

The Fall 762

Chapter 762: Changes in the Ravine

Zac looked down at the pitch-black talisman with a frown for a few seconds before he steered the submersible in another direction. The fact that someone had placed jammers in this area was extremely suspicious, and there was a high chance that it was related to him. Why else would someone bother with a place like the ravine? According to Catheya's missive, bursts of utter destruction made the area impassable.

Not being able to communicate with the others was a problem, but luckily not one without a solution. Zac continued sailing for another two hours before he stopped at a secluded spot hidden by enormous stalks of seaweed, each one of them as large as a skyscraper. He donned a cloak to hide his appearance before stowed away the vessel.

For the next hour, Zac swam back and forth in the area, observing one leaf after another until he found one that had a small freeze-burn close to the root. He immediately swam down and started digging until he found a Cosmos Sack hidden within the soil.

This was one of the contingencies he had set up with Catheya during their last meeting. They both figured the area around the ravine could be dangerous, with Uona already having been spotted here once before. So they decided on a couple of drop-off locations for Catheya to leave a communication crystal in case she had to leave the area.

They hadn't expected the place to get locked down by jammers, but their preparation luckily worked for this situation as well. More importantly, the fact that Catheya had managed to leave the Cosmos Sack here meant that she had left voluntarily, rather than something had happened to her.

The Cosmos Sack only contained two things; an [Ocean Chart] and a communication crystal. Zac threw out a few arrays to hide his presence before he took out the communication crystal and infused it with some energy. A recording of Catheya immediately started playing, and Zac listened on with rapt attention.

"Two months ago, something happened in this area. We sensed a terrifying presence in the distance, right at the location of the ravine. It felt like a Monarch had descended, someone even stronger than my master. Shortly after we sensed the aura, the Heavens moved to intercept, and the presence disappeared after just a few seconds.

"An hour later, we spotted hints of Uona's blood river heading in the direction of the City of Ancients. She came from the direction of the ravine, and the powerful aura was most likely related to her. I believe she somehow had her ancestor break into the Mystic Realm and assist her.

"A few minutes later, a terrifying explosion reached us from somewhere far in the distance... in the direction of the volcano. Knowing you, something shocking has probably taken place over there. We observed the ravine for another three weeks, but the place seems abandoned. It is still impassable for me, but it seems the danger is gradually declining.

“Varo managed to discover the origin of the jamming arrays, but we decided to leave them as to not alert anyone about our presence. By the time you’re reading this, we have moved toward the City of Ancients to search for more information. My intuition tells me you’ll be coming our way soon.”

The message ended there, and Zac took a deep breath to calm down after the communication crystal stopped playing. He infused some mental energy into the [Ocean Chart] Catheya had left behind, and it only added three spots, the jammers that had been buried to prevent communication.

Zac put away the Cosmos Sack before he turned in the direction of the ravine. He didn’t want to believe it to be true, but his instincts told him that Catheya’s intuition was right on the money. For some reason, Uona had stolen the splinter with the help of her ancestor. Perhaps it simply was to mess with him, or perhaps she needed it for something else.

He had to check out the ravine to make sure, but he couldn’t set off immediately. Something was definitely up, and he didn’t want to meet whatever challenges lay ahead in his human form. Besides, he would have to change to his Draugr form to pick up the Splinter in either case.

The problem was that changing his race was a risk both to the Hidden Node still growing in his chest. Furthermore, who knew how the Shard of Creation would react if he suddenly entered a weakened state. Zac couldn’t do much about the latter, but he did have a plan for the former. Over the past two months of travel, the node had slowly transformed thanks to being constantly fed energy.

The Creation Energy was no longer entering an invisible vortex when reaching his sternum. Rather, a small bead had formed, and it didn’t just swallow Creation Energy. Almost all of the energy that was periodically spat out by his [Void Heart] was swallowed by the bead, and it even took on raw Twilight Energy. This turn of events was different from how his previous nodes had formed, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

If anything, it felt like a relief that his cultivation for once worked as it did for others. This embryotic stage was how Hidden Nodes looked for most cultivators, after they had located their nodes and forced them to the surface. Zac had simply never seen it before because he had opened his Hidden Nodes using treasures and unconventional methods.

It was a bit weird that it swallowed all kinds of energy on its own though. Most Hidden Nodes needed a cultivator to slowly infuse the node with their Cultivation Manuals. Then again, Zac guessed he shouldn’t be surprised. Nothing worked the way it was supposed to with his body, it looked like. The problem of not knowing was unfortunately a weight upon his shoulder that stopped him from activating the Duplicity Core.

