

The Fall 1055

[Chapter 1055 - The Road Toward Hegemony](#)

The road that'd led Zac to the Daos of Life and Death was more circuitous than his connection to the Axe, marked by coincidence and outside factors. It was his battle with Mhal, the Corpselord General, that had accidentally steered Zac down the path of Death. It was only a short conflict at the beginning of his journey, yet the Corpselord became one of the biggest influences on his path and achievements.

His Seed of Trees was later pushed toward the Dao of Life because of the need to create a counterforce to the wound Mhal left on him. Even then, it had taken years of twists and turns until he reached his current direction. But the fact that coincidence and necessity had so greatly influenced his history with these two Daos didn't make them any less his.

Cultivation was discovery. It was to explore the universe and its secrets, and there was no telling what you'd find. Dao was as much chance as fate, where your experiences and encounters influenced your understanding of the Heavens.

Zac carved a second set of lines across the spiral. The pattern looked like a snake, winding back and forth between the two spiraled crystals, gradually making its way up as the Omnitool danced in Zac's hand. The mountain heart held a fragile balance, requiring far less prodding than the [Warstone] to destabilize.

Thick tendrils of Life broke out of the golden spiral, trying to burrow into its other half. Death fought back, and small cracks appeared across the treasure. Sweat formed on Zac's forehead furiously added one line after another while removing the energy spill. The seconds passed, and the situation was rapidly deteriorating.

Worse, the [Warstone] was already showing signs of early collapse. The collisions in the air had triggered its inherent nature. Zac's heart thumped, but his hands remained steady as he continued. Then, it was finished. The winding pattern covered the spiral side from side, and Zac urgently added it onto the second Nucleus Array and slammed his hand at a seal.

Both arrays hummed to life, and spatial fluctuations appeared as the treasures sank into the shimmering pattern. Zac exhaled as the two items were fully consumed, and he sat down on the prayer mat in the middle of the main array. Forty minutes passed, and Zac's heart hammered with worry.

Every second felt like an eternity, and working hard to maintain the status quo inside the Duplicity Core wasn't helping much. At least it allowed the Healing Pills to mend his body a bit, and every explosion he prevented inside the [Hollow Core] would prolong the harmonizing effect. Of course, one more material needed to be added to the nucleus to make the harmony permanent.

The Void.

Zac's eyes kept shifting to the third and final box on the platform, but he staunchly held onto the schedule he'd set. He meticulously watched the refinement process as he counted the minutes until it was finally time to move. The third box opened, and the [Void Engine] floated into his hand.

Dealing with the Void was both the simplest and trickiest of the bunch. It was simple in that he didn't know what kind of patterns he'd have to draw on the surface to refine it, so he wouldn't add any. It was

tricky because the Void technically wasn't part of his cultivation system, and he lacked the deep understanding that would normally go into a Cosmic Core.

The concept of the Void was nearly as much of a mystery today as it was when he first encountered it in the Towers of Myriad Dao. Being tempered in the lava had exposed the Void Emperor bloodline, and he had slowly worked toward unraveling its mysteries since. Today, he was far closer to the truth, but the answers he'd found were more related to the nature and origin of his bloodline than the Void itself.

The Void itself was still an enigma. His Body Tempering Manual had allowed him to get closer to the Void of Life, and the insights had allowed him to incorporate the Void of Dao into his Cosmic Core Blueprint. But the method was ultimately a concept borrowed from Ultom, as Engo said seven years ago. The role of the Void was similar to that of an outside consultant to his core and a way to connect it with his bloodline.

The Void could be described as the absence of Dao, but what did that mean? Zac still didn't know. Not even [Cosmic Forge] had allowed Zac to better understand its nature, even if its creator was a being who cultivated before there was a Heaven. Dasorm had altered his crafting method for his inheritor, and the imparted memories were designed to suit the future where the inheritance would be discovered. He'd even created the Omnitool, which was an incredible accomplishment when you thought about it.

