

The Fall 1057

Chapter 1,057 - Toll of Hegemony

Zac released a breath he hadn't realized he held. Forming a nucleus obviously wasn't the same as forming a core, but it was the step that had worried him the most. If any of his theories or deductions were incorrect, the whole project would be doomed to fail. And there was so much that could have gone wrong, from how the Duplicity Core's Quantum States worked to how his Void Energy would interact with the materials.

Conversely, forming a stable nucleus proved that his Blueprint worked in practice. The subsequent steps would build upon the foundation he'd erected, following the same logic and methodology. That didn't mean the process would be easy or that he could relax, but he had undeniably passed the first major hurdle.

Zac grabbed one of the Void Cores to extract its energy as he turned to the materials on the refinement arrays. A storm of chaotic energy entered his body, but it was all dragged into his heart before it could cause damage or create a mess. Infusing the cloud had drained him of most of his Void Energy, and he needed to recover some while he worked on the refinement arrays.

Looking at the three items on their respective glowing array, Zac guessed they'd be ready in around an hour. Zac observed the golden metallic root atop the life-attuned platform for a few seconds before shaking his head. He grabbed the half-refined treasure and crushed it, swallowing some while letting the released toxic waves of Life enter through his pores and irradiate his body.

It was a Life-attuned treasure at the top of Peak Quality, but the timing meant it couldn't be used for his core. Rather than wasting energy refining it into something unusable, he might as well use the treasure. Waves of nausea hit him, but the feeling lessened as Zac dragged the immense energies into his soul and the cracks left by the splinter.

He still had a complicated relationship with Life in his Draugr form, but it wasn't quite considered poisonous any longer. The infusion of Life ground against the stubborn slivers of oblivion hidden in the scars, exhausting and erasing them piece by piece. A similar scene played out inside his Soul Aperture, where the energies nurtured and healed the Life-attuned Soul Core.

Twenty minutes passed until the energy was expended, at which point Zac repeated the process with the Death-attuned treasure on the refinement array. The remaining active array didn't need much input from him, so he figured he might as well eat some treasures to fix his body. Doing so would leave behind some impurities, but so what? A tribulation was just around the corner.

After removing the old one, Zac engraved another Death-attuned treasure with a refinement pattern. The one he just used up would be refined too early. Besides, all the Life-Death treasures he'd prepared were matched up in pairs to ensure every layer would be balanced. Since the Life-attuned treasure had been discarded, the Death-attuned needed to go too. The choice of treasures holding the Dao of Conflict wasn't as stringent, so the remaining metal would become the first piece of the core's next layer.

Most cultivators would probably curse Zac for using such precious treasures like they were simple Healing Pills, but he had gathered way more than he needed during his years of collecting Mana. Losing a couple of sets wasn't a big deal, and he felt a lot better by the time the Death-attuned treasure had

been absorbed. Part of it was thanks to his soul being in a better state, and one part was simply relaxing from the pent-up stress. The refinement of the war-attuned treasure was about to finish, so Zac prepared himself.

The refinement arrays followed the same principles as the Nucleus Arrays. But while the latter were customized one-time arrays, the former was a generalized repeatable variant. In return, it took the arrays much longer to finish the process. That wasn't much of a problem as long as you understood the refinement process well.

Another twenty minutes later, a spiritual nudge confirmed the piece was done. It didn't pass through some mysterious spatial dimension, so Zac pulled it over with telekinesis. The array on his stomach had already collapsed, so Zac placed the refined metal onto a sub-array next to him.

The material flickered and suddenly felt illusory. That meant it was ready, and Zac pushed it into his side, avoiding the broken tattoo just in case. The piece of metal slowly passed through his body like a ghost until it reached the outer shell formed by the main Core Formation Array. At that time, it turned corporeal again, and it entered.

