

The Fall 963

Chapter 963: The First Draft

Zac looked at the screen with surprise. He'd thought the node in his navel was the only Hidden Node he'd get, but it turned out he had already opened one during his vision. It explained the odd shift in vision. One moment, Eoz stared up at a mysterious obelisk in a pre-system timeline. The next, he'd floated in space overlooking a terrifying vortex as large as a galaxy, presumably during the great migration.

He'd believed the shift resulted from the obelisk rather than his second Hidden Node. That thing was mysterious, terrifyingly powerful, and something at the level of the Stele of Conflict. It felt like time had twisted for a moment, where he and Eoz had been one. In fact, Zac really suspected that was the case. It almost felt like he'd missed out on something because of his second node opening.

Then again, Zac wasn't certain he'd be able to see what Eoz did with that obelisk even if [Immutability of Eoz] didn't appear. He couldn't remember a single detail of the dense scripts that covered its surface. He only vaguely recalled that the pillar contained ancient and tremendous power, eclipsing even Eoz. Of course, the obelisk might have been powered by the Abyssal Lake itself, which would explain the power it emitted.

The details of the obelisk were vague, but Zac still remembered the other parts of the vision. The Temples, the Fates, the Grottos. The memories were also oddly detailed, even if he hadn't physically seen the holy sites of the Draugr race during the vision. He actually remembered some hidden paths Eoz had explored in the millennia before the vision.

It wasn't the first time this happened. His visions with Karz were the same, where he, for a moment, became his supposed ancestor. What they saw, he saw. What they thought, he thought. With Karz, it didn't much matter since he was still just an orphan turned outer disciple, with little valuable knowledge to impart.

With Eoz, it was different since he was a being at the peak. Zac was certain Eoz was a Supremacy, though Zac had no idea how the Draugr progenitor would compare to the System-empowered Supremacies of today. Unfortunately, Eoz didn't think about the Dao during the visions, or perhaps those thoughts were removed, just like the details of the obelisk. What remained was still incredibly valuable.

If Zac ever managed to get to the Abyssal Lake, and things hadn't changed too much, he would come into a windfall. A few distracted thoughts as Eoz headed to the depths had exposed multiple secrets and opportunities that could drastically speed up his cultivation in the D-grade.

As for the origins of those ancient structures beneath the surface, Zac wasn't sure. But it didn't seem they came from this Era unless it was from a civilization much earlier than the Limitless Empire. Did that mean the Abyssal Shores were an Eternal Heritage? Or could natural phenomena be powerful enough to survive the end of an Era?

Zac was unsure what to make of the situation; he supposed it didn't matter. At least not for some little brat like himself. But it was hard to forget the sense of awe Eoz had felt when he thought about those

people. People who seemingly had reached the very limits of cultivation and 'chosen War.' War against what? The Heavens?

Zac shook his head, putting the matter aside. It was yet another mystery one could not so easily unravel. Instead, Zac refocused on the gains. He'd gained two new nodes but no constitution. The former was a welcome surprise, while the latter was expected. Catheya had essentially told him as much when she gave him the [Essence of the Abyss]. It was a bit of a letdown not to get a single attribute point, though.

Still, Zac could feel that his body had drastically improved. He was holding almost 20% more Miasma than before, which would transfer over to his other side, thanks to [Quantum Gate]. His pathways had improved as well. They hadn't grown any thicker, but it was like the paths had been swapped out with higher-quality wiring, allowing for faster energy transfer.

Dragging an edge across his skin confirmed it had become noticeably more resistant without losing its elasticity. In other words, all the inherent benefits of being a Draugr had been boosted even further. If he were a cultivator, his attunement to Death would most likely have skyrocketed as well, though Zac could tell his Draugr side had the same limitations as his human side. His affinity was still Zero, and he hadn't even gained any of that Dao-given beauty Iz, and now Catheya, possessed.

But while his affinity hadn't changed, Zac felt much closer to the Dao of Death. If his human side had formed whirlpools with golden flakes, then each of his Draugr cells now held a bottomless abyss. Peering into the depths of his body felt like looking into the netherworld, and there was a strong accumulation of pure Death. It was a phenomenon far more palpable than the first layer [Void Vajra Sublimation].

Pushing his Branch of the Pale Seal through his limbs was noticeably smoother, almost like it blended with his body. It was almost as fast as letting it pass through the pathways of [Thousand Lights Avatar]. All energy moved smoother in his body since the upgrade, to the point he might be able to match the energy rotation of a mid-tier cultivator.

The thought made Zac release a huge cloud of Miasma before he took out a Supreme Miasma Crystal. Soon, new Miasma replaced the energy he'd just sacrificed. As expected, his recovery rate of Death-attuned energy had almost doubled thanks to his constitution. It wasn't still at the level of the elites of Port Atwood, let alone the many Heaven's Chosen of the Multiverse, but it was a start.

