

The Fall 969

[Chapter 969 - Neither and Both](#)

The impartment of Ultom was unequivocal in its message. He couldn't fuse Life and Death in one core, and he couldn't use Two cores. So he would do neither, and he would do both.

The end of the spiral led to a small empty square, no more than ten meters across. It symbolized the destination of the journey he'd taken over the past years. It was here he would place his final blueprint, the one that encompassed his path without being a paradox. And it was finally time to create it.

Zac stood in the middle of his museum for over an hour, stabilizing his mind while recollecting the solution he'd seen in the light of Ultom. When Zac's soul was completely calm, and his heart was steady, he took out a table, a chair, and a piece of white marble as large as his torso. Next to it, he took out a stack of papers with hastily scribbled notes.

Some of the concepts that went into his idea were too complex, and Zac had been afraid he'd forget them over time as he had after some of his other epiphanies. Everything from feelings to step-by-step construction had been written down, but Zac didn't feel they were necessary. The core was so tangible and detailed in his mind that it might as well be real.

Zac began his work, this time opting to use a sculpture to represent his path. A simple disk wouldn't be enough; he would have to work with all three dimensions to get an even slightly accurate representation of his plan.

One of his artisan axes chiseled away most of the marble until what remained was an almost perfect sphere. With a Dao-empowered swing, the ball was perfectly cut into two, and Zac put one of the halves aside before turning his attention to the other. He swapped out his axe for a finer one and began engraving a series of patterns on the sphere.

The outermost layer of patterns was no more than a finger deep, and individual patterns were so small they were a tenth the width and height. A normal human could barely make out the runes, yet each represented whole sets of fractals. Sometimes hundreds of them. The edge of the small axe moved with extreme precision, guided by experience and the Dao.

It had been years since he completed the first layer of the [Thousand Lights Avatar], which allowed him to freely and naturally instill his body with the Dao. Just as he and Pavina theorized all those years ago, it had provided noticeable benefits to his technique. Not only that, it had proven useful in all kinds of scenarios, even carving blueprints.

Since [Thousand Lights Avatar] had proven practical beyond expectation, from channeling Daos into skills to improving his connection to his techniques, he'd kept cultivating it whenever he had time. And with the Moss Crystal's incredibly pure source of spirituality, he had already completed the second layer.

Today, his whole body was covered by a secondary soul instead of just having a skeleton framework. It was still mostly hollow, though. Even with the second Moss Crystal he'd arduously bartered from Mossy, in exchange for enormous attunement traps in space and mountains of Nexus Crystals, it would take years to flesh out the budding avatar fully.

For better or worse, Mossy had realized its crystals were incredibly useful to things outside their oneness, and they had actively started working on creating more. With Zac's attunement traps siphoning off all attuned energy to create Divine and Miasma Crystals, Mossy had more energy left over for that. The only problem was that the moss entity became noticeably smarter every time they conversed, but Zac had ultimately decided to take the risk.

Mossy's Crystals were simply too magical, no matter if it were for himself or other Mentalists like Vilari. Soul Cultivation was an incredibly powerful path, and most Cultivators' defenses were on the weaker side against mental attacks. But Mentalists just took too much time to nurture. With Mossy providing crystals to the elites of the Atwood Empire, that weakness would be shored up.

The effects of the soul avatar were palpable, even if it wasn't fully fleshed out yet. It was like the Heavens themselves were guiding Zac's hand as one pattern after another appeared with blazing speed. Not even the laser cutters of Old Earth would be able to compare to the precision or pace Zac added engravings to the half-sphere.

In just a few minutes, the whole outer core was covered in dense scripts that emitted the familiar aura of the Evolutionary Cores he'd created over the past years. However, there were some differences here and there, so subtle that Zac doubted any outsiders would spot them. They didn't change much by themselves, but that was just the start.

Zac carefully flipped over the half-sphere and continued engraving. He began at the middle, released a small engraved nucleus from the center, and put it aside. From there, Zac removed a layer of marble before carving a set of runes, both familiar and foreign. More than the runes on the outside, they reminded Zac of the seals in his [Void Vajra Sublimation].

The whole inner pattern was carved, and Zac actually cut it out of the sphere, hollowing it out even further. It was placed to the side with the nucleus, and three more layers eventually joined it. By that time, only the outer shell of the half-sphere remained, and Zac carefully put back the five layers he'd carved.

Each piece perfectly fit into the whole, creating an almost dizzying array of patterns. Zac looked at the result with satisfaction. It was one of the most intricate designs he'd ever brought from his mind to reality, and it had pushed his skills artisanal skills to the limits.

