

The Fall 968

[Chapter 968 - 3,412](#)

"Is everything alright?" Ilvere asked as he cautiously looked around.

"Looks like it," Zac nodded, not without some surprise.

The two previous times he'd absorbed a part of the seal, he ended up ripping a hole in the fabric of space. This time, nothing of the sort happened after the initial shockwave. It was possible the previous outbursts were because he had picked up the pieces inside the Void Star, where space was far more fragile.

"So, how did it go?" Ilvere asked curiously. "Did you accomplish whatever you set out for in there?"

"Something like that," Zac nodded, hiding the complex feelings in his heart.

Difficult. Too, too difficult.

Over six years of relentless work. The lake water had been completely used up two years ago, but his studies hadn't stopped there. On the contrary, they had taken up more and more of his time. The Book of Duality was not only completely deciphered but also expanded upon with an eighth and ninth chapter. Tens of thousands of models, Hundreds of thousands of patterns simulated.

Only to learn the path he'd originally envisioned was a dead end. Zac shook his head, looking out across the odd army. There were two hundred warriors, each sitting atop a mantis-like Ayn ant. In addition, there were another hundred brutish-looking Ayn meat shields ready to take on the role of vanguard.

"How did these guys do?" Zac asked.

"Well, they can stand around, at least, I can tell you that," Ilvere said with some bemusement.

"Sometimes I almost forgot they were real ants and not statues."

"They have no desires," Lily said as she caressed her Ayn mount. "These are pure warriors who take commands from the queen. Or, well, me. You can pretty much consider them machines."

"Still might be a good idea to bloody them," Ilvere muttered. "We use Barghest for a similar purpose back home, but some of the bloodlines are simply no good. They'd go out of control when the blood and killing intent in the air reached a certain point, especially those without direct contracts. They'd turn around and attack their controllers. Beasts usually have an inborn ferocity, after all."

"These guys won't do that," Lily assured.

"I believe you, lass," Ilvere said. "But it's still worth testing out."

"Can you take them for some actual battle after this?" Zac asked.

"Of course."

Zac nodded before turning to Janos. "Did you feel anything?"

"No," Janos curtly said before turning his almost vacant gaze toward the ruins around them.

"Don't mind him," Ilvere said with a grin. "He's just trying to figure out something in the world of his. And don't worry. We'll stay here for a while and check things out in case there's a delayed reaction. The eruption after you entered might have disrupted some of the remaining seals, so this could be an opportunity. We'll test these ants afterward."

"That's fine," Zac said as he gave the illusionist a helpless look.

Zac could barely believe his ears upon hearing that Janos had come walking out of the Ensolus Ruins a year ago. Zac had even cracked open the last ruin with the markings of the Left Imperial Palace to make sure the illusionist wasn't trapped, but he wasn't there.

Even today, Zac didn't quite understand where Janos had gone, partly because he'd become even more laconic during his opportunity. From the sounds of it, he'd physically entered a crumbling, ancient illusion created by the Limitless Empire. It had taken him over two years just to realize he was trapped and another five to get out. However, those years weren't spent in vain.

Janos' illusions were terrifying by this point, and even Zac had trouble escaping them in short order. He had also learned an incredibly odd technique, where he had created an imaginary world in his mind. Janos could bring out things from that illusion, and they fought as though they were real. The downside to the technique was that it seemed to require huge amounts of his mind power, leaving him with one foot in reality and one foot in his own world.

More importantly, Janos was now a Realmsinger of Ultom.

Most likely, Janos had been counted as part of his posse since Zac first got his hand on the quest. Just like Ogras got a quest in the Ra'Lashar Ruins, Janos got a quest the moment he realized he was trapped in an illusion. That quest ultimately allowed him to find a piece of the Mercurial Court.

Janos was one of the first to become part of his cycle, but he wasn't the only one. Zac hadn't heard back from Catheya or Ogras since they ventured into the depths of the Million Gates Territory, but he had at least a way to keep track of Ogras. Just over a year after they set out, Zac's quest updated to 6/9 in one go.

Since then, it had been updated twice until it reached 8/9 three months ago. However, Zac suspected this was it since their deadline to return was just two months away. It would have been great if his quest had filled up before leaving for the Perennial Vastness, but the progress was ultimately better than Zac had expected.

They made such progress by just sailing through the Million Gates Territory. With the war starting in 15 months, Zac suspected they'd have ample opportunities to complete the cycle, perhaps even finish a second one.

"Alright, let me know if you find something interesting. I'm heading back," Zac said before heading toward the settlement outside.

Two hours later, he was back on Earth, and Zac sighed as he stepped into his cultivation cave. Thank God his time in this place was coming to an end. He still felt it rewarding to practice the various aspects of his cultivation, but he could really use a change of pace. Ultimately, he was a cultivator walking the path of conflict. Caves and seclusion weren't the optimal way for him to progress.

Of course, some things couldn't be skipped just because he wanted to go out on capers like Ogras and the others. Like Iz had said, the foundation was the most important. Certain improvements in the E-grade could create a ripple effect of positive outcomes lasting all the way to the peak.

