

## The Fall 1002

### [Chapter 1002 - Nine to Lead, One to Follow](#)

Zac couldn't help but give the two Soul Strengthening Arrays in his hands a second look. Years of having Zac's Daos channel through their pathways and absorbing the ambient energy had completely transformed them. The previously matte disks now glowed in a deep hue of gold and black, giving off powerful emanations of Life and Death.

Even if he knew what he needed to do, Zac still was a bit worried as he looked down at the arrays. He'd never attempted cycling both halves at once, but he didn't have much choice. Nine to lead, one to follow. The first cycle he began would set the schedule for the third reincarnation, preventing the other side from taking charge. It would only be able to chase the one who came before, fueling its ascension.

Zac took a steadying breath, making sure he didn't have any lingering issues after having fought his way through the mountain. Only upon confirming everything was in order did he begin. Zac's eyes gleamed with madness and determination as he split his focus. Storms of Dao-empowered Mental Energy entered the disks while Zac focused on the outer cores in his mind.

As his central core was drained, the outer cores accelerated, quickening their dance of Life and Death. Minutes passed, and the arrays began glowing as they transformed his energy streams. For a moment, Zac had a strange vision. He had become the Calamity Mountain, holding its satellite stars in his hands. The tunnels were his pathways, and the storm chambers his Soul.

He didn't know if he imagined things, but it almost seemed like the mountain resonated with his thoughts. The Daos stirred, and the vibrations from above increased in frequency. But the feeling only lasted a moment before it was gone, and Zac refocused on his cultivation. He had his hands full just dealing with the cycles.

Channeling both array disks at once wasn't just an issue of multi-tasking. It was a linear leap in difficulty simply because of the energy required to fuel the process. He needed two sets of Mental Energy and two sets of Dao each time. His central core was rapidly being drained to fuel the process. Thankfully, Zac had enough to spare.

He had already absorbed one and a half Moss Crystal, each containing almost unfathomable amounts of Mental Energy. His central core had already passed the limits of the third layer of his method years ago, which was the only reason he dared attempt something like this.

The remaining Moss Crystal in his mind even helped, lessening his burden by providing a third of the energy that went into the refinement circuits. One Soul Crystal after another also appeared in his hands, right atop the two array disks. The powerful pull from the arrays siphoned some of the densely packed energy from within the crystals, lessening his burden further.

Zac spared no expense this time, knowing he was pushing it by channeling both arrays at once. The moment the Soul Crystals atop the disks had been drained of their most easily-accessible energy, he dropped them on the ground and crushed them with the back of his hands. A spiritual cloud was released around him, entering his pores. And from there, it went to his aperture, while two new crystals appeared on the disks.

An hour later, the currents of empowered Mental Energy came crashing back through his hands. Normally, it would appear like a healing rain. The cores that needed to be built had long since been built, and his central core was already at capacity. The only place the empowered Mental Energy could go was into the Outer Cores, filling them with powerful but unstable force.

Today, the effect was a bit different. One side didn't take charge, gaining power while suppressing the other. Instead, an arms race began Soul Aperture. The outer cores madly dashed to absorb the incoming energy, seemingly trying to get one over on their opponent. The life-attuned cores were especially aggressive, perhaps encouraged by the Pure Life naturally coursing through his body.

The golden spheres even tried to destroy some of their opponent's energy, but Zac fiercely suppressed those actions. Ideally, he'd spend half the time of each cycle in each form to balance the two sides, but the Duplicity Core didn't work like that. Ultimately, he'd settled on performing the whole thing in his human form.

It wasn't a matter of his sides being weaker or stronger. The reason was simply that Miasma didn't have as profound an effect on his human form as Divine Energy had on his Draugr self. Zac knew he'd have to rely on Natural Treasures of both attunements to pass through the gauntlet, which was best done in his human form.

Sometimes, it felt like the cores in his aperture were separate entities to him, flying about of their own volition as they communed with the Dao. Ultimately, they were part of him, and Zac wouldn't let them act as they wanted today. With destruction being banned in his aperture, Life and Death could only compete by gathering energy.

And since each side was provided an equal amount of energy, the two armies were locked in an even struggle. Even his Dao Avatar of Branch of the War Axe joined in on the fun. It started flitting about through his aperture, sometimes swinging a black axe according to the Inexorable Stance. Other times it floated on a golden core, his axe teeming with life and boundless possibility.

It was Zac's way of ensuring the two sides were kept equal while simultaneously steering the process toward his intended cores. If one side seemed to get the advantage and rock the fragile balance in his Soul Aperture, then Conflict would help push them back down.

One circuit after another was completed this way, each one boosted by his Middle Stage Dao Branches. By the fifth revolution, Zac started to feel the strain. Even with Soul- and Moss Crystal helping out, he faced an uphill battle. He needed bigger guns. An iridescent pearl appeared on his hand, and Zac's mouth shot forward to gobble it up.

It was a Natural Treasure, normally meant to hold as you cultivated the Soul. Today, it became fodder as Zac staunchly crushed the pearl into dust before swallowing it. It had been a gift from the Undead Empire, a rare item from some hidden realm of the Eidolon. Getting one's hand on such an item wasn't even possible on the frontier, yet this cultivation treasure was reduced to fodder for his breakthrough.