Zac spent the next thirty minutes studying the runes, but they really were a perfect representation of the core in his mind. As far as he could tell, the runes were all as they should be. Truthfully, he mostly relied on Ultom for a good chunk of the patterns inside the sphere. After all, half of the patterns were a fusion of Conflict and the Void of Life rather than the Dao of Life, and that was mostly uncharted territory for him.

Since nothing was wrong, Zac placed a talisman on the half-sphere. With a small shudder, the six layers fused back together without needing glue or anything else. With that, the first piece was complete, and Zac continued with the same process on the other half before pushing the two back together.

Another talisman was placed on the cut, and the two pieces fused like they had never been apart. Left was a single sphere with six layers of runes, including a nucleus, intricately connected in a way that created echoes of his path.

It was already lightyears ahead of his other designs, yet it felt incomplete. Hollow. Moreover, it looked completely erratic from most vantages, to the point it didn't even look like a real blueprint. But that didn't mean he'd failed. It simply meant he hadn't finished the core yet.

Zac placed the white sphere to the side before sending a nudge into his Specialty core, letting Miasma spread through his body. The second part would be best carved in his Draugr form. After four hours, a second core joined the first. This one was made from black marble instead of white, and its patterns were unsurprisingly those of Death and Conflict. And like with the first core, it both felt complete and defective.

Only from one direction could Zac see the inexorability of his path. The other sides were bedlam, chaos that made no sense. This core was even more alien than the first. Half of its patterns were created with the Void of Death and fused with his Dao of Conflict in ways that would be foreign to anyone whose understanding was limited to the Apostate of Order's fractal framework.

Zac already had some understanding of the Void of Life and how it affected his Dao after years of practicing his [Void Vajra Sublimation], but he didn't have the same experience with the Void of Death. Zac suspected that would have to change going forward. Thankfully, Zac could extrapolate the connections through his understanding of life, for now, so he somewhat understood the goal of the patterns.

The two orbs were placed on separate pedestals right in the middle of the spiral, with only a hand's gap between them. They looked like two broken moons next to each other, hinting at something greater that seemed irrevocably lost. It even looked like he had added unnecessary strokes and filler paths that served no real purpose.

But it was all a matter of vantage.

Zac slowly walked around the installation until death was completely hidden by life. There, the view was completely different. It was like everything had clicked into place. The previously incomplete or unnecessary additions to the core suddenly looked perfect, thanks to the juxtaposition of the core behind.

The Void of Death nurtured and completed the Evolutionary Core from within, just like the threat of death was the driving force for struggle in the wild. Similarly, the Void of Life completed the Inexorable Core on the other side. Without life, there could be no death. It was an Evolutionary Core. It was an Inexorable Core. It was neither, and it was both.

A Quantum Core to contain his Trinity Path, made possible by Void and grasping for Chaos.

In truth, the core was not two separate things, not really. It was impossible to engrave the concepts onto stone properly, so he was forced to take a shortcut. When it came to the real thing, it would be a single core with two states of existence.

When he was in his Human form, the core would look like it did from the vantage of the white marble sphere: Life, Conflict, Void of Death. Life and Void of Death didn't actually clash in this case. The Void of Dao acted as a hidden booster, enkindling his path and stabilizing it. Life from the absence of Death, one could say.

When Draugr, the Cosmic Core would rather be in its other state, where Death and Conflict were supported by Void of Life.

It looked simple when he just walked back and forth between the two sides. In reality, it was incredibly complex, deviating from anything Zac had seen. Even if he had 100 years, he would probably never have figured out these patterns. They relied on the concept of Void, which was mostly unexplored, and for a good reason.

To have an affinity to a Dao meant not having affinity to the Void of that Dao. No cultivator of life would ever touch upon the Void of Life. He, as the Void Emperor, was possible the sole exception in the multiverse, which had opened a door that was closed for everyone else.

And that still wasn't enough to make this impossible core possible. The Kayar-Elu had created something equally impossible when creating his core and the [Quantum Gate]. His body was in two states simultaneously, like two sides of a coin. As Zac was right now, he wouldn't have been able to stably create this Trinity Core without the assistance of these impartments. His Technocrat inheritance was the key that would trigger its two states.

Zac couldn't be sure, but he guessed this was the first and the last core of this type that would ever exist under the Heavens. Not because it was the most complex one ever created but because of its impossible requirements. A paradoxical core for a paradoxical person.

Looking at it filled Zac with a sense of release. Years of toiling had led to this, and the result was exactly what he'd hoped for. Even after looking over the schematic, he couldn't find a single mistake. As long as Zac managed to create this thing, it should at least become a Middle-quality Cosmic Core.