The Dao had spread through his universe like a plague, tearing apart the reality the First People relied on. Dasorm had taken on the poison, the raw Primal Dao of the era's birth, and used it to create a seed of hope in the shape of a hammer. Not hope for himself, but that his craft would survive the upheavals.

The existence of the First People had confirmed a few things, though. The Void had existed even when the Heavens did not, and it had been possible to use it to reach levels equivalent to today's Supremacies. Perhaps the Void was a constant while the Dao rose and fell with eras coming and going.

But how did his bloodline harness it? How did it enable his talents or even activate skills? How did you cultivate it? Could it even be cultivated now that the Heavens had reformed? Zac was only scratching the surface and could not understand the theories that had gone into the [Void Engine]. As such, there was no way for him to refine it the way he had the other two treasures.

Neither was the Perennial Vastness able to help him in this regard. Cultivating the Void was seen as a dead end, and it wasn't within the purview of the 17 Dao Peaks Sendor sought to perfect. You could see this reflected in the Dao Tapestry of the Void around him. It didn't channel anything into the Core Formation Arrays, and Zac could tell what it held wasn't true Void Energy.

As such, there was no Nucleus Array for the [Void Engine]. Neither was there any normal refinement platform, even if he'd prepared some Void Cores and other treasures good for extracting Void Energy. And even if Sendor had provided an array, Zac probably wouldn't have used it. After all, it wasn't exactly Void Energy he needed to complete his core, at least not normal Void Energy.

What good would it do him to infuse normal Void Energy into his core and blend it with his Daos? If that were possible for normal people, the First People wouldn't have gone extinct. The Void and Dao were akin to matter and anti-matter. They would extinguish each other until both sides were exhausted. It was exactly through this concept he'd used the [Void Engine] to create safe harbors when taking Catheya on dates.

The key was his bloodline—it was the only reason his impossible core would work. The Void of Dao couldn't mix with Dao, but the Void Emperor's unique ability broke that rule. He knew that power was enough to give even Supremacies a shock. Furthermore, Zac deduced it was one of the main reasons his Duplicity Core functioned as it did. Long ago, Zac thought that the Kayar-Elu Clan picked Karz's bloodline because of his ability to infinitely raise his affinities.

Today, Zac wasn't so sure. He had even started to suspect the 'corruption' was not a heavenly punishment but rather an intentional modification.

And as luck would have it, Zac already came installed with a refinery for this unique type of Void Energy. Zac pushed the [Void Engine] against his chest, which prompted a powerful thud of ancient hunger from [Void Heart]. He'd kept the Hidden Node restrained until now to avoid having it swallow Oblivion, Creation, or Chaos. Zac didn't want it distracted from its most important task. Now, there was no longer any need to hold back, and Zac released his hold.

Each beat was filled with greater urgency, and Zac did everything he could to empower the node. Then, a vortex appeared on his chest, and the treasure was sucked inside. Thank God. Zac's bloodline and Hidden Nodes had created those vortices on their own on a few occasions, but this was only the third time he'd managed to trigger one intentionally across hundreds of attempts. The key was to offer a tantalizing enough prize, and it looked like the [Void Engine] qualified.

If that failed, he would have been forced to cut open his chest and cram the [Void Engine] inside, something Zac definitely had wanted to avoid. The Hidden Node calmed down the next second, and Zac could tell it had already begun refining the treasure. With that, all three components of his nucleus were being prepared.

The issue of incorporating the [Void Engine] was the one that had stumped him the longest, and it had turned into a migraine-inducing catch-22. Life, Death, Conflict, and Void were all needed to form the nucleus. If even one were missing, the whole thing would collapse. The refined [Calamity Core] was highly unstable, so it made sense to refine the [Void Engine] and the [Warstone] first.

That only worked in theory, though.

His body was a safe harbor for Void Energy, but it was also incredibly voracious. Any time his [Void Heart] spat something out, it would quickly be consumed by the vortices in his cells. Zac estimated he had five minutes at most before the refined [Void Engine] was squandered, based on how much control he could exert on his bloodline through Heart Cultivation.

