

## The Fall 980

### [Chapter 980 - Nine By Eight](#)

The whole square shuddered at his words, and Zac looked around with alarm as he felt Fate gather around him like when he uttered the word 'Ultom.' It wasn't just the world, either. Each one of the pillars had hummed into life, and Zac found himself awash with terrifying truths far beyond what he could handle.

Seventeen distinct Daos flooded the square, and Zac found himself an unwilling witness to a tremendous clash urged on by a torrent of Fate. Zac didn't know if the energies were trying to destroy the world or recreate the Heavens on Earth. Either way, the energies were reaching dangerous levels, and Zac started looking for an escape path.

But before Zac could start running for his life, a heavy pressure descended and quelled the unrest, scattering the winds of Fate and dragging apart the currents of Dao. It wasn't the System but the entity that scanned him upon his arrival. The Perennial Vastness itself had made a move.

"Ah," Null exclaimed. "The boss is telling you to cut it out. Don't bring up that ancient conflict. You'll cause trouble."

"Ancient Conflict?" Zac frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Shouldn't I be the one asking that?" Null lazily said. "I was born less than an hour ago. What do I know about these matters? Even if I did, I couldn't tell you. If the boss doesn't want to get involved, then I'm definitely going to stay clear as well. We only get one life, and I'm not going to throw mine away on stuff I don't understand."

"That's-" Zac began, but he stopped mid-sentence as he felt a prickling killing intent right behind him, almost like a needle sticking into the back of his head.

There was no delay or hesitation. [Verun's Bite] appeared in his hand, and three runes had already lit up as Zac unleashed a herculean swing at whatever was behind him. Axe hit flesh, but Zac felt like the bones in his arm would snap when the feeling of his edge forcing its way through the enemy was completely missing. Instead, there was a tremendous rebound, and Zac knew he was dealing with something extremely dangerous. His fears were realized just a moment later when he'd managed to take in what he'd just attacked.

A face.

The face was as large as Zac was tall and belonged to a creature with more girth than height. Its greenish face was covered in such a dense beard and bushy eyebrows that Zac suspected it had some beastkin blood in its ancestry. In reality, it was closer to some sort of demonic troll. Its huge nose was wider than Zac's face, and it had four glistening horns covered in archaic runes.

Its eyes were even bigger, each one as large as a manhole cover, and Zac felt extremely exposed as they stared at him at point-blank range. Especially considering his axe was stuck trying to penetrate its left eye without much luck. No barriers or cosmic energy kept the sanguine edge of [Verun's Bite] at bay.

Zac could tell his axe was actually hitting the pupil of the monster, yet it was his axe that suffered damage. Cracks covered the edge of Verun, and Zac felt a mix of pain and fear in his mind from the Tool Spirit. Zac urgently jumped back a few meters, activating the seldom-used third rune on his axe, prompting the axe to start molting and regenerating.

Thankfully, the troll creature made no move to follow, and the sense of impending doom was completely gone. It just stood there, with two stubby legs, each as thick as a tree, with a three-meter staff in its hand. It wore a set of earth-tone robes over its body, which looked incredibly odd on such a misproportioned creature.

"As expected, you chose violence," the troll laughed as it tapped its staff onto the ground, prompting odd ripples to spread through the square. "Conflict, indeed. Pretty sharp senses, too, though it took you a few seconds to notice me."

Zac blankly looked at the huge creature. Had this thing stood right behind him for seconds without him noticing?

"Lord Engo!" Null exclaimed.

"What? Who?" Zac whispered.

"Lord Engo is one of the boss's oldest disciples. He's at the threshold of Supremacy."

Zac looked up at the odd humanoid with surprise. He'd known it was powerful, but a Peak Autarch? Those beings weren't quite as rare as Supremacies, but it wasn't that far-off either. It also proved just how powerful the Perennial Vastness was if he had such powerful disciples.

"An Immemorial Realm has disciples?" Zac muttered with surprise.

"We're all equal in the face of the Dao," Engo smiled. At least Zac thought he did. It was hard to tell, with the troll's maw being a two-meter-wide vortex of teeth and horror. "Origins mean nothing at the peak. Only your path and your purpose do."

Zac nodded after some thought. What the troll said was true. There were people like Ubo in the Orom World. He was originally just a normal rock that happened to be in a particularly Dao-dense environment, which had accidentally created a spark of sapience. Zac himself had a soul sliver of a likely dead cultivator for a master. It wasn't that weird for a powerful realm to take in disciples of its own.

"Don't be so nervous," Engo guffawed. "I was nearby and sensed fate gathering, so I came over to see what was going on. It's not often you see such winds of Fate from people who haven't yet shed the chains of mortality."

"I'm sorry about that," Zac coughed.

"Do you want to know?" Engo grinned. "About what you asked."

Zac was about to say yes, but he didn't immediately answer. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't curious, but this felt like a matter far beyond someone like him. Just knowing about it might entangle him in unexpected ways, like how the Remnants seemingly influenced his path in their desire to fuse with their brethren.

