

The Fall 1050

[Chapter 1050 - Like the Moth](#)

"Mad... you're mad," Null cried in Zac's mind as he opened his robes to expose his stomach. "You're already at the eleventh echelon, and the boss confirmed you'd reach the fourteenth by snatching these things."

"Do you know what the fourteenth echelon means? I don't even know when someone reached that level last time. It'll be like having the boss himself aiding you in your Core Formation. Even the top-tier guests go into seclusion after hitting the eleventh. A rare few narrowly squeeze into the twelfth."

Zac ignored Null's prattling. It had been a daily nuisance since the guide realized what he was planning to do, or at least part of it.

"You have everything you need to accomplish your goal already. There's no need to go to these lengths, risking both our lives! People normally go into seclusion for months to stabilize their Dao and minds before they break through, not doing foolish things like this!"

"This is happening, whether you like it or not," Zac answered with a thought. "You're better off cheering me on than trying to sow seeds of doubt in my mind. Or keep watch of the big guy hiding in that moon over there."

"Bah, fine!" Null said with exasperation. "For seven years, you've tortured me with your antics. Worse comes to worst; I'll just die. At least my torment will be over."

"That's the spirit," Zac smiled as he infused some Mental Energy filled with all three of his Daos into the [Hollow Core].

The Natural Treasure looked like a somewhat dull crystal orb, but it lit up when his Daos entered its empty innards. It drew some energy from the environment, prompting a set of previously invisible markings to appear on its surface. Most of them were natural markings, but there were also a few exquisite runes engraved.

The runes were undoubtedly carved by the artisan who had realized the use of the [Hollow Core]. They had nothing to do with the Core Formation itself but rather helped with absorbing the treasure. The runes detached the moment they had absorbed enough ambient energy and formed a circle around his exposed belly button.

Zac felt a foreign energy enter his body and ordered his Hidden Nodes not to interfere. The energy soon congealed into a small sphere, which Zac dragged toward his Duplicity Core. He had long since realized that the Core Formation would have to occur within the Specialty Core, which meant the first step was to put the [Hollow Core] inside.

That way, it would act like an insulating layer, protecting the Duplicity Core from being damaged while he worked with the dangerous energies of the Core Formation process. The [Hollow Core] would eventually liquefy into pure energy that nourished and stabilized the finished core, at which point Zac would connect the Cosmic Core with his Specialty Core.

Much of the Duplicity Core's makeup was still outside his understanding. Not even Ultom could unravel the secrets behind his family's ultimate experiment. Partly because it almost felt like the runes across its surface were encrypted, but most of the reason was that he couldn't pierce the outer layers to inspect what hid within. Not even Ultom could provide answers out of nowhere.

That fact was problematic, but the bouts of Lake-fueled inspiration had allowed him to intuit a few conclusions. First, Zac strongly believed the Duplicity Core would automatically evolve when connected with a finished Cosmic Core. It was possible he'd have to fuel the process with a bunch of treasures, but he was already prepared for that eventuality.

Secondly, there was actually a hidden "hatch" on the Duplicity Core. He had never managed to open it before, but Zac was certain it was meant for the Core Formation process. So Zac led the small orb toward the hatch, preparing to force it open by force. However, the hatch opened on its own when the orb drew close.

It was as though the Duplicity Core knew what he was up to, and the thought made a grim frown appear on Zac's face. Truthfully, he would have preferred using his, admittedly crude, solutions to having the Duplicity Core act independently. For one, he didn't want any help from his mother's faction, even indirect help.

It also added unpredictability to the plans he had painstakingly put together. However, he couldn't stop now, like one couldn't take back a loosened arrow. The hatch opening wasn't the only change to the Duplicity Core. It was dragging energy into the space within. It was fine for now since he could use his energy and Dao to accommodate the pull.

Since it was his energy, it obviously wouldn't add heterogeneity to his Core Formation. It would, however, affect some of his plans. Furthermore, the amount of energy dragged into the core was more than Zac could sustain. He estimated he'd last a day before running out of energy. Zac would be left with no choice but to start using treasures at that point, no matter whether he was ready to form his core or not.

Interestingly enough, Miasma wasn't the only energy entering the Duplicity Core. Normal Cosmic Energy seeped out of the walls, providing no clue where it was stored. Not only that, but it was in an incredibly mysterious state Zac couldn't explain. It both existed and didn't in a weird quantum state of uncertainty.

It felt illusory, yet the energy was certainly there based on how it interacted with the Miasma. Zac couldn't feel any connection to it either, unlike the Miasma and Dao being dragged inside. There was, however, a weak hint of the Void hidden in the Cosmic Energy. It wasn't like the Void Energy he used to power skills or his bloodline talents, but more like the theories of the Void had inverted the Cosmic Energy from its natural state.

Zac already suspected his bloodline was the key to making his Duplicity Core work, and this was further evidence supporting that theory. For all the grief Leandra had caused him, he had to give the Kayar-Elu some credit. They really knew what they were doing when forming this mysterious core.