Zac's body was immediately agitated, and it started to absorb the Mental Energy from the surroundings and the Moss Crystal much faster. A refreshing wave entered his central core, allowing him to keep going.

The outer spheres in his Soul Aperture soon turned into small suns, mirroring those floating about in the Calamity. The previous sensation that he'd become one with the mountain returned far stronger, and Zac could tell it wasn't just an illusion. Had the mountain formed a spirit that resonated with his breakthrough? Zac had no idea whether that was good or bad, but he couldn't do much about it.

He had already jumped onto the tiger's back and needed to ride this storm to the end.

Another cycle was completed with the aid of the pearl and dozens of Soul Crystals. Zac was buried to his knees in Soul Crystal shards, but he didn't care. They still released some lingering Mental Energy, and Zac took any help he could get.

The outer cores started vibrating ominously after the energy of the sixth cycle returned. They moved far faster than normal, waging an invisible war by following their heavenly trajectories. The patterns released an invisible pressure, making his whole Soul Aperture groan. Six revolutions were usually the point Zac where stopped channeling his Dao when practicing the [Nine Reincarnations Manual]. But not today.

Zac initiated the seventh cycle, at which point the array disks actually broke free from his grasp and started rotating around his torso. Their movements mirrored the outer cores in his mind, following the heavenly trajectories of Life and Death. They generated a mysterious resonance in the cave that took control over the ambient Dao.

The previously wild energies in the cave were attracted, and Zac was happy to see some of the attuned clouds enter the hovering disks. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough. Zac could tell he wouldn't be able to finish the hour-long circuit without further assistance. The Kalpataru Tree in his aperture had started withering. Similarly, the oppressive aura of the Pale Seal was weakening, the whole thing fading into a turbid grey.

His Soul was drained beyond what it could sustain, and the truths of his path were drying up. All the while, the outer cores grew increasingly difficult to control. Zac's body was in perfect condition, yet he felt like a dried-out corpse. Despite that, Zac felt incredibly alive. There was a sense of victory and accomplishment from simply walking down a path you created of your own volition.

He was no longer dancing to the tune of others. He was creating a new future with his own hands. Of course, that feeling of freedom did little to help with his lacking resources. Around the halfway mark of the seventh cycle, Zac reached his limit. He'd hoped to finish the whole circuit before reaching this point, but simultaneously using both arrays had been more draining than he'd expected.

At least his performance was up to par with his previous breakthroughs, even when the difficulty was more than twice as great when doing both cycles at once. Besides, the pearl was not the only thing he'd prepared. A torrent of pure, unblemished Dao poured out from the central core as the floodgates of [Spiritual Void] opened wide. The currents passed by the waning Dao Apparitions, nourishing their source before entering the Array Disk.

Zac had already confirmed that his Void Self of the heart had allowed him to control the Hidden Nodes in his body freely. Finally. He could turn them on and off at will, preventing them from competing for resources. Of course, there were few situations where he didn't want his three Void Nodes to passively keep running, but his elevated state also helped with his control.

For example, he could tell the [Void Heart] which energies to eat and which to leave behind, including energies that weren't even harmful to him. Similarly, he could tell [Purity of the Void] what to focus its purification on, another ability that would have saved him a lot of headaches over the past years.

And he could sense how much Dao the perpetually hungry node in his mind could hold. It was no longer just a voracious enigma but three separate containers—one for each of his Daos. There wasn't actually more than 10% of his total stores for each of his Daos, but it was incredibly dense and pure. Ultimately, the true use of [Spiritual Void] was to temporarily bolster his Daos by almost a full stage rather than acting as a Dao Battery.

The Hidden Node gave Zac a much-needed break to recover some of what he'd lost. When the refined energy returned half an hour later, he could better guide them into the rampaging outer cores. The whole aperture was shuddering by this point, but Zac just started the next cycle.

Halfway through the eighth, the stores of [Spiritual Void] started to run out, and Zac had no choice but to continue onto treasures. One item after another was either placed against his forehead or chewed and swallowed, each something that would create waves in the Zecia sector. Not even his body could properly utilize all the amazing items when wasted this way, but he didn't have much of an option. He needed a lot of energy and quick.

The discordant pile of treasures left him with a new set of toxins just days after purifying all the filth from his body, but they allowed him to narrowly squeak by the eighth cycle. At that moment, the outer cores essentially broke free from his control, aggravating their struggle even further. His aperture was filled with almost unbelievable levels of energy, to the point even the sealed remnants stirred.

Meanwhile, the cave was drowning in light by the two array disks, and energy was dragged from the tunnels above into the cave, forming radiant and nebulous clouds around him. Zac could tell the arrays were barely holding on. Still, the disks were made by one of the most talented Array Masters in Twilight Harbor, using the sturdiest materials available.

Hopefully, they'd survive the final push.

The ninth cycle was the final and the utmost, returning toward the one. It was the last opportunity to infuse the much-needed extra boost to make the impossible possible, and Zac began rousing the two slumbering energies within his body.