The new piece of Conflict was like a small moon pulled over by the gravity of a far greater planet. In fact, the nucleus' pull was so strong that the new treasure would've crashed into its surface like a meteor if not for Zac restraining it with everything he got. Even then, Zac barely managed to hold the material back while spinning the nucleus to the correct location, at which point he let the blob of Conflict-attuned steel land.

The pressure would slowly merge the materials even if Zac did nothing at that point. Of course, such a creation would only barely follow the patterns of his Blueprint thanks to the ambient energies. To avoid such a crude result, Zac went to work like before, using the mental tendrils to reforge and reform the piece of Conflict. Two hours passed until something similar to a silvery spiderweb had been evenly applied to the nucleus.

The process had been quite smooth compared to forming the nucleus, apart from a few eruptions and the general drain of Mental Energy. Only adding one material at a time increased the duration of the process and the overall strain on his mind. In return, the risk of mistakes occurring was far lower, and Zac felt that was more important than saving time.

Looking at the black piece of rock atop the refinement array, Zac added the matching Life-attuned treasure. Not much later, the Death-attuned treasure was about to finish its refinement. Seeing it was time, Zac took out a vial and swallowed a shimmering pill that contained immense waves of unattuned energy and heat. It almost looked like a white sun had erupted in his chest, and he dragged the ball of energy into the hatch.

The pill needed no guidance from that point, and it smoothly entered the core. In return, the waning lights of the nucleus rekindled, regaining some of the luster it lost while waiting for [Void Heart] to finish. The pill was called [Rising Sun Return], a hot commodity inside Vastness City. The Perennial Vastness didn't provide it, but a powerful alchemy clan in the Multiverse Heartlands.

Its effect was simple: returning some of its malleability to a budding core. Sometimes, delays or mistakes make you fall behind schedule, which could quickly lead to a negative spiral of accumulating mistakes.

The [Rising Sun Return] was like a second lifeline, where you'd get the opportunity to fix the problem or catch up. One could only eat three such pills during Core Formation, and its effect would be halved after every use. Yet Zac felt it warranted after the earlier delay.

With his nucleus once more resembling a magmatic ball, Zac dragged over the next treasure for refinement. Soon, another item entered the nucleus, adding the next layer. Zac could feel the addition of more Death-attuned material affected the stability of the core, but the thin outer layer wasn't enough to push the nucleus off-balance. It just resulted in a few more discharges of energy.

After Death had joined War, Zac swapped to his human form to add the matching Life. With all three materials in balance, the core quickly calmed down. Even better, just as Zac was about to infuse Void into the Quantum Death, he realized he didn't need to. The dense amounts of Void had already spread into the newly added section. He would eventually have to add more to avoid the Void getting diluted, but Zac continued with the next layer for now.

With the initial hump passed, Zac entered the longest stage of the core formation. He formed a stable cycle, adding one element after another while swapping between Draugr and Human. Layers of Conflict, Death, and Life were tacked onto the nucleus, which slowly grew into a proper core. All the while, Zac supplied Void Energy through his [Void Heart] to fill the gaps with Void of Dao. Interestingly, the vast Dao Tapestry was absorbed into his core with every layer added, providing extra strength and stability. With every layer added within, the spiderweb shrunk a bit.

Zac almost felt like he was gestating life inside the [Hollow Core], and he was filled with anticipation as the weeks turned to months. During that time, he encountered only a few snags. A few materials destabilized before they could be used, and others didn't react as he'd expected when forming his plan. These things weren't a big deal, but the constant explosions were a real headache.

His Quantum Core would hold more than ten times the energy compared to most cultivators while being a mortal. The energy and treasures required to build such a thing was enough to blow Mount Illumination to kingdom come. Zac knew that when the 1-month mark had passed, there was no chance he'd survive the core collapsing. He would never become a Half-step Cultivator—it was success or death.

The threat of death wasn't enough to make Zac hesitate or back down, but the eruptions only worsened. The Core Refinement array could only take you so far when trying to contain such vast amounts of energy. Even his [Hollow Core] was starting to show cracks. Zac doubted its creator could ever have dreamed his invention would get beat up so badly.

