

The Fall 962

Chapter 962: Once More Into the Depths

Originally, Zac had planned on using the [Essence of the Abyss] much later, some time after using the Temporal Chamber. Now, he didn't have that luxury. He wasn't ready to seal himself off for three years, and the elixir would start losing its efficacy soon. So Zac would have to activate his Draugr heritage immediately, which was why he had asked Iz for Life-Attuned treasures rather than something else.

Any item Iz would send over would undoubtedly be absurdly powerful, far surpassing what Calrin might get his hands on. And with his cultivation of [Void Vajra Sublimation] being faster than he'd expected, he felt it was safe enough to drink the [Essence of the Abyss] early without risking the balance between Life and Death.

When Zac returned to his cave, he transformed into his Draugr form. A smile spread across his face since he still felt the sense of vibrancy in his cells even if there were no golden flakes to be seen. In other words, the intangible benefits of his new Constitution were still there. Not only that, but a quick calculation confirmed that he retained the bonus attributes, even if the line in the Status screen was gone.

This was exactly what he'd hoped to see. Until now, Zac had been worried that his mother's clan had planned on using his second half as a "feeder class" that would pour a bunch of benefits into his outwardly normal Human form. Thankfully, it looked like the benefits were bidirectional, creating a huge advantage for both sides.

Hopefully, this meant he could fully stack the benefits of two Constitutions just like he gained the benefits of his Branch of the Pale Seal in his human form without really using it. And judging by what Catheya told him about Eoz, it seemed like his Bloodline Constitution would match his Dao.

The only regret was that he was becoming more and more lopsided. His survivability was pretty shocking as it were, and it would only get more absurd when tacking on his Constitutions. Meanwhile, Zac felt his speed slowly fall behind, even if he poured all his free attribute points into Dexterity.

Until now, he had been the bane of speedy cultivators like assassins. But as Iz said, he couldn't underestimate the elites of the Multiverse. His only way to deal with powerful rogues was to trap them and slowly whittle them down with his domains, but he wasn't confident he'd be able to hit them with his attacks.

And if the enemy was fast enough, his Danger Sense wouldn't be enough to save him from a powerful finisher. His body could only move so fast to avoid those kinds of strikes. Zac thought it over for a few minutes before he chose to send Catheya a message. He wanted to ask a few confirming questions about the Constitution of the Eoz Bloodline and whether one could somehow make it provide Dexterity and speed rather than durability.

The response came within a few hours. Just as expected, the Bloodline of Eoz focused on Endurance and Survivability, and it couldn't be just swapped over for something else. Bloodlines were fixed among the Draugr branches. The only difference between the descendants was how pure their bloodlines were and how many pieces of the Bloodline they managed to awaken.

There were no such things as mixed bloodlines among them either. If two people of different branches married, the children would either have the father's Bloodline or the mother's. The difference in bloodline purity and cultivation level could skew the result in either direction, but it was still a bit of a toss-up. Therefore, Draugr generally married within their branch to avoid familial complications.

However, there was good news as well. Draugr was ultimately a top-tier race, and the benefits would become more and more obvious the further you awakened your Bloodline. Even a defensive bloodline like Eoz would provide comprehensive benefits, including strength and speed. Not only that, but Eoz had Hidden Nodes that weren't just defensive.

The exact details had been lost with time, or were at least unavailable to the people in Zecia. But the Monarchs were certain Eoz possessed the means to become temporarily faster. Ultimately, he would have to use the [Essence of the Abyss] and figure out the details himself according to them.

They had already sent a general Bloodline Method, [Abyssal Revolutions], that would help him better control his Draugr Nodes. They had also promised to petition the Abyssal Shores to see if any of the original Eoz manuals remained. Unfortunately, they had already indicated those things might not be possible to send to Zecia in the short run.

Zac guessed that was just another way for them to bind him to their chariot. Perhaps they'd take them out in a few years in return for him providing some sort of additional help. At least, Zac hoped that was the plan. It was hard to figure out all the ways these people could be scheming against him. Zac wryly smiled as he put away the communication crystal with Catheya's recording. He wondered what she would think if she knew the top-tier treasure she so proudly had displayed for him was laced with a Life-erasing seal.