Zac had made sure to retain ample reserves of Creation Energy in his body and Oblivion Energy in his Soul upon entering the Perennial Vastness. You never knew when you needed an ace, whether it was to protect your life or break through. Luckily, nothing too dangerous had happened since arriving, which allowed him to use the energy for their intended purpose.

Meanwhile, Zac took out a small vial, the very one he'd gotten from Iz, containing the [Wreathstar Nectar]. Five drops remained after taking one after breaking through the [Void Varja Sublimation]. This time, Zac swallowed the drop before the real hurdle had even arrived.

It wasn't that he was so certain he'd succeed that he took the drop in advance. Rather, he needed to rely on its mysterious properties to tide him over for the whole cycle. A fresh wind swept through his body, and dozens of streams of energy seemingly sprouted out of nowhere before they came crashing toward Zac's Soul Aperture.

The streams entered almost completely dimmed central core and the withered Soul Apertures who had been drafted beyond their limits. The center of his Soul flickered to life, and his exhaustion was temporarily swept aside. The withered tree bloomed, once again spreading its divinity across his aperture. Similarly, the Iron Maiden released a deep hum, seemingly coming from the depths of the underworld.

It wasn't the nectar that powered his Soul. It was the latent energy from all the treasures he'd just swallowed. He had only managed to use a small amount of their energy before, while the rest started to dissipate. The true purpose of the [Wreathstar Nectar] was to put your body in a hungry state after a breakthrough, letting you absorb huge amounts of energy to stabilize your foundations.

In Zac's case, he used the nectar to let his exhausted Soul pull one last batch of energy from the treasures before it was too late. Even the swirling clouds of Life and Death around him were dragged into his pores and channeled into his Soul Aperture. There, they were reforged through the filter of his Soul Apertures before being pushed toward the array disks that were now moving so fast around him they'd formed two bands.

Zac also infused his Creation and Oblivion Energy into these streams, elevating it even further. It entered the Array Disk, which immediately started to crackle ominously. Just as he was approaching the zenith of his method, so were the disks reaching the limits of their endurance. Furthermore, infusing Creation and Oblivion had a mysterious effect on their trajectories, and in turn, the whole cave.

Initially, the odd ripple effect only really affected Zac's sealed cave. But as the ninth cycle approached its end, the ripples spread outward, seemingly completely unbothered by the isolating rocks. It was hard to tell where he ended, and the mountain began, and he felt like his tendrils stretched for tens of thousands of meters in every direction. His path was made law in the area, and he was becoming the heart of the mountain.

And when the heart beat to another tune than the rest of the body, some odd changes were bound to occur. If he looked outside the Calamity Mountain right now, would the locked rotations of the attuned stars have changed their trajectories?

All stray thoughts were pushed aside as the final cycle came crashing back. As with previous breakthroughs, the beleaguered Array Disks exploded when they finished their task. Two huge swirls appeared to his sides, one golden and one black. The ambient energies were finally starting to be dragged into the vortices in earnest, but Zac barely noticed it. His mind was fully turned inward already.

Normally, Zac would have almost lost his mind by the billowing wave of Divinity and Death that raged through his Soul Aperture. Yet, thanks to his elevated Heart, he felt his mind as clear as ever. His Void Self even helped him momentarily keep the rampaging energies in check, allowing him to proceed with the plan.

The original method called for using the incredible force and accumulated pressure built up over two cycles to finally shatter the central core. From there, you'd shatter one outer core after another of the attunement you picked, infusing its essence into the cloud. Finally, you'd detonate the nine leftover cores simultaneously. That would unleash a tremendous shockwave that forced the mixed dust together and left you with an attuned core and a nebula of its opposing element spiraling around it.

The Soul would essentially be a galactic core, and you built a galaxy of small attuned systems. The number of stars needed for the fourth reincarnation wasn't set. It depended on your Dao and your path. The loftier your goals and the greater your comprehension, the more stars you could birth in your galaxy.

The problem was, Zac had completely turned the method on its head. The first cycle was supposed to set the stage. The empowered side would imprint its Dao onto the central core, creating the fault lines that would prompt it to crack later. But the outer cores had been busy fighting each other during his dual cycle.

Meanwhile, his central core was far sturdier than normal thanks to the Moss Crystal's continuous impartment. As things stood, his Soul Aperture was liable to crack before the central core would. He had to bring in a hammer to smash the thing himself.

Time was of the essence. Cracks were already appearing in the far edges of his aperture, proving it was not just one endless space. This was one of the riskier parts of the plan, but Zac hadn't found any better options. His Void Self found it harder and harder to maintain clear thoughts, but he forcibly gathered his will and snatched up a large amount of energy from both elements.

Zac pushed the opposing sides together before infusing a hefty amount of conflict to act as an accelerant. He had essentially built a makeshift bomb in his head, capable of an eruption like the ones outside in the Calamity. However, the bomb didn't fly toward the central core. It swerved, passing through a hidden gate, appearing in the secret sub-dimension where the remnants rested.

The bomb went off, a rune shattered, and madness poured forth.