The Core Formation barrier could be moved inside the Duplicity Core if the protective shell cracked, but it wouldn't block out the damage nearly as well. In other words, the energies would crash into the Duplicity Core, and Zac had no idea if it was designed to withstand these kinds of eruptions. After all, his Core Formation process was undoubtedly designed to be controlled by Jeeves, who'd manage the process with inhuman precision.

Two months in, Zac was forced to swallow his second [Rising Sun Return]. It wasn't to catch up but rather to turn the inner regions of the core malleable again. Two months of explosions had damaged the internal wiring to the point that it couldn't be ignored anymore. At the same time, Zac had no choice but to start relying on outside help.

One pill, talisman, and consumable treasure after another was used over the following days, each a powerful but costly method to absorb damage or calm down the core. The large amount of toxins was manageable, but each lifeline added some extra heterogeneity to his core. Even then, the [Hollow Core] finally cracked around the three-month mark from an earthshattering explosion that almost knocked Zac unconscious.

Zac held on to his fraying consciousness, clumsily trying to contain the damage while swallowing the third and final [Rising Sun Return] to repair a huge crack that had reached all the way to the nucleus. Months had passed with no rest, and he'd been constantly forced to maintain full focus. His soul was like a parched desert, but his red eyes gleamed with madness and excitement as a rumble shook the sky. The [Hollow Core] had lasted much longer than Zac expected, and the Dao Tapestry was almost fully absorbed.

A few dark clouds had appeared in the sky over the past days, and a weak aura of punishment filled the mountain range. The Heavens hadn't descended in earnest just yet, but Zac's Cosmic Core was already nearing completion. Things had more or less gone according to plan, except the process had been much rougher than he'd expected.

Yet the result was good. A few layers were still missing, but Zac could barely believe how close to his goals the core had come. Certainly, the large number of explosions had left enough imperfections to make a High-quality Cosmic Core an impossibility, but it was certainly enough for Middle-quality. It wasn't even a matter of barely pushing past the goalpost; he was well within the acceptable range.

Another three days passed, and Zac's hands shook as he moved the refined piece of Life-attuned Natural Treasure onto the main array. His soul was already too tired for telekinesis, but he roused himself as he added tacked on the layer that perfectly entered the grooves on the core's surface. The region was drenched in darkness already, apart from the flickering purple of the barely contained bolts of lightning above. The sky roared, yet Zac didn't even dare look up, afraid that giving the boundless fury attention would unleash the storm.

There was something odd about the tribulation lightning this time. Technically, the tribulation for forming a boundless Cosmic Core was the same as forming Dao Branches. Cultivation was stealing providence from the Heavens, and the severity of these two crimes was considered at the same level. However, the amassed energy far surpassed what he'd endured inside the Orom World. Something about his core had angered the Heavens even more than normal.

At the same time, it didn't seem very focused. The lightning was spread out across the horizon rather than gathered above him. It almost seemed like the Heavens had trouble pinpointing his exact location, making it even angrier. Zac presumed it was a feature of the Duplicity Core rather than the Perennial Vastness, adding the Technocrat's trademark ability to hide from the Heavens.

This time, Zac didn't mind his mother's meddling. He'd planned to slow down his progress when he reached this point, to recover before facing the tribulation. But with the process being so volatile, Zac had been forced to keep a breakneck pace to the end. Even now, there was no chance to rest.

One side of the core was complete, while the other was not. Zac could already sense the incredibly dense energy streams form a perfect circuit in his Evolutionary Core, which put immense pressure on

the other side. Zac shifted to his Draugr form one last time, where he branded the recently added pathways with the Void.

Balance was restored within his trinity path, and Zac felt something click. A second circuit was completed, and two streams became one. One half felt real and palpable, while the other remained in a quantum state, like a shadow hiding from the light. The flowing rivers of energy added stability, further fusing the materials.

It was done.

