The Fall 1061

Zac looked at his other self, or himself, with mixed emotions. The words had been born from one thought, yet they emerged from two mouths. He still couldn't believe decades of planning had been thrown overboard just like that. His soul and body had mostly recovered during his month of unconsciousness, yet his mind felt sluggish as he tried to come to terms with the situation.

Forming a second body may have been the goal of his desperate gambit, but the one who forced him down this road was someone else. It all traced back to Leandra Atwood, or rather Leandra Kayar-Elu, and her clan's goal for the Zero Affinity Container. Zac sighed and closed both sets of eyes, turning his gaze inward.

Having his eyes shut helped with the disorientation from a doubled vision, letting Zac unravel the details of his situation. First things first, Zac saw that the Duplicity Cores in his bodies didn't look the same. One was inlaid with gold and silver, while the other was silver and black—Life and Conflict versus Death and Conflict. Any trace of Death was missing in his human body; the opposite could be said for his Draugr form.

The situation within the Specialty Core was even more confusing. Inside was the very same core he'd spent the past months forming, except the System had processed the somewhat crude pathways. Now, they were covered with extraordinarily complex patterns that made up the basis of his Classes.

That wasn't the source of Zac's confusion—getting patterns and a first set of upgrades for your pathways after picking a class was supposed to happen. The confusion came from his consciousness entering the same space from separate Duplicity Cores in separate bodies. You could say he had two Cosmic Cores, yet one. Separated by a physical distance, yet taking up the same space.

The phenomenon reminded Zac of the toys Iz had used to ferry items across an unfathomable distance. However, while those natural treasures were consumable items that could only be used for short durations, this was a steady entanglement that was constantly active. At least Zac hoped it was steady.

The two Duplicity Cores were continuously drawing energy from his Cosmic Core, probably to make the situation possible. It was a noticeable amount, though not to the point he'd have to keep using Crystals to keep up. The natural recovery of his Cosmic Core was greater than the expenditure, partly thanks to the Supreme Treasures that made up its nucleus.

However, it could potentially cause some problems down the road. For one, he could only extract so much energy every second. With the Duplicity Core taking up a fifth, it would take longer to activate his Skills and equipment. He already had a slight disadvantage in this department due to not being a cultivator, and this would exacerbate the situation. It would also slow down his energy recovery by a noticeable degree.

The weirdest of all was that Zac simply couldn't tell where the core was actually located. Was it in his Draugr body or his Human? Was it neither, or was it both? It felt like none and all answers were correct, giving Zac a headache. Suffice it to say, the space within the Duplicity Core didn't seem to follow the conventional rules of space.

Zac's instincts told him the Duplicity Core was using the Void in his bloodline to create a hidden pocket through the Void of Space. When the Dao of Space was missing, truly missing, there was no such thing as distances. It didn't matter whether it was a meter or galaxies away; it might as well be the same.

The location wasn't the only thing odd with his Cosmic Core. The core seemingly existed in both its quantum states simultaneously. Life was both Life and Void of Life; Death also held the Void of Death. The scene was different from his expectation. The third element was supposed to be hidden when taking his opposing form. However, Zac didn't feel the situation to be a problem. If anything, it was even better.

The core seemed to work perfectly even though it was in its chimeral state. A weak pull extracted some Miasma into his Draugr form while Cosmic Energy entered the other. The energy entered his pathways like a raging river, its source like a boundless sea. The feeling was intoxicating, but Zac stopped the intake. Another pull produced Divine Energy, confirming his theory that the core could supply Life-attuned energy too.

A third pull confirmed that he'd suspected when seeing the change. A stream of Miasma entered his Human form, though Zac quickly expelled it. It wasn't the first time he'd ever had Miasma coursing through his body as a human, but it was the first time his own body produced it. He could actually use all three energy sources for both his bodies.

The same was true for his undead form, which likely made him the first Draugr to use Cosmic Energy. The Divine Energy was like pure poison, though, and he wasn't sure if he'd be able to leverage that ability into something useful. Perhaps to take out other undead in a surprise attack of mutual destruction?

Suddenly having access to three energy forms in both bodies opened all kinds of avenues, but having a working core was the most important thing. It meant the sudden twist hadn't left him crippled and that his goals were still achievable. Everything else could be figured out one step at a time. Zac opened his Status Screen, or rather his Status Screens.

