

## The Fall 668

### Chapter 668: Cycle of Life and Death

One cycle after another passed as the [Life-Death Array] did its thing, and some sweat started running down Zac's forehead by the time he reached the seventh cycle. He usually stopped infusing the array with his Dao by this point, but his urgency kept him going this time. There thankfully was a huge surplus of energy in his [Spiritual Void], especially since he hadn't used the array at all over the past weeks.

His second Dao storage helped Zac tide over the cycle without much issue, but a headache made the veins on Zac's throb as the eighth cycle started. Only an insignificant stream was released from the avatar of the Fragment of the Coffin by this point. Zac wasn't satisfied with just that, and the scenes of Leandra appearance flashed over and over in his mind. The scene of Kenzie being taken away, of Thea floating up toward the lightning in the sky, the sense of utter helplessness.

A surge of Dao was squeezed out of the Dao Avatar as Zac took out several Soul Crystals, crushing a few of them before grabbing one in each hand. The crushed crystals turned into a dust cloud that looked like a nebula slowly drifting around him, steadily infusing his whole body with energy through his pores.

This was a method he had accidentally discovered a while back, but he never used his very limited number of Soul Crystals this way because of the low efficiency. It was actually possible to take in the energy from the cloud even while absorbing normally, giving his soul an extra boost that helped him forcibly extract some more Dao from the Coffin in his mind.

The effect of the Soul Crystal was limited, but it helped him tide over the eighth cycle, and a pure wave of death was returned after half an hour.

His soul had never contained a level of undeath as it did right now. Eight full cycles empowered by the Dao of the Coffin and D-Grade Miasma Crystals was over a hundred times more powerful compared to simply running the array as-is. Frigid drowsiness spread through his mind, and he just wanted to lie down and sleep.

Zac knew that it was just an effect of his soul being modified beyond what was safe, and stopping right now would probably lead to his soul getting harmed in unknowable ways. He forced himself to start the ninth cycle, ignoring his old rules of precaution.

Blood ran down Zac's nose and his soul shuddered from the pain, but he staunchly continued to squeeze out all his potential as one Soul Crystal after another was expended. Finally, his soul was utterly drained, like a parched desert that hadn't seen rain for centuries. But Zac kept pushing even then, and microscopic motes of destruction were suddenly squeezed out of his wrung-out soul.

It was the energy released from the Splinter of Oblivion, and Zac was surprised to see them since he had thought the energy had been perfectly blended into his soul. It looked like the fusion wasn't perfect considering the motes had appeared, but Zac had no time to ponder on that as the purified energy of Oblivion entered the array.

Zac looked on with anticipation mixed with trepidation since he wasn't sure what the result would be from adding yet another energy into the mix, especially one as powerful as this. The worry only grew as

a shudder rocked the whole cultivation cave a few seconds later, and it soon felt like he was caught in the middle of an earthquake.

However, Zac staunchly refused to move, since doing so would waste all his efforts and even damage his soul. Half his soul was essentially inside the array by this point, and leaving now would result in a huge loss. The shakes only increased in intensity, and Zac could even hear Triv scream with horror in the distance.

A surge of energy suddenly slammed into Zac's mind, a terrifying force that threatened to knock Zac unconscious. Zac didn't understand what had happened to his mental energy as it passed through the array, but the amount and intensity were just terrifying. The hazy ball in his mind that represented his soul looked like it would explode any moment.

That wasn't the only problem. Zac felt himself rapidly turning into a zombie as deathly cold spread out throughout his body. Those small motes of oblivion had somehow supercharged the deathly energies in the array, which was extremely dangerous considering Zac barely held on as is. His heartbeat slowed down and the embrace of death beckoned him, but there was a core in the deepest recess of his mind that refused to give in.

Zac's mind was a blur as he crawled toward the life-attuned side of his cave, his body only moving thanks to muscle memory as he was forced to use all his attention on keeping the creeping death at bay. He finally reached the prayer mat, and he desperately turned on the array after activating his Specialty Core.