Not that it mattered. It was just like Iz said; he wasn't convinced that something like that curse would work in the face of his Technocrat Duplicity Seal. In a sense, Zac felt his body was a lot like Iz's toys. It was almost like his Duplicity Core had created two separate bodies superimposed on each other, and these bodies were then connected by [Quantum Gate]. If he swallowed the [Essence of the Abyss] in his Draugr form, there wouldn't be any Life to latch on to unless it somehow managed to pass through the mysterious tunnel in his chest.

It wasn't quite how it worked, but Zac knew it wasn't so simple as his Duplicity Core holding a bunch of Miasma and a spare set of pathways. It wasn't like his pathways emerged from the core itself when he swapped races. It was more like his human side sunk to the depths while his Draugr side rose to the surface. The bodies were one, yet separate.

Zac shook his head as he took out the small vial. The mysteries of his body was something he'd have to slowly excavate and investigate over the coming years. For now, Zac just wanted to see what his Bloodline had in store for him, so he decisively drank the tar-like concoction in the vial.

Immediately, any errant thoughts were washed away. Zac felt his vision close in, like a darkness crept closer. It felt like death but also like a warm embrace. Zac didn't try to fight it, as he recognized the feeling. It was just like what he'd experienced during his first Draugr vision. It was the embrace of the Abyssal Lake.

Soon, his surroundings were gone, replaced by endless darkness.

It was joy and sorrow entwined.

Returning into the depths was to come home, in a way the buildings above could never match. The buffeting streams of the Abyss were the caress of a parent, welcoming and familiar. At the same time, it was different. Back then, before time, before thought, they had been one. But since he woke up, there was an unbridgeable gap between them.

Was that why it had resisted his will all those years ago? Because it knew it was hard to take back an arrow that had left the string?

Eoz occasionally wondered if it had been a mistake for them to wake up. They had been safe, content. And while the boundless sky outside was marvelous beyond compare, it was also dangerous. Mez had seen it in the stars; a great darkness was coming to the cosmos, and they had little time to prepare.

The others looked to them for leadership, but Eoz didn't have the answers. He couldn't see the will of the Heavens like his elder sister, nor could he call on the Abyss like Azol. So he would become a shield for the children of Draug, the Vanguard that would lead them through the coming calamity.

But he wasn't ready.

He had seen it with his own eyes; not even his eldest brother had traveled as far as he. If what Mez said was true, that they soon would lose the protection of the Abyss, there were not many places for them to go. They were created in the image of the Abyss, but most of the cosmos was not. So Eoz had come back, to beseech Abyss for the strength needed to carry out his task.

Deeper and deeper he went, far past the Pools of Rebirth and the Temples of Eschatology. The blessings inside were not enough. The Thirteen Fates, the Seven Grottos. Even the Sea of Unknowing passed by as Eoz pushed further than the children had ever gone. Toward where the true power of the Abyss hid.

Part of him wanted to bring with him the sacred spaces of the Abyss, but Eoz knew he could not. They were a gift of the Abyss, or perhaps from those who came before. Before time, before the Heavens. Those who they had only found whispers of in the deepest sanctums, who had pressed against the edges of reality and chosen War. It was not their place to take them – the Abyss had made it clear.

Eoz still hadn't reached his destination, yet the weight of the universe was already bearing down on him. Existing was a struggle; moving was a to push the boundaries of what his body could withstand. If not for his body's endurance, he would have succumbed already, but it was not enough.

Will became strength, determination became speed. He pushed against fate and his limitations as he followed the path in his memory. He was getting closer to the beckoning call he'd felt upon first awakening. A call similar to the other unexplored mysteries of the depths, but one uniquely tuned to him.

He could only pray that it would still accept him. Eoz's muscles tore, and his soul cracked, but he kept going. His faith and his purpose shattered the fetters that chained him down and allowed him to push back against what had given him life. And just barely, it was enough to carry him to the journey's end.

The obelisk towered in the dark.

The Abyss hummed, and a wave of terrifying disassociation hit him. For a moment, he was unsure who he was as he gazed upon the ancient pattern on the pillar in front of him. Was this real, or was it a dream? Was that short and confusing life an illusion or a warning? Was he Eoz, or was he Zac?