The Technocrats had probably added the automated energy pull to make the Core Formation process easier, but it had turned into a ticking time bomb for him. Zac inwardly cursed his mother for only dropping a few vague hints before leaving, but there was nothing to do about it. He knew his plan had

many uncertainties, and he was already prepared to make some adjustments on the go. This was just another bump in the road.

The small glowing orb entered the hatch without a hitch, and it transformed in a flash of light. The next second, Zac felt a weak but stable connection to the crystal sphere from within his Duplicity Core. The treasure had returned to its physical form. It was easy to forget, but a Cosmic Core was not a spiritual phenomenon like a Soul Aperture or Skill Fractals. When cultivators formed a Cosmic Core, they essentially grew a new organ. Mortals such as himself had to build it instead.

A mental command expanded the crystal sphere until he felt an intractable resistance from the outside. Zac performed some calculations, nodding his head with satisfaction. The less space he had for the core formation, the more difficult the process would become. He'd even prepared three scenarios depending on the situation.

The hidden space within the Duplicity Core wasn't quite as big as Zac's most optimal scenario, but it was still quite generous. He'd be able to follow his main scenario and even have some extra breathing room in case of mishaps or unexpected turn of events.

He'd already isolated his cave, but the [Hollow Core]'s fluctuations had stirred some nearby auras. The beasts' meditative slumber had been disturbed, but they soon stilled. Zac was relieved but not surprised. If you woke up from every minor fluctuation inside the Calamity, you'd never get a wink of sleep. The process had taken quite some time, almost making him late. Zac took a breath before leaving the cave, just like he had the past six days.

The moon's surface was currently drowned in the light of Life and Creation from the distant star. But that soon changed as darkness rose from below, supplanting Life with Death. It was time.

Miasma surged, and the world was reduced to a dull monochrome as time seemingly ground to a halt. Zac flew off the edge, down toward the Oblivion Sun, before any beasts could react. He extracted tremendous speed from his Peak-mastery [Abyssal Phase], but it wasn't enough to elude the locals. One consciousness after another latched onto him as he pierced into the deathly corona.

Zac didn't feel any killing intent from the observers—they likely thought him yet another fool consumed by greed after just a few days in the splinter's presence. Having his movement skill forcibly dispelled by the rampant energies on the sun's surface probably reinforced this impression. The Beast Kings wouldn't laugh for long.

Death flooded his body as he fell through the sun's outer layer, and the echoes of Oblivion created zones of extreme danger he had to desperately avoid. Their concentration was manageable this far out, but it was enough to awaken the remnants. They had been stirring inside their cage for a week, and their energies were fast rising in response to the environment.

Zac tried to endure the corona's fiery onslaught as long as possible but was soon forced to activate [Profane Exponents]. The floating skeletons climbed onto his back, and a protective shield formed around him. This was the main reason he targeted the splinter first. The absolute defenses of [Empyrean Aegis] were slightly higher, but it would have forced him to leave the pillars back on the moon. A single thought of the Late-Stage Beast Kings would tear apart his protection.

The outer corona comprised roughly half the sun's diameter and was made out of Death-attuned Energy packed so tightly it mimicked flames. Beneath was a semi-solid layer similar to lava or a viscous ichor. Not even a Draugr was spared from the crazy amounts of Death that tried to tear him apart, but it was still manageable.

More troubling was the Dao of Oblivion. It was far more pronounced this far in, enough for the mesh of remnants inside the cage to finally separate. Splinters and shards entered a familiar war, where one side tried to break out while the other wanted to contain them. Three sets of remnants fighting pushed the limits of what the cage could withstand, and Zac was alarmed to see bursts of energy leak into his Soul Aperture.

A hint of killing intent finally appeared in the auras when Zac pushed into the molten core. Zac couldn't sense the situation outside, but he wouldn't be surprised if the beasts had already crawled out of their caves by this point. It wouldn't be long before the leaders were compelled to take action, and Zac knew exactly what would set them off.

Cracks appeared across the small pygmy skeletons as they did their best to block and divert the unrelenting inferno around him, but a scream of danger warned Zac that the true peril of the sun was about to strike. A pulse of pure Oblivion was bearing down on him. There was no time to worry about the fallout as Zac channeled Oblivion into his shoulders.

Conflict and Oblivion fused and formed a sphere of nothingness between his hands. It consumed any Death that came close and then merged with the approaching pulse. There was no way for Oblivion to destroy Oblivion, but they weren't exactly the same. One was unbridled destruction, while the [Annihilation Sphere] was infused with Zac's will.

The difference allowed Zac to extract enough Oblivion to create a safe passage through the pulse. Doing so tripled the size of the [Annihilation Sphere], and it was rapidly going out of control. Zac was ready for that and threw it out in front of him with all force he could muster. The sphere created a tunnel of nothingness before collapsing in a huge implosion that pulled Zac closer.

The miniature black hole was gone as quickly as it appeared, and Zac had managed to use it to speed up a bit. The experience was just like when he got the Shard of Creation inside the Twilight Ocean. It had been in the heart of a volcano, releasing deadly pulses that he'd been forced to fight through.