Still, he'd heard the term Nine Seals, Eight Pillars, and One Destiny during his first vision of Ultom. Not knowing what they were dealing with might put him and his followers in danger after they entered the inheritance.

"The broad strokes, if it's convenient for you," Zac eventually said.

"Broad strokes," Engo hummed. "Well, show me something interesting, and you'll know."

'What does that mean?' Zac inwardly asked, hoping Null could hear him.

"See that pedestal in the middle?" Null answered. "You need to show your planned core. Not for Lord Engo, but as part of orientation. Depending on how good it is, you will get a set amount starting Mana."

Zac was curious about this Mana, but one thing at a time.

"How do I show my blueprint?" Zac asked.

"However you want. Place a blueprint on it. Infuse it with your mind. We've seen it all."

"Alright," Zac said, glancing at the Autarch before walking over to the pedestal.

Zac placed his hand on the white stone and infused some Cosmic Energy. He then imprinted his blueprint, just like he'd record information on an Information Crystal. He could have placed the two carvings on the plinth, but he was afraid doing so would lead to the array misunderstanding his plan. Better to showcase the exact idea that existed in his mind.

The process only took a few seconds, after which he looked back at Engo, only to find the creature standing right next to him. Zac's heart almost jumped out of his mouth, but he didn't swing at Engo this time. What was it with this big bastard and moving so stealthily? Did he enjoy startling people?

Engo turned back to the pedestal, and a light tap prompted it to light up and display a mesmerizing orb made up of innumerable lines in steely grey, gold, and black. The discerning eye would also notice invisible lines made by negative space—the Void.

Even the array couldn't perfectly replicate the core, though. The projection shifted back and forth between two states, just like how it looked when Zac looked at his carvings from the right angle. As the blueprint spun above the recording pillar, two of the pillars hummed at the edge of the square.

The pillars of Chaos and Conflict.

"Life and Death connected through the Void and enkindled by Conflict," Engo muttered, slightly nodding his head a few times as the core spun.

Zac inwardly grumbled at the reaction. It was just like the consciousness before, when it barely spared his Duplicity Core a second glance. Would it kill them to be a bit impressed? This was a core never-before-seen in the Multiverse. Why did Engo have to talk about it like it was yesterday's weather?

A surge of energy distracted Zac's thought, and he saw two streams of energy enter Null on his wrist, each coming from the two pillars that had come alive again. A set of patterns lit up on the band before sinking into its depths. Zac looked on with wonder, feeling that Null was changing on a fundamental

level to accommodate his path. A few seconds later, the process was over, and the radiant blueprint hovering in the air disappeared.

If only the Core Formation process would be that simple as well.

"How interesting. No wonder the System is keeping such a close watch on you. But I see that your understanding of the Void is not your own. It carries the shadow of the Left Imperial Palace and the inheritance it governs."

"That's..."

"Don't worry. The Perennial Vastness has no intentions to involve itself with the ascent of the fifth Pillar, nor the conflict it represents. We neither have the qualifications nor the desire to decide the direction of the Era," the troll grinned. "We all have our own pursuits."

"Then, the answer?" Zac ventured. "What's the ancient conflict? How does it relate to Ul... that place?"

"Why does an Era end?" Engo countered.

"That's-" Zac hesitated, stumped by the sudden shift in subject.

The question itself was interesting. The Dao was eternal, and the Heavens released and took back energy in an endless cycle. Why couldn't it keep going forever? Was the universe leaking energy or something? Zac eventually shook his head, indicating he didn't know.

"Suffice to say, the Heavens are eternal, but they aren't static. Those at the peak can influence the Dao, and the Heavens also change on their own. An Era has a period of rapid growth as it recovers from the death of the previous one. Then follows a much-longer era of stability as the Heavens move toward their peak. We're in that stage now.

"Far in the future, the universe will reach its Zenith. But the Heavens will not stop changing at that point, nor will cultivators stop imposing their wills onto the fabric of reality. This will lead to the Heavens drifting apart and the Dao growing more discordant. Eventually, the Multiverse cannot function and gets ripped apart as the Dao collapses.

"Some believe this natural cycle of growth and decay is yet another limit meant to be broken. Cultivation is to go against fate so why not break open the Heavens and see what's beyond? Only that way can our potential be truly unlocked. Only that way can the path of cultivation move toward true Eternity. The Heavens is the final gatekeeper to that ancient goal. The thrones represent the will of the greatest Emperors, those who have levied their swords at the Terminus."

Zac shuddered, remembering the boundless anger of the Statuette in the temple of Ultom. Or Eoz memories of the forebearers who had left their gifts in the Abyss. Were they part of this group? Holding the belief that the Heavens was a prison, wanting to break the limits of what was possible. Was that the sorrow of reaching the peak? Did they still feel incomplete, that their path had yet not ended, but the Heavens were blocking the way?

"Others believe that doing something like that will destroy the road of cultivation. If there is an Eternity, it can only be found by perfecting the Heavens and fusing with them rather than destroying the Dao.

The Zenith of an Era is the key. If they can seal the Heavens at that moment by taking control of it, they have a chance at Eternity."