Zac couldn't actually use it yet, but he had a fully working core. A powerful pulse of primal force shook the Hidden Space within the Duplicity Core. The wave passed through the Specialty Core's walls, where it seemed to be amplified rather than absorbed. It spread through his body, invigorating him and filling his cells with boundless power before continuing outward.

It was an unstoppable expression of Zac's Dao and his path, a heralding cry of his ascent. It made the ambient energy in the whole region stir, forming one apparition after another around him. They didn't look like the Kalpataru tree nor the iron maiden of his Pale Seal. The apparitions weren't even fashioned after the shifting Dao Avatar wielding his two axes.

Instead, two powerful armies materialized, forming a protective circle like an imperial guard. However, while both sides were part of his force, there was an unmistakable animosity between the camps.

One army looked like a horde of barbarian ravagers. No two were identical in shape or equipment, except they all wielded axes. They emitted a primal aura of dominance, seemingly more beast than man. The barbarians emitted an unquenchable and unbreakable will, like their weapons could sever Dao, Fate, and the Heavens themselves.

The other half was a dour army of hooded executioners, slightly resembling Zac's form when using [Arbiter of the Abyss]. All held a black axe, and chains were wound around their black robes. Their auras truly resembled that of a judge. The weapons in their hands held the inexorable certainty of death. Dao, Fate, and the Heavens only became subordinate truths of their will.

Nine hundred ninety-nine warriors were conjured in each camp before the phenomenon stopped expanding. However, the pulse continued even when the armies did not. It spread to envelop the whole mountain and beyond, repainting the valleys in the color of Zac's Dao. The platform beneath his feet crumbled from its pressure, but Zac floated in place. He was like a radiant sun, showering the world with his glory.

It was the Toll of Hegemony.

The toll was like the first cry of a newborn, announcing its existence to the world. But instead of a baby, it was a path that had been born, manifest into physical form through his Cosmic Core. Some considered Hegemony the true start of cultivation, and Zac could understand the feeling as his Daos and Energy kept him aloft, surrounded by a sea of his power.

This kind of phenomenon marked every ascent, though apparitions only appeared when Dao Branches fueled the ascent. But even Zac was shocked as the wave just kept going.

The size and expression of the toll depended on various factors, such as quality, energy density, and the stability of one's path. Zac had heard that forming a one-mile shockwave was the hallmark of a cultivator who had the qualifications to continue beyond the entrance of Hegemony. Five meant the core could climb through the ranks of the grade, while twenty indicated a seed of potential for an Inner World.

So why did Zac's pulse just keep going?

At first, Zac considered it a welcome recognition of his potential when five miles turned into ten. But the ripple just kept swallowing mountains, setting their energy astir. Twenty, thirty, and soon fifty miles. It was unstoppable, and Zac's excitement was soon replaced by worry. Because for every mile the pulse expanded, the Heavens grew more agitated while it forcibly honed in on his location.

The light of his Dao projections was eventually overwhelmed by the purple gathering above. Zac had to fight his instincts to burrow into the ground, to use the layers of soil to hide from the punishment that was gathering above his head. For one, it would be to shame his path, but Zac also knew it was fruitless. There was no escape from what came next.

The shockwave only stopped after forming a domain of over 99 miles, an accomplishment Zac had never heard of before. By this point, the heavenly clouds were fully purple, and Zac could even spot mysterious runes inside the formations. They were like angry spots of red, filled with the desire for destruction.

Zac quelled the turmoil in his heart, and his eyes steeled as he looked up at the sky. Even if the bolts were superpowered, he only needed to withstand three. He refused to believe it was enough to do him in.

The Dao Apparitions shifted, and the whole mountain range stirred. One second ago, it had seemed as though a supreme Dao treasure had been born, creating a glorious spectacle. Now, that feeling was replaced by ruthlessness and fighting spirit. And the sense of internal disharmony between the armies was gone; their aggression fully turned to the outside threat.

Together, they formed an axe pointed at the sky.