Since then, Zac had grown a lot stronger, both his constitution and soul. It allowed him to control the uncooperative energies better, and the collision only cost him two of his fingertips. He could even have gone further and infused [Profane Exponents] with Oblivion to completely block the pulse.

Of course, doing so would do more harm than good. With his tight schedule, there simply hadn't been time to do anything with the energy highways on his shoulders. He'd only had time to reinforce his [Thousand Lights Avatar] to the point it would hopefully withstand what was about to happen. As such, he was still forced to rely on the Dao Molds if he wanted to channel Creation or Oblivion into his skills.

And while the molds had improved since his successful attempt in his fight with Valsa, they still weren't able to properly carry that kind of force. Zac continued toward the star's core, hoping to reach his target before it released another pulse. Things had worked out just like Zac had hoped, but not everyone rejoiced about his success.

A furious roar shook the star, and Zac's bones groaned when a tremendous aura crashed into him from outside. It clearly belonged to the ruler of the Oblivion Star, but Zac wasn't phased in the slightest. He even used the pressure to speed up as he dug toward the core with wild abandon.

He'd known that using Oblivion Energy would warn the kings outside that things were different this time. That he wasn't just a greedy fool overestimating his capabilities. Zac wryly smiled, realizing that the latter might depend on who you asked. But the fact remained that someone who could wield Oblivion held the key to stealing the remnant.

Zac could feel a huge presence draw closer with speed that outclassed his own, but it was within his calculations. The sun wasn't that big, and he could already feel the remnant ahead. As long as he absorbed the splinter before the Beast King caught up, then everything would be fine. In fact, he dared that guy to target him when he had a splinter-worth of Oblivion coursing through his body.

Soon, Zac felt the splinter was just 100 meters away. The energy was just unbearable by that point, and [Profane Exponents] couldn't withstand the assault any longer. The skeletons crumbled, and the star's energy dug into his body. Even his undead constitution started dying from the immense and uncontrollable aggression. Skin and limbs withered as a comforting yet terrifying cold gripped his soul.

Yet Zac pushed on, using his Dao and Hidden Nodes to fight back. He was almost there. The resistance was far greater this far into the star, and the tar-like ichor had almost turned into a solid. Zac was forced to dig his way forward, all while the sense of doom drew closer. Then, a scream of danger forced Zac to take drastic measures.

A huge jagged blade giving off a profoundly ancient aura dug into the solidified energy in front of him, and the Branch of the War Axe allowed him to carve a scar over forty meters deep. Zac didn't even have time to finish the swing before he'd turned into an abyssal wraith that squeezed into the crack. He even left the practice axe behind, not daring to waste even a fraction of a second.

It was lucky as well, as a huge taloned claw tore into the star right where he just stood. A whole section of the Oblivion Sun was ripped out, finally exposing the local tyrant. It was a skeletal monstrosity over one hundred meters long, its bones covered in black flames that resembled fur. It reminded Zac of the Gwyllgi back home, except for its size and two wings made of burning bones that didn't seem attached to its main body.

Zac didn't know if it had been raised from the bones of a fallen beast or if it was something that had naturally been born that way. Either case, the Beast King emitted a murderous aura, and it wasn't sparing any effort to deal with him. It was willing to carve off a good chunk of the star as long as it killed Zac.

Thankfully, it wasn't quick enough, and Zac appeared at the edge of the scar just as the claw passed. Deep wounds covered his whole body after forcibly using his movement skill in such an unstable environment, but some surface wounds beat being swiped by a Late-stage Beast King.

A deadly flame grew in the Gwyllgi's maw, but Zac didn't bother activating any defensive layers. Only [Pillar of Desolation] had a chance at withstanding the thing, and that skill couldn't be activated in this environment. Instead, Zac desperately dug on as more Oblivion was extracted from his mind.

A second [Annihilation Sphere] tore through the inner core while swallowing the ambient Oblivion. Zac was fast losing control, but he furiously held onto his will. He could feel the splinter right ahead, and Zac grinned upon sensing that it had actually detached itself from the sun's core. Did it sense its siblings, perhaps, and wanted to swim over?

Zac was soon forced to throw away the [Annihilation Sphere], and it erased a huge swathe of the magma barring his path. His mind was already screaming of danger, and not because of the sun rapidly destabilizing from the punishment it had been forced to endure. The Gwyllgi's all-out attack was fast drawing closer. Zac knew he wouldn't make it in time, so he forcibly activated [Abyssal Phase] again, even if he knew it would damage the fractal.

It was narrowly enough to cross the void created by his outburst of Oblivion. On the other side, was a smooth sphere of solid black. Zac didn't know exactly what it was, but he suspected it was a special shell protecting the sun's core—a shell that was now cracked, leaking vast amounts of energy. Zac could feel it just on the other side, and his arm squeezed into the crack. The world slowed down as extinction poured into his arm, and a smile spread across Zac's lips.

So far, so good.