"Boundless Path and Heaven's Path," Zac muttered.

"You could look at it that way, but things are seldom so black and white," Engo laughed. "This is a gross simplification of the conflict. In reality, there are as many beliefs and paths as there are cultivators. A Throne may not necessarily want to destroy the Heavens, and a Seal may not necessarily aim to perfect the Heavens. Most simply desire the power those titles represent or see them as the key to reaching the next stage of existence."

"Don't bother asking me about who these people are," Engo quickly added, shutting down Zac's next line of question. "You've seen how a few words can have enormous effects."

"Why Nine Seals and Eight Thrones?"

"That, I don't know," Engo shrugged. "For some reason, that's how the Heavens are arranged. Eight Pillars lift the Heavens, and Nine Seals keep it all in check. If not for those at the top of the food chain having seized corners of the Dao, then each Peak Dao would have represented either a Seal or a Throne. This is how it's been for some Eras. Perhaps the inherent nature of Heaven leans toward preservation rather than destruction?"

Zac frowned as he looked at the pillars around him, remembering the conflict Perala Janodrok mentioned. The conflict over the direction of the Era. It was definitely related to this struggle. Some factions wanted to seize Ultom and use it to break open the Heavens, while others wanted to try to become the Heavens and seal the Dao to prevent it from drifting apart.

And how was this related to the System and Heaven's path? Was there more to the System than the official story, that it was a training device for the war of the Limitless Empire? Was this why the System so desperately wanted his Motes of Chaos? Was its goal to perfect its understanding of the Dao before the Heavens reached the Zenith?

"No need to look so troubled," Engo said. "This matter is ultimately something for those at the top. Just know that the ascent of the next Pillar will attract people from both sides of the conflict, along with neutral parties just looking for power. And with these kinds of stakes, the battle will be beyond brutal."

"Which parties are on which sides?" Zac asked.

"That, you'll have to figure out on your own," Engo snorted as he looked to the sky. "Master seems to feel I've been talking too much already. Well, this was an interesting encounter, so I'll bend the rules a little more. You should check out the Quarry before you start working on your core."

There were more things Zac wanted to ask, such as the details about Ultom. But Zac knew this was it, so he bowed in thanks.

"Thank you for your guidance."

The troll nodded and was gone a moment later, like it had never been there.

"Lucky guy," Null said. "But I guess it makes sense. Your core is super weird. It would be odd if neither the boss nor his disciples showed any interest in your idea."

"So they were just acting cool and collected?" Zac smiled.

"I mean, it's still just a Cosmic Core," Null giggled. "Lord Engo is millions of years old and only cares about completing his Pillar and ascending. Would he lose his composure over the clever idea of a brat? Perhaps he pitied you because you also walk a pure path toward a broken peak?"

"Whatever," Zac snorted. "What's the Quarry?"

"Remember what I said about Mana and the many realms?" Null said. "Well, the Quarry is one of them. It's actually one of the lower-tier zones, though, and all guests can visit for free for a week. After that, it's 10 Mana a day."

"And that is little?" Zac asked. "How much do I to start off with?"

"Look at your Status Screen."

Zac opened it, and everything looked the same except for one part. A new line had been added below his Nexus Coins.

[Mana: 2,500]

"Just so you know, the starting Mana ranges between 500 and 2,500 depending on your core," Null added. "So full marks for you. Of course, that doesn't mean your core is perfect or anything. It just means it reaches the level for the highest payout. Roughly five percent of all guests do."

Zac nodded in satisfaction, though he wasn't too surprised. If he couldn't reach the top 5% of the guests after hundreds of lake-empowered epiphanies and using the full opportunity of a Seal of the Left Imperial Palace, he might as well give up on cultivation.

"So what's with this Mana?" Zac asked. "I can't sense it at all."

"It's the fundamental currency in the Perennial Vastness. There are many subordinate treasure realms you can visit to prepare the materials for your breakthroughs or search for enlightenment. Visiting those places costs Mana."

"So, kind of like contribution points?" Zac nodded.

It sounded a lot like his time in the Orom World, where he accumulated contribution points by improving his cultivation. The points, in turn, could be used to get more resources, keeping the process going.

"It's similar, but Mana is more than that. Mana is akin to providence in the Perennial Vastness. The more Mana you wield, the greater your impact on your surroundings will be. The world will be molded in your image."

"My image?" Zac said, but he immediately understood what Null meant, and his gaze turned to the pedestal.

"Exactly. As you gather Mana, the environment will get more and more suited for your breakthrough. Eventually, the world itself will assist you in the process. You might be a mortal with no Affinities, but

you can still rouse the Heavens to assist you here. It's part of what makes the Perennial Vastness unique."

A smile spread across Zac's face. The difficulty of forming his core had weighed on his shoulders over the past years. Even if he had figured out the blueprint, it was so incredibly complex that he hadn't been certain it was possible to form as a Mortal. But if the world itself could help him out, the pressure suddenly decreased a lot.

Mana was the key, and anyone who got in his way would have to watch their back.