His mind had felt stuffed full to the point of bursting a second ago, but the drain from the array immediately gave him a sense of relief. Furthermore, he was now in his Draugr form, and there was no risk of him zombifying any longer. Zac crawled up to a sitting position, but he didn't give himself any opportunity to relax as he poured the power of the Bodhi into the array as well.

The same procedure repeated itself cycle after cycle, though Zac started to feel immense pressure even at the sixth circulation this time around. It wasn't that he had smaller storage in his Bodhi Avatar, but rather that his soul was so wrung dry from being overextended once already.

Furthermore, the increasingly powerful clashes between life and death in his soul weren't just purifying and strengthening his soul; the collisions were so powerful that they were actually starting to hurt him.

This feeling of danger was exactly what had held him back until now. He hadn't really made any progress for months when using the array because it seemed like he would have to cause some severe damage to his mind. He had seen first-hand what a broken soul did to Alea, and he had felt it himself when he almost got killed by Vilari's predecessor. He wasn't willing to take that risk at the time.

But no one on Earth was as used as himself to pushing forward even when hurt, and he started to take out even more Soul Crystals to provide some more relief. His dwindling stash had almost run dry by this point, but Zac cared nothing for the expenditure as he kept going. The Soul Crystals were good, but their value was nothing compared to an evolved soul.

He had been stuck at the bottleneck for so long already, and Zac was adamant about breaking through today by hook or crook. Going through the first reincarnation would give him a huge boost before setting out, improving every aspect related to his soul.

Protection against Illusions, Mind Control, and even direct attacks. Greater stores of Mental Energy. Perhaps even better control of his Daos. Most importantly; greater protection against the remnants in his mind, and perhaps even the first step in taking control of them.

The seventh cycle passed, as did the eight. His harried soul was on the verge of collapse by this point, and he had used more than twice the normal Mental Energy than it normally stored. Part of it came from the frantic consumption of Soul Crystals while part of his energy was inside the array, while some came from [Spiritual Void] tiding him over when his Dao Avatar ran out of steam.

He somehow managed to squeeze out the last potential of his soul, and it resulted in a very familiar scene as last time. But it wasn't motes of Oblivion that got extracted from the depths of his soul but rather simmering blobs of pure Creation. The scene gave Zac pause since the energy from the Shard of Creation entered his body rather than his soul.

Then it hit him. These motes of both Oblivion of Creation were not the result of the constant stream of energy being extracted and purified by his fractal cage. It was rather hidden impurities left from when the two remnants had ravaged his soul and left their crisscrossing scars behind.

In either case, the small sparks were the final piece of the puzzle that allowed him to complete the ninth and final infusion. Now he could only wait, and a growing sense of dread gripped his heart as the cultivation cave shook once more. He knew that he might have gone too far this time around.

There was no way that his current heedless method of breakthrough was the normal path of performing the first reincarnation. It was like he had jumped onto a rocket instead of walking normally. The chaotic clashes between life and death would have killed most people by now, and he was barely holding on as cracks covered his whole Soul.

Part of him screamed at him to stand up and run away, but his legs refused to move as his redrimmed eyes glared at the array pathways. The minutes passed, and the circuit was finally completed. The world shuddered and his vision turned dark, but the all-consuming pain stopped him from staying unconscious for more than a fraction of a second.

Zac spat out a mouthful of blood, but he didn't care about the state of his body as he looked inward with horror gripping his heart. The clashes had reached an unprecedented state, and it looked like a cataclysmic war was taking place inside his head. A snap echoed out in his mind, followed by incessant shattering sounds that filled Zac with pain and dismay.

His soul had not just cracked, it had completely crumbled.

A vast cloud of crystals swirled about in Zac's mind, like a million gemstones forming a miniature galaxy. Surrounding it were two nebulae, one black and one white, and they gave off a mysterious light that was reflected in the small crystals. Zac would be mesmerized by its beauty if it wasn't for the fact that those small gemstones were broken pieces of his soul, and he desperately tried to figure out a way to salvage the situation.