The world shuddered and twisted, and Eoz shook his head as he looked at the swirling maelstrom in the distance. There had to be a sanctuary within, judging by the streams of Death in the confusing mesh of energies. But the taboo power expelled from its core was strange and terrifying, and he was so tired.

Twenty thousand years had passed since he'd left the last sanctuary, and he could feel how the weight of the Heavens was wearing him thin. Entering this anomaly to scout and stabilize it would carry a real risk. But what choice did he have? If he was suffering, the fates of the children were far worse, and both Azol and Mez were needed to sustain their people.

Once more into the depths.

Zac slowly woke up, but he didn't move an inch. There were a lot of impressions to digest from the vision, but he was reluctant to give up the feeling of warmth and security that the [Essence of the Abyss] provided. More importantly, there was a huge amount of energy from the elixir remaining, and it was all burrowing into a hidden spot by his navel, just over his Specialty Core.

This sensation wasn't anything new; a Hidden Node was being cracked open.

Unfortunately, not even half a day was enough, and the energy from the elixir was finally waning. Meanwhile, the node seemed unwilling to pass the threshold and awaken. Had Iz's investigation damaged the treasure more than she'd realized? There was no time to cry over spilled milk; Zac had to figure out how to turn the tides.

A quick test confirmed Miasma Crystals and random Death-attuned treasures didn't cut it. They entered his body, but they barely seemed to affect the node. There was something about the energy of the [Essence of the Abyss] that made it far more efficient than normal Death-attuned items. It was based on something deeper, more profound, than the items Zac had sourced in the Zervereth sector.

The situation was worsening by the minute, and Zac could even feel the Hidden Node slowly recede. The window of opportunity was closing, but Zac suddenly had an idea. He swallowed a few normal Node-breaking Pills to buy some time as he flashed over to the inner sanctum of his Death-attuned cave. Right in the center, a black pedestal held a small black sphere.

It was the [Seed of Undeath] he'd taken from the Undead Incursion years ago. It was once the heart of the Realignment Array but had since been turned into a battery for his cave. Because of its inherent nature, it had also strengthened the Miasma Veins beneath the mountain, allowing the transition to be completed far earlier in Port Atwood than elsewhere.

The egg had used up most of its energy before Zac got its hand on it, and it was almost running on empty by now. However, even if just a small amount of Death remained in the tank, it was pure and concentrated. Zac still didn't know exactly how these things were made, but he suspected it had something to do with the Heart of the Empire, the Eternal Heritage the Undead Empire had found.

The Death in these things was so pure and potent without being high-grade, and the only similar thing he'd encountered was Ultom and its light of truth. That would also explain why these things had to be sent over from the Heartlands rather than produced locally by the Kavriel Clan. But no matter how impressive its origins were, it was mostly useless by now.

With Earth already becoming a real Death-attuned world, there was not much purpose to holding onto this thing. So, Zac took it and cracked the sphere open, prompting a huge cloud of Death to erupt in the cave. If any living being had stood in the chamber at this moment, they would probably have been instantly converted to Revenants.

The seed didn't actually contain a deadly gas but a few drops of turquoise liquid that were rapidly vaporizing. Zac hurriedly swallowed the remaining liquid, and a storm of death joined the waning energy of the [Essence of the Abyss]. The energy was extremely chaotic, though, and billowing plumes of Aquamarine clouds poured out of his pores as to join the vapor in the room.

But as much as he lost, there was even more remaining. Zac forcibly took charge of the rampaging currents and slammed it into the half-opened node before it could recede into the depths of his body. It was like a tsunami crashing into a small floodgate, and the result was instantaneous. The node was blasted wide open, along with most of his midsection.

Black ichor poured down on the ground, but Zac didn't care. Mending flesh wounds and some broken pathways was easy; getting another Hidden Node was not. The injury was agonizing, yet Zac couldn't stop himself from eagerly opening his status screen to see what he'd just gained.

Bloodline

[E – Corrupted] Void Emperor

Talent

Force of the Void – 50%, Void Zone

Bloodline Nodes

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

Nodes

[E] Quantum Gate, [E] Adamance of Eoz, [E] Conviction of Eoz, [E] Immutability of Eoz

Zac blankly looked at the screen for a moment, wondering if the pain was making him see double.

There were actually two of them?