If the node had still been hidden, like it was in the beginning, Zac would probably just have rolled the dice and hoped that he didn’t ruin the node by transforming into a Draugr. But now that the embryo had formed, there was another path available to him – to burst open the Hidden Node before transforming. That way he should guarantee he didn’t ruin the Hidden Node’s formation by changing race in the middle.

Seeing how energy-starved the node was, it might be possible to force it open just by cramming a bunch of random treasures down his throat. But thankfully, Zac didn’t need to resort to such a crude method. He had something much better.

Two of the supreme items he had gotten his hands on were related to affinity-boosting. Another was a supreme death-attuned wood that could raise the quality of an E-grade Spirit Tool upon evolution, and something he hoped to be able to use for Alea in the future. The fourth was a life-saving herb, something that could turn the situation around even if he had a foot in the grave. It contained Time Energy, literally turning back the clock on lethal wounds.

According to Catheya, there would almost be no wound it wouldn't be able to mend, be it physical or spiritual, and it would work in either of his forms. The only caveat was the risk of the wound being caused by someone too powerful, like a late Hegemon or Monarch. Their Daos would most likely be powerful enough to resist being erased like that, nullifying the herb's efficacy to a large degree.

The final supreme treasure was something every E-grade cultivator wanted, a type of treasure Catheya called a gatecrasher – an item that could help open Hidden Nodes. These kinds of treasures were commonly called gatecrashers because of the “three gates” – the most common Hidden Nodes in the multiverse.

The treasure still wasn't as valuable as the [Eye of Har'Theriam] he had gotten from Yrial though, and for a simple reason. His unnamed gatecrasher couldn't locate and excavate unearthed Hidden Nodes. That wasn't a problem now though that the node had already been dragged to the surface.

Zac wasn't too enthused about the treasure before since hadn't encountered any indication that he had more Hidden Nodes than the three he had already opened. But the Shard of Creation had either found a node hidden extremely deep, or perhaps even created one out of thin air.

He took a deep breath and shoved the small pill-like bead into his mouth, simultaneously redoubling his efforts to keep the Shard trapped. A surge of extremely condensed power slid down his throat, and it stopped by the point it reached his sternum. Zac breathed out in relief that the mote of energy stopped by itself, saving him the effort of actually guiding it.

That way he could keep the remnant under lock and key the treasure did its thing. The energy ball reached the small bead, and it looked like the Hidden Node was a black hole swallowing a sun. A stream of supremely condensed energy was continuously dragged from the gatecrasher, entering the depths of the node.

At first, Zac didn't see any change, but soon enough his mouth curved upward as the node started to grow. At first, the node grew from a dot to a large circle. That didn't seem too odd, but Zac's brows rose in surprise when the Hidden Node suddenly turned into a small triangle. The node was completely different compared to the others, or any node he had read about before.

It almost looked like a triangular well, with a white frame and black waters in its depths. Zac wasn't actually sure why he felt that way though. The node was pretty small, yet it felt like the hole inside the frame was almost infinitely deep. More and more energy kept entering the node, and a few minutes passed until the node shuddered and changed again, this time turning into a cube.

At the same time, a set of scripts appeared on the frame, and they didn't look like anything he had seen before. It wasn't a script like those based on the work of the Apostate of Order, and neither was it the primal engravings he had seen on items like the Stele of Conflict. It was something else entirely, seemingly detached from the System.

Four corners turned to five, and then six and seven. With every transformation, the script grew denser, more esoteric. But oddly enough, the depth of the 'waters' actually decreased as it gained more edges. In the beginning, it had almost seemed endless, but by the point it had turned into a heptagon, it rather felt like a shallow pond.

The shard was unusually quiet during the whole process, but he still frowned as he saw the process gradually slow down after an eight corner being added. There was still a decent amount of energy left from the gatecrasher, but the amount that entered the Hidden Node had turned from a stream to a trickle.

Normally that wouldn't have been a problem, since that would usually mean the process was complete. However, Zac could feel that something was missing. There were only eight edges, and his instincts told him that there should be nine for the node to be complete.

Zac saw how the energy of the supreme treasure started to dissipate after not being able to enter the Hidden Node, and he desperately crammed one natural treasure after another into his mouth in hopes that the burst of energy would kick-start the process again. But it was useless. The Hidden Node seemed completely different to the various chaotic energies that entered his body.

Dao Treasures, crystals, energy-packed herbs meant for alchemy. Zac tried everything without any results. The only thing that happened was that his [Void Heart] got a feast, and [Purity of the Void] got busy cleaning up all the gunk. Soon enough, the node had stopped absorbing energy altogether, just as it felt like it was on the cusp of forming its ninth and final corner.