So, what were you supposed to do when you had no idea how long his [Void Heart] would take to refine the [Void Engine]? Some energies had taken days before being released, while others were a matter of minutes. It wasn't like the Hidden Node gave you an estimate either—it was radio silence until it suddenly spat everything right out.

Zac had performed various experiments, using everything from Void Cores and other Void Treasures to Supreme Treasures he'd found in the depths of Red Zones. But nothing could compare to the [Void Engine]; it was unique. Zac estimated the process would take roughly fifty minutes to an hour, based on the energy involved and how much quicker his [Void Heart] refined Void-based items compared to normal treasures.

The original plan was to put his faith in these estimates. He'd refine all three treasures simultaneously, two through the Nucleus Arrays and one inside his [Void Heart]. If everything worked out, the refinements would finish in step, and he'd go on to form his nucleus before the materials destabilized.

But what if his estimates were wrong? Refining the [Void Engine] could take twice as long because of how complex its inner structure was. If that happened, he would have already lost the [Calamity Core], and the [Warstone] would have also been wasted.

Zac could also see it swinging the other way. Such a pure Void Treasure might barely need refinement and get spat back out in less than a minute. Then the [Void Engine] would be long gone by the time the Nucleus Array released the refined essences. He only had a few minutes of leeway in each direction.

He did have all kinds of backup treasures in case Plan A didn't pan out, but that would have huge ramifications. He couldn't just throw a bunch of unrefined Void Treasures into the [Hollow Core] in case the [Void Engine] was released too late. Even if it somehow worked out through dumb luck, the resulting nucleus would be extremely rough. Forming even a Low-quality core was a long shot in such a scenario.

More likely, he'd end up with an incomplete core that couldn't withstand more than a handful of levels. Then, it would all be for nothing. Fixing such a mess would take centuries if it were even possible. He could forget about Ultom, and his value to the Undead Empire would drastically decrease. His goals of catching up with Leandra and saving Kenzie would grow far more distant.

So the timing was a huge risk, and it wasn't even the only one. With the original plan, he'd suddenly have two unstable energies on his hands. He would have to perfectly combine them at a breakneck pace before they destabilized, where a single mistake would lead to disaster.

Zac was unwilling to take that risk, so he opted for his untested solution using Chaos. If it succeeded, he would have a far easier time with this first step. If he failed, he would have to go with one of his backup plans, but now with the damage from dealing with the remnants. So far, his choice had proven the right one.

A section of the main array lit up a few minutes after Zac dealt with the [Void Engine], and two bright blobs appeared. Forty-six minutes on the dot, just like Null said. Seeing their state finally let Zac relax. The guide had assured him the Perennial Vastness knew what it was doing—how could it fail in refining the items found within its domain? But it was impossible not to worry when so much was at stake.

Sendor had thankfully come through. Zac didn't know how, but the arrays prepared by the Perennial Vastness had melted down the treasures without damaging their essence. The Nucleus Arrays were custom designed for these two treasures and the patterns he'd added. He essentially had a Supremacy personally overseeing the process, ensuring this first step would work without a hitch.

No energy was leaking from the two materials, and they weren't fluctuating dangerously, either. The arrays he'd engraved had fused with the material itself, creating a stable structure that could be molded. The glowing blob from the [Warstone] looked much like heated steel, and it emitted an aura somewhere between his Branch of the War Axe own and its original Dao of War.

The [Calamity Core] looked like a sphere of heated glass. Life and Death almost formed a Yin-Yang symbol, except for the missing dots. The two sides were in perfect balance in energy, aura, and Dao, which was why he picked the [Calamity Core] over two separate Supreme Treasures.

Of course, the balance didn't mean the two elements had already fused, and stability was only a relative concept regarding Life and Death. The Nucleus Array had melted and forced the two together, but it was an unstable union without the Void to keep the peace. Zac could feel the mutual rejection within the treasure, but it was within his expectations.