Zac guessed he'd gain something similar from his Life-attuned constitution sooner or later. With two constitutions improving the base functionality of his body, yet another one of his weaknesses would eventually be shored up.

With the gains of his body covered, Zac turned his attention to his new Hidden Nodes. Zac had a pretty good idea of how [Conviction of Eoz] worked, and it was easy to test. He closed his right hand into a fist and tried to flex his muscles as hard as possible. Normally, one would be able to push their muscles to a certain point based on their attributes, after which one wouldn't be able to exert more speed or strength.

This time, it just kept going. Zac felt like someone was inserting needles into his bicep, but he had no problem flexing his muscle noticeably harder. The same thing happened when he tried to leap forward as far as he could.

[Conviction of Eoz] had essentially upped the limiters on his body at the cost of damaging your limbs. It was like a hidden Berserking Method, but the drawback wasn't very punishing. It hurt your muscles and could probably damage your bones, but Zac had incredibly high Endurance and Vitality. So, for someone like him, it couldn't really be called a drawback unless you were forced into an extremely pitched battle.

Even then, it wasn't a problem. Zac had pushed his Techniques to the Integration Stage, and he had nigh-perfect control over his body. He had no trouble controlling his movements to avoid overdoing it; he wouldn't even need to use a Bloodline Method to turn the node off. The real risk was if he was forced to overextend himself against a powerful enemy.

At that point, he'd risk entering a negative spiral where self-inflicted damage weakened him to the point where he was forced to use the Hidden Node even more to keep up.

After testing things out for a couple of minutes, Zac felt he could push his speed and strength by roughly 3-4% without any drawback except the prickling sensation. It felt a bit uncomfortable, but his natural resilience and recovery fixed his muscles faster than they could be damaged. Not only that but the effect could be doubled if he was willing to harm himself.

Less than ten percent wasn't special, but Zac could tell this wasn't the limit of the node. Even when running the node at full blast, the damage to his body wasn't too bad. Ultimately, it came down to the name; conviction.

He remembered Eoz's conviction as he pushed toward the depths of the Abyssal Lake. He was fighting against the weight of the universe, ready to risk his life to reach the obelisk. Sitting around in his Cultivation Cave wouldn't allow Zac to bring out the mental and emotional state needed to fully awaken the node.

The other node, [Immutability of Eoz], was a tougher nut to crack. The second vision showed Eoz floating in space, looking down at a vortex. But since its name indicated it was a defensive node, Zac started to try various things. Two days later, he had a preliminary answer.

It quickly became apparent the node didn't provide any physical resistance like the [Adamance of Eoz] did by strengthening his Miasma. Instead, it was more like [Purity of the Void]. But while his Void Emperor Node cleansed impurities and foreign energies, [Immutability of Eoz] protected against and cleansed intangible things.

To reach this conclusion, he had been forced to call upon a wide variety of cultivators from the Atwood Army, from normal Elementalists to Poison Masters and Hexers. The node had been useless against the former, but against the latter, the node had finally awakened.

When the Hexer had tried to inflict him with a curse of weakness, Zac had felt his node automatically heat up. That had prompted the curse to fail, and the Hexer had even been hit with a small backlash. Part of it was probably because the Hexer was only Early E-grade, but it hopefully meant that it would at least weaken the curses of even powerful adversaries.

The same thing happened when a ranger had tried placing a tracking mark on him a few moments later. In other words, it looked like the node protected against various detrimental afflictions. This was an amazing node, and Zac liked it even better than [Conviction of Eoz]. The multiverse was filled with

dangerous and unpredictable environments, and there was almost no limit to the weird skills that existed.

A lot of these methods were incredibly difficult to spot as well. The fact that he had been carrying around six tracking marks after his visit to the Tower of Eternity was proof of that. And as his battle with Iz had shown, things could take a drastic turn when they launched unexpected forms of attacks.

Unfortunately, there were no Karmic Cultivators on Earth, or at least none that his people knew of. Zac would have liked to test whether [Immutability of Eoz] also helped against Karmic meddling. After all, The Great Redeemer was probably out there still, and Zac had already been targeted by the Buddhist Sangha once. Some extra protections against those kinds of people would be a godsend.

The easiest solution would probably be to just ask Catheya, but Zac wasn't sure how to deal with the Undead Empire after finding out they had spiked the [Essence of the Abyss]. He believed he was better off pretending he hadn't used it yet. That way, they'd think he would lose his human side sooner or later. Otherwise, they might move on to other methods of dealing with him.