Name Zachary Atwood

Level 155

Class [D-Arcane] Evolutionary Precursor

Race [D] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment [Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

Titles [...] Runic Progenitor, Grand Achievement, Arcane Ascension, Pathbound Core, Peakmender

Limited Titles Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, Equanimity, Big Axe Gladiator, The Final Twilight - 1st, Gates of Rebirth

Dao Branch of the War Axe - Middle, Branch of the Kalpataru - Middle, Branch of the Pale Seal - Middle

Core [D] Evolutionary Core

Strength 56,098 [Increase: 189%. Efficiency: 409%]

Dexterity 23,045 [Increase: 146%. Efficiency: 285%]

Endurance 34,638 [Increase: 165%. Efficiency: 409%]

Vitality 33,854 [Increase: 168%. Efficiency: 428%]

Intelligence 6,503 [Increase: 125%. Efficiency: 285%]

Wisdom 11,479 [Increase: 127%. Efficiency: 300%]

Luck 881 [Increase: 154%. Efficiency: 349%]

Free Points 500

Nexus Coins [D] 7 645 946

A screen appeared in front of each body, and Zac released a collective sigh of relief as he saw everything was in order. If anything, they were better than okay. Zac had to make a double-take when he saw the almost grotesque numbers. Some quick math confirmed he'd gained a whopping 47% increase in his attribute pool. It was his biggest gain in a long while, and most of it was allocated to his main attributes.

His Strength, especially, had taken a monstrous leap forward, increasing by almost 80%. No wonder he'd felt like he could crush mountains. He'd thought it was the result of having such vast quantities of energy continuously course through his body, but the real cause was the comprehensive boost to his attributes.

Zac took a calming breath, fighting the impulse to start swinging his axes around. The boost was far beyond what he'd expected, but he had more pressing things to deal with. He needed to figure out the ins and outs of his current situation.

The screens looked identical except for a few lines. Like before, his Classes and Races were individual, but Zac immediately honed in on the change to the line with his Specialty Core. It no longer said Duplicity Core like before. Instead, they had been renamed, with his Draugr persona having an [Inexorable Core] while his human form had a [Evolutionary Core]. Seeing the name was a load off Zac's shoulders. For all the things that had gone wrong with the breakthrough, the Duplicity Core had at least adapted to his path.

The change to his Specialty Core reminded Zac of the other culprit that had almost gotten him killed, and he opened his Bloodline Screen next.

Bloodline: [E - Corrupted] Void Emperor

Talent: Force of the Void - 6%, Void Zone

Bloodline Nodes: [E]Void Heart, [E] Spiritual Void, [E] Purity of the Void

Nodes: [E] Adamance of Eoz, [E] Conviction of Eoz, [E] Immutability of Eoz, [D] Alpha Link, [D] Omega Link

Constitution: [Life] Void Vajra Sublimation (Third Layer): Base Attributes +50. Vitality +500. Endurance +250. Base Attributes +5% Vitality +5%. Effect of Vitality +10%.

Zac blanched upon seeing the changes to the screen. Before Zac even had the chance to investigate, he spotted the drastic change to [Force of the Void]. The Bloodline Talent had been capped at 50%, yet it was now reduced to a measly 6%. In raw numbers, it still meant he had much more Void Energy than before, considering his Cosmic Core had drastically increased his energy stockpiles.

However, he would have to start improving his bloodline as soon as possible if he wanted to use his Void Energy to power his future D-grade Skills and War Regalia. And how would you even go about doing so when he suddenly had two bodies to worry about? Zac shook his head and moved on to the part he sought.

The Duplicity Core had adapted to his classes, but it didn't look like his troublemaker of a Hidden Node followed suit. [Quantum Gate] was gone, replaced by two new entries of decidedly Technocrat origin. He was now saddled with something called [Alpha Link] and [Omega Link], possibly one for each of his bodies, though both were listed in both personas.

Shifting his attention to his chest didn't turn up anything. [Quantum Gate] had moved to his soul just before he was rendered unconscious, but Zac couldn't find anything there either. The runes he'd seen for a moment were gone, and everything looked normal. However, another important change had occurred inside his mind; his Soul Aperture had been transformed to work exactly like his Specialty Cores.

Zac had been prepared for his soul and consciousness getting split in two when he sacrificed his [Thousand Lights Avatar] to move part of himself over to the newly-created body. He'd figured living like two separate entities was better than dying as one.

The Draugr body he formed wouldn't have a core, being semi-crippled and likely stuck at the E-grade. It would have been like the outcome everyone expected for a Life-Death Edgewalker, where only one of his side could enter Hegemony. [Quantum Gate] had provided a much-better solution, letting him retain one identity and one soul.