So he had ignored the call for adventure and studiously continued tempering himself and shoring up his foundations. His years in the Time Chamber weren't any different. The treasure had essentially created a bubble roughly fifty meters across, where the world outside was frozen in place.

By the time the Time Chamber ran out of juice, Zac knew the trees in his Cultivation Cave so well that he knew how many leaves they had. Of course, he had emerged a new person, having pushed his Soul and Constitution to new heights. Now, there was just one step that remained.

Zac reached his prayer mat, but he kept going until reaching the opposite edge of the cave, where he entered the most recent addition to his subterranean complex. The gate slid open, and Zac was greeted by the scene that had become incredibly familiar over the past years.

Thousands of paintings, schematics, statues, and contraptions filled a vast hall. Some were over five meters tall. Others were no larger than eggs and placed on pedestals to not disappear. The first item that greeted him upon entering was the crude diagram he made based on his insights inside Yrial's trial.

Coming back from the enlightenment of Ultom, it was almost like he was seeing the schematic for the first time, and Zac stopped for a moment to inspect it. Zac shook his head with a slight smile. It wasn't even worthy of forming a basic skill, so riddled with issues and misunderstandings. But it didn't matter. Albeit a stumbling one, it was the first step that had started his journey of discovery.

Zac passed the blueprint and continued further into the cave. When he first opened this inner sanctum, there had only been a straight corridor that got increasingly longer. But after emerging from the Time Chamber, he had been forced to redesign the room. Now, the path was a huge spiral, and Zac was slowly making his way toward the center.

The first 100 blueprints were both similar in shape and nature. They were all drawn on circular disks, mirroring the concept of the first one. Life to the left, Death to the right, transforming as they moved toward the center. Yin and Yang, light and dark. Each blueprint was far more refined compared to the one before it.

Progress had been easy in the beginning, when he was still on the fifth chapter of the [Book of Duality], and he was just scratching the surface. Even then, some things can not be bridged with hard work. This type of straightforward core was most likely impossible. Even today, Zac had no solution. Its fundamental concept was flawed, or it required a Dao that far surpassed what was possible in the D-grade.

As such, the blueprints started to change after Zac had walked a third through the outermost spiral. He had added another source of inspiration; his Duplicity Core.

The more Zac learned about Duality and the underpinning rules of Cosmic Energy and Attunement, the more Zac realized how magical the Duplicity Core his Mother's Clan had created was. He had become half-Draugr by accident, yet it had accommodated this change without issue. It seemingly could encompass all Daos.

However, Zac eventually realized that he couldn't base his Cosmic Core on the ideas of his Duplicity Core either. It ultimately didn't contain the concept of Duality, even if it looked like it. The Specialty Core was a container, an unfathomable solution to split a single person into two. Its underpinning rule was that the two were kept completely separate while one nurtured the other, most likely because the Kayar-Elu had planned for his other half to be mechanized.

And that was not Duality. It had taken some time for Zac to reach this conclusion, with each following iteration of the blueprints tarrying the echoes of his Duplicity Core. It would be a few hundred meters before that changed. Each step felt like retracing his cultivation journey until now. What once felt like strokes of genius was now riddled with errors.

Yet, they were the foundation of where he was today. Even reaching a dead end was an important lesson, leaving you better off as you righted the ship. As Zac continued down the path, the patterns grew increasingly complex.

There was a clear demarcation where he'd mastered the sixth chapter of the [Book of Duality]. The patterns grew denser, and new sections were added, all in an attempt to cross that seemingly unbridgeable gap between Life and Death. It hadn't worked, even when the patterns reached a point where they were tens of times more complex than conventional Cultivator's Cores.

The ample reserves of lake water had given him a deeper foundation in the subject than almost any centennial in the Multiverse, yet he hadn't managed to find the solution. By the time he'd mastered the final chapter, Zac had realized he had been walking in circles. It wouldn't help, no matter how many sections, arrays, and frameworks were added to the blueprint.

From there, he'd continued into uncharted territory, focusing on the specific interactions between Life and Death and their flavor of Duality. Luckily, he still retained a third of his Lake Water by that point, allowing him to walk a bit further. And halfway into the spiral, there was a change.

From complexity came simplicity, where more was expressed with less. The change was small and subtle, but it was there. Gradually, the patterns became more refined while also better representing his trinity path. Conflict was still the glue that would bind together and contain Life and Death, but he'd realized it wasn't enough.

Zac shook his head, a smile tugging at his mouth. In a way, he'd been walking in a circle, both metaphorically and literally. He was now over two-thirds into the spiral, yet he had come to the very same conclusion as the day he learned of blueprints. No matter how you looked at it, there simply wasn't a theoretical foundation to create something lasting and stable with these three Daos, at least not while retaining his path.

Life was Life; Death was Death. Forever separate. That was the conclusion he'd arrived at inside the Twilight Ocean.

