whole body was constantly screaming for sustenance, when his soul was pressured to the point the two spirals had essentially been forced to a halt. There was nothing to do but wait. He'd tried everything over the past week, but nothing worked. The only thing that helped was absorbing Void Cores and Void Stones, which replenished the small but constant drain on his Void Energy.

He tried to make time pass faster by studying the sixteen seals and committing them to memory. He wasn't making any headway at all, but that was fine. Eventually, the memories might jog something loose and spark an epiphany. But eventually, exhaustion overcame him to the point his concentration failed him. His empowered soul and solidified heart were utterly unable to deal with the mysterious resonance of the seals, and Zac was essentially reduced to just trying to stay awake.

"Zac? A- Are you okay?" a worried shout suddenly dragged Zac's thoughts to the surface, and he opened two tired eyes to see Catheya standing in front of him.

"You made it," Zac smiled, his voice but a weak whisper.

"You!" Catheya glared at Ogras. "You said some of his strength was restrained! How did you let him get like this? What's wrong with you?"

"You try to stop him when he gets an idea in his head," Ogras said with a helpless wave.

"Useless!" Catheya spat before turning back to Zac. "What do we do? His aura is almost completely—"

"I'm fine," Zac said, surprised to find he barely managed to stand up.

The two days had passed in a flash, but the passage of time had weakened him even further. A pang of hesitation filled his heart, but he pushed it away. There was no turning back now. He was right at the finish line.

"Sorry about interrupting your cultivation. I asked Ogras to call you here in case an opportunity appeared."

"Opportunity? You look like you're about to embrace the eternal slumber. We need you to get back to one of the healing environments."

"No point; he's already swallowed sixteen kernels," Ogras interjected, getting another nasty look.

"He's right," Zac said as he took a couple of stumbling steps toward the exit. "More importantly, get ready."

"Ready for what?" Catheya asked.

"Not sure, but I think I will either summon something or open a path when I take on the seventeenth piece," Zac said before hesitating. "Be careful. Whatever happens, it might be teeming with dangerous energies. Just stay back if you don't feel confident."

"Now you know how to be careful?" Catheya sighed as she led Zac out of the hidden cave. "Fine. We'll do what we can to assist you."

They approached the withered tree, and Zac extracted the final Void Kernel. It was a pitch-black gemstone filled with the power of gravity, representing the final Dao Peak. Zac took a steadying breath as he pushed the gem into his body, beginning the process one final time. Zac's vision swam from having the final vestiges of his strength siphoned from his body, and he felt his consciousness slipping.

A thunderous crash shocked Zac wide awake, and his gaze turned to the sky with shock. The warm glow of the Quarry's perpetual sunset was ripped apart, replaced by a swirling darkness that stretched beyond the horizon. Zac felt like he was looking at an ancient sky. A sky from before Earth, even before the System. Before the Dao. The vortex drowned out everything, its movement releasing a deep hum that Zac could feel to the depths of his soul.

One by one, thin pillars of light shot up toward the sky. At first, there were just a few, but in seconds there were millions. They rose from every corner of the Quarry, seemingly supporting the Heavens. All the while, the resonance within Zac's body surged toward a crescendo Zac both anticipated and feared.

Ogras looked at the spectacle with a crooked smile. "That's the Deviant Asura for you."