With both Soul and Cosmic Core being shared, he was, for all intents and purposes, one person with two bodies. The newly created body couldn't even be considered a clone. He had used his Soul Avatar to carry every aspect of his Draugr persona into it, making it indistinguishable from his old Arcaz form.

The double set of impressions had been extremely disorienting for a while, but Zac was quickly getting used to the experience. A simple test confirmed he could infuse any Dao into either body. It was nice, even if he didn't use his opposing Daos very much. The notable exception was [Rapturous Divide], and this confirmed he'd still be able to use it without issues.

Everything was in order, so Zac turned back to his Status Screen.

Zac had no idea why he'd gained five levels while unconscious, but he guessed it was related to the desolation around him. The Duplicity Core had used up the vast majority of what the vortices absorbed, but some of it entered his Cosmic Core. Even some of the spillover from such powerful currents would give him a couple of levels.

It might also be related to [Void Heart]. It had already finished refining the Tribulation Lightning while he was knocked out, and some of the energy might have gone into adding new levels. Unfortunately, Zac

noticed there were a bit more toxins spread through his original body than he'd hoped. He only got part of the benefits when he wasn't there to control the cleanse.

Of course, only part of the significant gains could be traced back to his classes. Danger and opportunity often come hand in hand, and this encounter was no exception. Zac opened his title screen, where he first located his old title for gaining a Duplicity Core.

[Evolutionary Inexorability: Successfully form a unique customized Specialty Core. Reward: All attributes +5%.]

The old title was gone, replaced with a decidedly stronger variant. The old title had only provided 5% to Strength and Endurance, the respective main attributes in his F-grade Classes. Now, it boosted all attributes, including Luck. Better yet, that wasn't the only new title from his breakthrough. His ascent had awarded not one, but three.

[Arcane Ascension: Gain an Arcane D-grade Class. Reward: Base Attributes +250, All attributes +5%, Effect of Attributes +5%.]

[Pathbound Core: Form a Supreme Pathbound Core. Reward: Effect of Attributes +10%.]

[Peakmender: Assist in the reformation of a broken Peak. Reward: Luck +10, Luck +10%, Effect of Luck +10%.]

Zac had already known he'd gain a new title for picking an Arcane Class. His version was quite good, though not quite as good as if he'd gotten it in the E-grade. That version provided 10% rather than his 5%. Zac hadn't heard of the other titles, though the first of the two looked quite familiar.

Supreme Pathbound was the same terminology used with the Runic Erudition and Runic Progenitor titles he gained for creating [Pillar of Desolation] and [Primal Edict]. The title had to be based on potential rather than quality, considering his Cosmic Core was still only Middle-quality. The confusing events had solidified and repaired his core, but it was otherwise the same as before he was knocked unconscious.

Peakmender was clearly related to the Peak of Chaos, and Zac supposed forming a Life-Death Cosmic Core, possibly the first one, counted as helping reform it. It was no news that the System really wanted the peaks mended. He'd felt the palpable greed multiple times when conjuring the Glimpses of Chaos, and the System had an immortal being like Sendor on retainer to advance the Grand Dao.

Zac briefly wondered why this counted while providing progress while the Glimpses of Chaos didn't. Was it because the core was truly a new creation while the glimpses were just Creation and Oblivion pushed together? In either case, a top-tier Luck-improving title was far better than either of the other two in Zac's book.

The other two were still quite good and added a noticeable boost to his combat power. Zac closed the title screen and continued his inspection. Gaining three titles and five levels had added the lion's share of his impressive influx of attributes, but there was one final source waiting for him in his Class Screens.

Class: [D-Arcane] Evolutionary Precursor.

Attributes: Strength +1,750, +15%. Dexterity +750, 10%. Vitality +1,000, 10%.

Level: Strength +300 / 450 / 600. Dexterity +100 / 150 / 200. Vitality +150 / 225 / 300. Free +100 / 150 / 200.

Class: [D-Arcane] Inexorable Apostle.

Attributes: Strength +2,000, +20%. Dexterity +500, 5%. Endurance +1,000, 10%.

Level: Strength +325 / 475 / 650. Dexterity +75 / 125 / 150. Endurance +150 / 225 / 300. Free +100 / 150 / 200.

Like when breaking through to E-grade, the old base Class attributes had been removed, replaced with a far more generous allotment. He'd gained 7,000 raw attributes between his two classes, almost the equivalent of a Middle Dao Branch.

The best part was that both classes now helped with his Dexterity. Keeping up with his snowballing Strength had forced him to pool all his points into Dexterity, and even then, he'd barely been able to maintain a minimum requirement. This would reduce his pressure significantly, making him more flexible with his Free Attributes.