It didn't sound like much, especially in the face of the claims that the Perennial Vastness could help cultivators form Peak-quality cores that would remove most of the bottlenecks of Hegemony. Ultimately, that was only true for normal elites with simple and unimpressive paths.

The heavier one's foundations, the more difficult it was to form a High-quality core. The same was true for the complexity of your path. Even Iz was only aiming for a High-quality Cosmic Core with her backing. For Zac to expect a Peak-quality core right out of the gate was a fool's hope. Still, as long as he managed to form a Middle-quality core, Zac's short-term goals would be met.

Hegemony was similar to the E-grade in that it was divided into Early, Middle, Late, and Peak. But while the E-grade had 75 minor bottlenecks, D-grade had three major ones. After breaking through, you'd have an Early-stage Cosmic Core, which would last you until the first bottleneck at level 175. At that point, you would have to upgrade your core, which was risky and difficult.

A failed attempt would damage and lower the quality of your core, which could waste centuries of cultivation. If you really messed up, you could destroy your core altogether and cripple your cultivation. But if you succeeded, you would break through to Middle D-grade.

Upgrading your core from Early to Middle-stage came with all kinds of benefits. First of all, your level limit would increase by another 25 levels, where each level provided more attributes than the Early stage. With a Middle-stage core, you'd also be able to store and transmit far more Cosmic Energy, giving a huge advantage in combat since it could both power stronger War Regalia and skills.

But for many, the true prize of breaking through was something else; Longevity. Your lifespan was more related to your core than your Race in the D-grade. There were no pills for a quick breakthrough. Your Race would reach C-grade upon passing the final bottleneck, upgrading a Late-Stage Cosmic Core to Peak.

Each breakthrough before then would also add roughly ten thousand years of lifespan, far more than any longevity treasures could provide. Even those who had no hopes of Monarchy or even later stages of D-grade desperately wanted to upgrade their cores at least one stage for this reason. But it was easier said than done.

The fundamental requirement to pass each bottleneck was the quality of your core. If you managed to form a Middle-quality Cosmic Core from the get-go, you had the qualifications to assault the first bottleneck the moment you were level-capped. If not, you would have to slowly work on the quality of your Cosmic Core until you were ready.

Cultivators could use their manuals to accomplish this. A Middle-quality D-grade Cultivation Manual could gradually refine compatible cores to Middle-quality without any risk, though it took centuries to millennia of cultivation. Mortals such as himself didn't have that luxury. They needed to use treasures or risk everything by simultaneously upgrading the stage and quality.

Zac wasn't confident about reaching Late Hegemony before Ultom, even with the opportunities provided by the sanctioned war. Breaking through didn't only require your core to have reached the minimum quality. You also needed foundations and accumulations. For someone like him, he'd most likely need to upgrade his branches to Earthly Daos to act as the foundations for a Late-stage Cosmic Core. To reach that point in 3 years was simply too difficult.

But Zac felt the peak of Middle Hegemony doable, even if it would be incredibly difficult. The levels would be easy; between pills and endless enemies during the war, he was confident in quickly gaining levels. There was no real bottleneck between levels either.

Normal Hegemons who entered D-grade with imperfect cores, either from relying on treasures or lacking understanding of their Daos, would find themselves unable to gain any levels before fixing the mistakes. But with a Cosmic Core perfectly aligned with his path and vetted by the wisdom of Ultom, Zac expected he'd be able to rush through the levels without any issues.

Of course, reaching that level didn't mean he would be invincible. Having spoken with Iz and Catheya, Zac was certain the top geniuses would be Late D-grade with at least one Earthly Dao. However, with his unique situation and various advantages, he wouldn't be like a fish on the chopping block.

Even if winning was hard to impossible, he should be able to make himself unpalatable enough to target that it wasn't worth the effort messing with him.

Zac shook his head, his abyssal gaze turning back to the two spheres. These matters were all problems for the future. The first step was to actually create this impossible core. In reality, the process would be far harder than chiseling two marble blocks. The real thing was just one core, meaning he had to craft both sides simultaneously.

In other words, he would have to keep swapping back and forth between each side while forming the core. Because if he added too much in one of the two states without the other side to balance it out, the

core would collapse. He would walk the tightrope for who knew how long if he wanted to create something like this.

Zac wouldn't be surprised even if the process took years to complete. Years where a single slip of concentration would spell his doom. But if that was what it took, so be it. Zac was ready to meet the challenge to prove his path. A token with the rune for "Vast" appeared in his hand, and a smile spread across his face.

Not much longer now.