Just a splintered soul had been difficult enough to heal, forcing him to head to the Zethaya Clan when looking for remedies for Alea. But what had just happened to his soul went far beyond a few tears, it was a complete disintegration. However, Zac's panic and despair were suddenly swept away from one simple realization.

He was fine, even better than just a few minutes ago.

Zac had received various wounds to his soul before, ranging from small shocks to massive cracks that took a long time to heal. Those kinds of wounds always came with severe nausea, difficulty to think, and unconsciousness. Yet he was still perfectly lucid even now that his soul had lost its form.

The frantic clashes between life and death had ended the moment his soul cracked as well, and it looked like his mind had reached a state of equilibrium.

That didn't mean he wasn't in danger, but Zac thought back to the text in his Soul Strengthening Manual. The [Nine Reincarnations Manual] was incomplete and it lacked the comments and insights of predecessors that marked a high-quality inheritance, but there were still clues hidden in the somewhat sparse descriptions.

Steeped in the cycle of Life and Death, the soul enters the Samsara. Only by returning to the Origin can reincarnation take place. Give up on the past life to form the next, only through death can life grow. Use the past to set the foundation for the future.

The Eight Trigrams form a System unto itself, encompassing all. Towering above are the Four Emblems of Heaven and Earth. The Heavens are subject to the demarcation of Yin and Yang, the delimited Dao.

Supreme above all is the Primordial Chaos, a singular unity.

Zac had read that passage in the manual many times before, but only now did he actually understand how literal it was being. His soul needed to undergo a rebirth to reach the next stage, a reincarnation where weakness was shed and a soul with greater potential would form. Zac hadn't expected that meant his soul would turn to stardust though, as that usually meant instant death.

There was no time to waste as Zac suspected that his lucid state was only being propped up by the array considering the state of his Soul. Zac hurriedly started exerting pressure on the cloud of Soul Shards, and he was elated to see them following his command as they pushed together toward the center of his mind.

He needed to use the past to set the foundation for the future, meaning the Soul Shards couldn't be discarded. They would be the core of his reincarnated soul. However, when he pushed together the cloud it just formed an uneven sphere that looked far worse than his previous soul. Zac frowned, immediately realizing he was missing something.

Inspiration suddenly struck and Zac's attention turned to the two clouds of extremely condensed Life-Death energies that surrounded the shards. He willed the clouds to start circling the crystals like a nebula surrounding a black hole. The two clouds quickly came into contact with each other, causing a new series of explosions to erupt.

Zac had initially planned on fusing the clouds into his soul, figuring that's why they were left behind in his mind. However, he quickly changed course when he saw what was going on with the Soul Shards. The minuscule splinters were far more malleable than he had expected, and every collision forcibly pushed splinters together, fusing them into one.

The fused splinter was barely larger than just one of the original Soul Shards, meaning that it had almost twice as high a density of energy compared to the original pieces. Zac finally understood what was going

on, and he egged on the two clouds to clash with each other more and more, causing the fusion to speed up.

The galaxy of gemstones kept shrinking as they were forcibly pushed together, and soon it was less than half the size of his original soul. However, there were still tens of thousands of splinters, so Zac kept pushing the Life-Death energies closer to keep the fusion going.

Zac finally understood the final passage as well. He had just assumed it to be some cultivation mumbo-jumbo to describe how powerful this method was, considering Yin and Yang was just below the Primordial Chaos. That might be true as well, but it definitely wasn't the whole story.

Judging by the passage 'Eight Trigrams form a stable system unto itself, encompassing all', the minimum requirement was to reduce the total number of remaining shards to eight. But to continue to fuse the Soul Shards even after that would result in a better reincarnation, with perfection being all shards fused into one new soul. Zac felt confident in reaching the minimum goal of eight, but was he really content with barely passing?

Definitely not. Only perfection would give him a foundation strong enough to accomplish his goals.