As for the cost of his Hidden Nodes, it was similar to [Adamance of Eoz]. The nodes somehow drained his body, rather than using Miasma or Mental Energy. For lack of a better description, Zac called it Blood Force, like what the Body Tempering Cultivators before the System used. Expending his Blood Force would leave him hungry; overusing it would make him feel hollow and weak, just like Eoz in the second vision.

The good news was that he'd noticed upgrading either of his two constitutions seemed to improve his stores and the natural recovery rate of Blood Force. Still, Zac feared there was no getting around his needing to eat even more to keep himself in fighting condition. He'd have to rely on Ryan's chef buddy even more going forward.

Zac spent another day getting used to his most recent upgrades before returning to his original training regimen. The first three layers of the [Void Vajra Sublimation] weren't as complicated as the [Nine Reincarnations Manual]. They were fundamentally the same, except the 81 stances had become 108 in the second layer.

Each additional stance added a surprising amount of difficulty, leaving Zac sore for over an hour after each session. One welcome surprise was that his [Conviction of Eoz] and generally improved constitution from [Essence of the Abyss] noticeably helped him when cultivating [Void Vajra Sublimation].

It was still more difficult to complete each pass than the first layer. But without his other gains, Zac suspected it wouldn't have just needed one hour of rest. Zac even felt lucky he'd been forced to use the elixir early. This way, he'd save a huge amount of time over the coming years, time that would otherwise be spent lying sprawled on the ground, too exhausted to even think.

And Zac already knew what he'd spend his extra time on; drawing blueprints.

It was something Iz had suggested he add to his daily routine. Zac's original idea was to work hard on the theoretical aspect of Duality before starting to create blueprints. He wanted to avoid a situation akin to his stances, where he had been forced to throw out much of what he'd learned because of shaky foundations.

However, Iz said that he should start experimenting immediately and that expressing his understanding would help connect what he learned with his path. It would also concretize the problem, allowing you to look at it from a different light. It was fine going over the options in your mind, but that could lead to missing some critical weaknesses that would be laid bare when trying to draw the blueprint.

Zac ultimately felt it was a good idea, especially after thinking back to the vision Yrial showed him. Zac's master had conjured that flame hundreds of times during his journey, making incremental adjustments to get closer to his truth. With his superhuman attributes and integration-stage technique, drawing up a blueprint or two wouldn't take much time each day.

Hopefully, it would also act as a motivator, where he could see his gradual improvement over time.

There was no better time to begin than now, and Zac took out a stone disk the size of a manhole cover. He didn't have Yrial's energy- and Dao control to form something like his flames, so Zac was better off inscribing his ideas onto various materials. Zac took out a small scalpel shaped like an axe he'd prepared for just the occasion. It looked a bit odd, but he'd found he was far better at carving intricate details when using an axe than something like a chisel.

Zac wasted no time as he started engraving the fractals and paths he'd envisioned and iterated upon so many times in his mind. He began at the outer edges, carving runes that held the whispers of true Life and Death. Life to the left, Death to the right, separated by the center of the disk. It was like Yrial's second trial, where he'd cheated his way through after returning from the Orom.

Back then, his path had been showcased by three brutal scars instilled with his Dao. That obviously wasn't anything worthy of being called a blueprint, but it worked as a starting point. Meticulously drawn fractals replaced wild energies and destruction, and unfettered Dao was replaced by runes instilled with precise meaning.

At the opposite edges, the two concepts were pure, but they transformed as Zac worked his way toward the middle. Gradually, the Dao of Conflict entered the fray on both sides, seamlessly melding with the two other Daos. The sides moved toward each other like warriors charging their enemy, just like the struggle he saw in the air around him—an Evolutionary force against an Inexorable one.

But then the problems arrived. He'd thought about how to fuse the two sides at length, and a pattern similar to yin-yang had already appeared on the disk. In the center, the Branch of War Axe dominated, being the inspiration for over 75% of the patterns. Those parts were not difficult to fuse, but the problem came from the other two Daos.

The shadow of Life could be found in any Evolutionary Pattern, even if it was dominated by Conflict in the center. The same was true for the opposite side. These two Daos completely changed how most of the patterns worked and the balance of the whole schematic. And they refused to harmonize.

If Zac were using one of his [Fractal Framework Arrays] to create a skill right now, it would have blared with warnings that the energy conduits were unstable. After all, this was not just about fusing Dao. The Cosmic Core was a battery, and he was trying to create something that could hold both Miasma and Cosmic Energy.

Still, Zac trudged on, using all the insight he had accumulated to fix the issues best as he could. This was not a final design. It was a test to see how far his current understanding could take him. Twenty minutes

later, the whole disk was engraved and completely covered with an intricate array of patterns. Zac wordlessly looked at his first blueprint, the schematic that was supposed to take him into Hegemony.

Thank God he had years to work out the kinks.