Unfortunately, nothing Zac did work, and he could only give up after an hour of testing everything. Zac felt a sense of defeat as he cut a deep gash on his arm. Having released a chunk of the accumulated toxins, Zac swallowed a healing pill before opening his Bloodline Screen just in case.

Bloodline

[E - Corrupted] Void Emperor

Talent

Force of the Void - 42%, Void Zone

Bloodline Nodes

[E]Void Heart, [E] Spiritual Void, [E] Purity of the Void

Nodes

[E - Incomplete] Quantum Gate

Zac looked at the screen with a mix of elation and confusion. His fourth node had actually appeared on the screen, but it raised as many questions as it did answers. The easiest takeaway was that it wasn't related to his bloodline – as expected. But what it actually did, was still a mystery.

He checked his [Quantum Gate] over and over, but there was nothing. The node almost looked like a mirror by this point, with the pond so shallow it might as well be a windowpane. But there was nothing

on the other side, just darkness. It didn't accept energy either, and no matter what he tested, it didn't seem to improve any aspect of his cultivation.

The name itself made Zac think of teleportation, but it didn't emit the slightest amount of spatial fluctuations or energies, and neither did it emit the aura of the void. No matter how he scoured his memory, he hadn't heard of anything like it before either, no matter if you talked appearance or name. In fact, he didn't think "Quantum" was a word the System or cultivators used.

But there were some people who probably did – the Technocrats.

Together with the odd scripts, I seemed more and more likely that this was an inborn node that the burst of Creation had managed to force open, rather than something it conjured out of nothing. Was this perhaps a node Leandra's family passed on? Or was it rather something he had been implanted with, just like the Duplicity Core?

Of course, the node's origin wasn't as important as figuring out how to fix it. The fact that it said Incomplete rather than Corrupted hopefully meant it simply missed that final ingredient to form the ninth edge and properly activate. And did he even dare activate it? It was called a Quantum Gate.

What if the gate connected him to Leandra, or even some sort of doomsday device, through quantum entanglement? Or what if the node was completely useless, considering that he wasn't swapping out any body parts for machines?

It was impossible to know for the time being. At least the node was stabilized to the point it had appeared on his status screen, which had to be enough for him to not worry about losing or ruining it when swapping race. Zac spent another hour ridding his body of all the excess energy he had accumulated from his feeding frenzy, before sending a command into his Specialty Core.

A wave of weakness hit him as death spread from his core to every inch of his body, but he barely noticed it as he kept the shard in check with everything he had. However, the remnant sensed an opening, and it expelled a wave of creation that forced its way out of the Mental Energy cage. Zac felt his body morph and change, but he held on while his class-changing process finished.

Only then did he release a wave of creation that reshaped the seaweed forest into a world of ice. Thankfully, that was the extent of his problems. The creation energy still coursed through his body, but it wasn't any more lethal to him in his Draugr form compared to when he was human. Zac still didn't know why, but Creation simply wasn't deadly to his Draugr side, just like Oblivion wasn't any more dangerous when he was human.

It was only when it fused with the Twilight Energy that it had become a problem.

However, Zac's eyes widened in shock when he saw that his new hidden node was missing. He hesitated for a bit, but he decided to delay his mission by a few hours to get to the bottom of the situation. An hour passed, and Zac swapped into his human form once more, and he breathed out in relief that the node had reappeared.

Soon enough, Zac was once more sailing toward the ravine in his Draugr form. It turned out that [Quantum Gate] only existed on his human side, in contrast to the bloodline nodes that existed in both.

It lent credence to the theory that it was related to his Technocrat heritage, which Zac had some mixed feelings about.

It did at least open up for the possibility that he might be able to discover Draugr Hidden Nodes in the future, now that it was proven both his sides could have unique Hidden Nodes. The Void Emperor bloodline was extremely overbearing, to the point that it might have made his other nodes extremely hard to find.

Another day passed, and Zac finally reached the edge of the ravine. It looked like a scar in the earth, reaching thousands of meters into the ground. It was like the whole place was shrouded by impenetrable darkness, and Zac felt his hair stand on end as he tried to glean what waited inside. He also strained his eyes to expose the slightest hint of sanguine energy in the vicinity.

His desire was made into reality, and he felt new eyes growing across his face as they looked for any signs of danger. Zac took a deep breath and got his impulses back under control, and the additional eyes closed before disappearing altogether. The brief lapse of control had at least confirmed a few things for him.

There was both good news and bad news. The good news was that Uona really wasn't in the area, and it didn't look like she had left any traps either. The bad news was that the amount of Oblivion Zac sensed in the depths of the ravine was less than a third of what he had encountered in the volcano.