Back inside the Inheritance Trial, he'd realized his crude creation might allow him to create a powerful skill that would unleash unmatched destruction. But to build a core would end up with him exploding. And after five years of effort, he arrived at the same roadblock. Of course, this time, it was with a scholar's understanding of why it didn't work.

It was like the difference between knowing the sun would rise the next day and knowing how and why it would do so. And it was at this point he ran out of lake water. No more were there any easily-accessible insights. Every step of progress had been fought for with blood, sweat, and tears. Thankfully, his foundations and theoretical knowledge were terrifyingly stable by that point, so he had the tools to continue down the path on his own.

Zac had set out to solve the equation by adding something without damaging or altering his path. For a while, he had experimented with centrifugal force. Zac had suspected he couldn't rely on the static Cosmic Core most used. Because conflict wasn't a glue. It was a matchbook and gasoline. There was no such thing as an eternal and unchanging war. Even his Inexorable Path continuously adapted to seal and suffocate the enemy.

So Zac figured he needed a core that automatically and perpetually rotated the energy. This was nothing unusual on its own; it was an established high-tier concept for Cosmic Cores. Their storage capacity was worse than equally high-tier static models, but they were good for energy transmission. The experiment lasted for over two hundred blueprints before it was discarded for being too unstable.

Between the inward pressure from the vortex and the agitation of conflict, he couldn't create a safe system that would work for energy storage. It was like his Soul Strengthening Methods. The ferocious storms were fine for short durations where he could temper his cores, but it wasn't a sustainable state to maintain indefinitely.

Just creating two sealed-off chambers of Life and Death with his Branch of the War Axe in the middle wouldn't work. Not only would it halve his energy capacity, but it would be just as unstable as the vortex core. The moment he'd try to extract any significant amount of either Divine Energy or Miasma, a resonance would naturally form, and balance would be disrupted.

One idea after another was discarded in this way. This was where Zac had started to worry for real that he had taken on a project beyond his abilities. Perhaps beyond the realms of possibility. The only solution he could think of was to create two separate cores, even if all missives said it was impossible. One Evolutionary Core that would be connected to his human pathways and one Inexorable Core that fueled the other.

Unfortunately, the book [Book of Duality] said this was a fundamental impossibility, and not for lack of people trying. Who wouldn't want an extra Cosmic Core to double their energy reserves? But no matter if it was creating two identical core or complimentary ones, it simply didn't seem to be something you could do.

Ultimately, Zac had been forced to reach out for clarification to the only one he knew who might know the truth; Iz. The two plushies had almost collapsed by the transference of the promised Life-attuned array disks, but they still had some lingering power left. Zac had sent a message asking if his idea was even possible, along with his thoughts and theories so far. He had received a one-sentence answer in return.

Outside the scope of this Heaven.

Iz hadn't said it was impossible, but her answer wasn't much better. No cores or multiple cores were not possibilities within the system of cultivation that existed in the Era of Order. Even if you somehow

succeeded and broke past the boundaries of the Era, you'd be disconnected from the natural path of progression. It was just like the Earth Immortals I mentioned.

Zac didn't have any Supremacy to push away reality while he embarked on a path of a previous Heaven, and neither did he have the fundamental qualifications to forge a completely new approach to cultivation. Forming a Life-Death core was incredibly difficult, but creating two cores seemed even more far-fetched.

Dark clouds were gathering, yet Zac hadn't stopped or let the task shake his conviction. Luckily, he was far ahead of schedule on both soul and constitution, allowing him to focus fully on his blueprint alone. He tried everything he could come up with, to the point he spent every waking moment theorizing, simulating, and engraving.

Yet the patterns grew increasingly similar as Zac walked the final stretch of the spiral, even if the expressions became more diverse. Ultimately, he had exhausted everything he could think of. There was simply no path forward. He had only managed to come up with a few wild ideas that may or may not work, crazy last-ditch efforts that were far more likely to end in disaster. And then, the blueprints ended as Zac reached the center.

Six years of constant work had gone into this room. And these were just his finest creations, the ones that Zac felt worthy of entering his museum of failure. Because that was what this place was. In total, there were 3,412 attempts at creating a Life-Death Core lining the path to the center. In total, there were 3,412 failures.

Every day, he'd made multiple attempts at drawing, carving, sculpting, or chiseling an array. Every single day, he ended up with a defective product. Since he was well and truly stuck, having the theoretical knowledge but lacking the inspiration, Zac ultimately turned to the one chance he had remaining.

Ultom. It was a few months earlier than planned, but what could you do? Zac had exhausted all his venues. Unfortunately, the moment the light of clarity entered his body, he was instantly met with an inescapable truth. Cores with both Pure Life and Pure Death were simply impossible to form without also controlling Chaos. It was no wonder the Undead Empire wanted to erase his human side.

Conflict couldn't solve that insolvable equation; it could only make the fallout more volatile. Zac had almost given in to despair then and there, but the next moment, Ultom shone a light in the darkness. A weak, flickering light, but it was there. A possibility that perfectly toed the line between genius and madness.

A path only open to a Void Emperor.