No line listed any locked skills this time, though that was expected. He had officially confirmed his path, which meant the training wheels were off. The System wouldn't create any more skills for him; he was expected to handle that himself. There should still be a quest waiting for him at level 175, though that would award him another opportunity to fuse or evolve an E-grade skill rather than a brand-new one.

Zac continued through his various screens, but nothing else had changed. A mental tally confirmed what he suspected; he only got one set of Base Attributes, but suddenly being split in two didn't stop him from getting the full benefit of having two classes. There were currently 500 Free Attributes for each body, but Zac left them unallocated until he'd have time to sort through this mess.

Going through the status screen greatly helped Zac calm down. It felt like his whole world had been turned on his head just moments ago, but he had started to see the undeniable upsides to his situation. He remembered his Strength was just over 31,000 before breaking through. With his current attribute pool, he'd probably be able to fight ten copies of his former self. And if he added a second body with identical attributes? He'd be unstoppable.

Wait, identical?

Zac compared his two status screens for a few seconds, his eyes almost burning upon confirming his notion. For the first time ever, [Forester's Constitution] improved the attributes of his Draugr body. Was it because both classes were active simultaneously for the first time? All kinds of opportunities and possibilities cropped up in Zac's mind, further helping him acclimate to his new reality.

All his old benefits remained, except for the undeniably powerful ability to swap form. It had provided an incredibly powerful element of surprise, letting him turn things around more than once. However, was his current situation any worse?

Having simultaneous access to both his classes had always been a dream of his, even if this wasn't how he'd pictured it. But it wasn't all bad. Who was a greater ally than yourself? Having both his bodies fight side by side would push his lethality to new heights. The only cost was the admittedly annoying energy drain. However, that might be fixed by the time he upgraded his core.

It also opened all kinds of possibilities and schemes, depending on how far the two bodies could move from each other.

Of course, Zac didn't want to stay this way forever, even if he saw much potential in the situation. His long-term goal had been to fuse his stances into one holistic path, but how would he do that with two bodies?

Trying to interface with the new Specialty Cores didn't do anything, and nothing happened when he tried to push his bodies together. For now, it looked like he was stuck in two forms. However, Zac believed it was a problem that could be fixed given enough time.

He could somewhat intuit what the Kayar-Elu Clan had planned for his ascent into Hegemony; fusion. [Quantum Gate] and the Duplicity Core had tried bringing both classes to the surface as they were engraved on his core, making them occupy the same space. That way, he could simultaneously use two classes, though Zac believed that wasn't the Technocrats' main goal.

He'd already suspected his mother's clan had wanted to sneak the Dao of Technology into a cultivator. Instead of Draugr, it was entirely possible his second body was meant to be entirely mechanical. When fused, he would be human yet machine. Zac and Jeeves combined. But Zac wasn't prepared for such a transition.

Even his core was designed to only retain one of its states at a time, using the Void as a bridge. His body was even less prepared to hold both his Draugr and Human persona. If anything, he'd made the situation way worse by becoming an Edgewalker. The two were like oil and water; they simply didn't mix.

Perhaps the unexpected fusion would have worked if he had two unattuned sides, though even that seemed like a stretch. Superimposing two bodies like that must require very specific properties and a lot of preparation to work. Even Ogras Body Tempering Manual only stole the essence of the creatures he absorbed, and just that was bordering on the unorthodox.

Having excavated all information he could from his screen, Zac shifted his attention. The actions of his bodies had almost been perfectly mirrored until now, but they slowly diverged as Zac split his attention. It was a bit tricky, like trying to write different things with his two hands, but he was quickly getting the hang of things.

Zac didn't get the chance to fully acclimatize before the world stirred, and the broken Dao somehow reformed. He'd expected as much and calmly turned around to find the Realm Spirit of the Perennial Vastness observing him with an inscrutable expression. His eyes felt like the Heavens themselves, and Zac's chaotic thoughts ground to a halt as strong fluctuations filled both his bodies.

Sendor was scanning him, using a far more thorough method than when Zac first entered the Perennial Vastness. Zac wasn't happy with the invasion but was powerless to resist. The process only lasted a few seconds, at which point the old Realm Spirit's monstrous aura disappeared.

"Uh…" Zac said, unsure what to say at this point. "Sorry about the mountains."

Sendor blankly looked at Zac for a few moments before a smile spread across his face. "Don't mind that. I've seen the way you deal with things. Losing a couple of mountains can be considered me getting off easy. Now, if you could answer two questions of mine?"

"What?"

"Are you one? Are you two? And why isn't there even a shred of Karma between your bodies?"