Zac dragged the two materials over with telekinesis as he disrobed to leave his chest bare. The tattoo on his belly was still there, ready to receive more materials. The main array had a similar function, but the tattoo was better while it remained as it was slightly faster. His skin rippled as the [Calamity Core] entered his body. The [Warstone] would soon follow, but he needed to complete the next step separately. Zac dragged the molten glass into his core, where the perfected Life and Death waited.

The [Calamity Core] was transformed just like the energy entering his core. The Life-attuned half remained the same, while the Death-attuned side turned into a mirage. The quantum state didn't alleviate the instability within the sphere in the slightest. Zac had already expected as much after observing the situation since opening the hatch.

The molten treasure was like a voracious black hole when it came in contact with the energies sealed inside the [Hollow Core]. Vast amounts of Life entered the golden half of the glowing sphere, while the Quantum Death entered the black one. The effect was immediate. The sense of rejection was rapidly weakening as more and more energy entered.

"That's it!" Zac shouted.

This was exactly what he wanted to see. He had been somewhat confident in his plan after seeing the Chaos Motes successfully split, but it was still a huge load off his shoulders to see the [Calamity Core] stabilize. The twinned crystal was as stable as the [Warstone] when two-thirds of the accumulated Dao had been absorbed.

Still, Zac crammed another two Chaos Motes' worth of perfected truth into the Supreme Treasure, ensuring it would stay stable even longer. The energy inside the [Hollow Core] was fully drained by that point, except for some lingering pieces of Conflict he hadn't managed to prevent the Duplicity Core from absorbing.

The [Warstone] entered the [Hollow Core] the second the process was done. Simultaneously, Zac released the floodgates in his mind, letting a storm of Dao emerge from his [Spiritual Void] while the axe-wielding Dao Avatar was squeezed for over three-quarters of its accumulated truth.

The War-attuned treasure already contained significantly more energy than the [Calamity Core] thanks to being left on the array until it couldn't withstand it any longer. Still, it wasn't a match to the [Calamity Core] after it swallowed the four Chaos Motes. This was a second infusion to reach equilibrium between the three forces.

The [Warstone] joined the [Calamity Core], and Zac shifted his attention to the platform beneath him. A nudge activated its main feature, and the whole thing came alive. The array started to absorb the vast

amounts of energy provided by the Dao Tapestries, using it as fuel. Zac felt an uncomfortable pressure build in his body, but he ignored the discomfort as he ensured none of his Hidden Nodes triggered.

A gleaming three-colored sphere surrounded the Duplicity Core, releasing immense gravitation waves into the core. Seeing the Duplicity Core was fine, Zac sent out over twenty strings of Mental Energy. They entered the sphere, where they were transformed in an interesting way. They were still spiritual, but the array somehow gave them physical characteristics, like letting them interact with the materials.

Their function was similar to the robotic surgical instruments sometimes used before the Integration, meant to help him work on his core. It was night and day compared to the basic methods he'd found in Zecia. Those techniques pretty much took the base materials and put them under great pressure, trying to squeeze them into a shape resembling a blueprint.

It took little time to get used to the transformation since it was ultimately his Mental Energy. The only problem was that his control was a bit clumsy due to the damage across his body. A few tests indicated it should only slow him down, not ruin the process altogether.

The [Void Engine] was still being cooked inside his Hidden Node, but that didn't mean Zac could sit around. From the second he began the process, there would be no rest. Right now, his core was just the two treasures pushed against each other, gradually being distorted by the immense pressure released by the Core Formation Array.

The next step was to mix and shape the temporarily malleable materials into a proper nucleus, adding the critical pathways and connections that would make up the inner circuitry of his Cosmic Core. Zac was full of anticipation as he got to work, sending the mental tendrils forward like a swarm of snakes. Everything until now was just the warm up. The next step was what he'd actually practiced for.

The actual Core Formation was finally starting.