

The Fall 670

Chapter 670: Alternative Paths

Zac breathed out in relief and elation, thinking everything was over. But a lot of things suddenly happened at once. The rampant energies of the remnants started to recede into the fractal prison as Zac felt two marks appear on his forehead, where each mark formed a vortex that could match even his Hidden Nodes in voracity.

A shocking suction made the space around Zac bend, and he looked on with distress as an enormous amount of attuned energies was dragged into his head. Zac had absorbed just a few percent of the energy he released before, but this much energy wasn't meant to be consumed. It was meant to be used as a boost to the environment when breaking through.

Yet these two marks cared nothing for that fact as they greedily swallowed everything they could.

That alone was alarming enough, but his eyes widened even further when a series of explosions erupted all around him. It was the array flags of his Life-Death array that had shot up into the air and self-detonated, releasing a huge amount of energy as well. It looked like the array had been saving a small part of the energy that cycled through its pathways, and it all came crashing back now.

Tremendous amounts of attuned mental energy blended with the miasmic and divine clouds as they entered Zac's forehead. Zac himself didn't control this process at all, but Zac actually wasn't sure he wanted to stop it even if he could. Instead, he quickly looked inward to see what was going on. His evolved soul still looked like a white-hot sun that illuminated his mind with mysterious splendor, but it wasn't hovering in an empty space any longer.

Instead, it looked like it was floating on top of a pond wrought from life and death. The body of 'water' was still both shallow and small, but it rapidly expanded as energy kept pouring in. It was like his mind could suddenly house an infinite amount of power, like his aperture was able to grow along with the ocean.

The process continued for hour after hour, until Zac finally felt a pressure in his mind. It looked like the space for his soul no longer could expand. Zac looked on at the situation with marvel. Before now, his soul had just been this diffuse blob that he could sense in his head, but now there was a defined space. Furthermore, everything was so clear and tangible. It almost felt like the core of his soul was a physical object, and he looked at his new internal space with marvel.

There were no set rules of how a soul should look from what Zac had gathered. Soul Cultivation didn't follow a strict series of grades like cultivation either, where everyone had nodes to break open in the E-grade and a Cultivator Core to form and upgrade during the D-grade. It was rather dependent on the method, and two equally powerful souls could look completely different.

Zac's soul had undergone a tremendous transformation as he had officially completed the first step of the [Nine Reincarnations Manual], and his soul was undeniably marked by the experience. It would be hard for him to swap to a different Soul Strengthening method by this point, but he wasn't really intent on doing so as he felt it fit his path quite well.

Half of his spiritual world was now filled with a golden ocean, not surprisingly teeming with life-attuned energy. This energy wasn't connected to him though, and he was unable to move or change it at all. It was the same with the second half of his internal space, which was now a pitch-black sea of death. The two bodies of water didn't mix at all, but crashing waves rose to the sky where they met.

His perfected Soul Core was floating right in the middle between these two oceans, still shining in a pristine white. His avatar representing the Fragment of the Axe, and his Hidden Node [Spiritual Void], had taken its spot right on top of the core. It was now sitting on it like a marooned sailor on a small island. The other two apparitions had instead formed two smaller islands apart from his core, with the hanging coffin resting atop the death-attuned ocean and the bodhi tree atop the golden one.

The scene was beautiful and it resonated perfectly with his path, and Zac felt he could finally relax.

Things had gotten a bit dicey for a moment there, but everything went above expectation. Zac wanted nothing more than to explore his new soul, but first, he had to check in on the remnants. He could still feel the cage, and it still hid in a subspace in his improved aperture. Better yet, there wasn't too much of the remnants' energies left in his mind.

Some of the energy had blended with the two oceans, but his new core was unsullied. It could have been worse, but a lot of the energy had been dragged back into the cage, probably by the remnants themselves.

Forcing open the funnel in his fractal cage was a last-resort option Zac had figured out a year ago but never had reason to try out until now. It was a method he could use if his life was on the line, a way for him to borrow the power of the remnants in case everything else failed. For example, if he was able to release energy like this back during his fight with Adcarkas, then things might not have gotten so desperate.

The energy funnel had thankfully started mending itself in response to Zac breaking it open, almost immediately. The remnants in turn didn't want to lose their arduously accumulated energy, prompting them to quickly drag most of the leftovers back into the prison instead of giving it up. Things worked out better than Zac could have hoped, but the strategy did come at a significant cost.

The luster of the protective fractals had been expended by a noticeable degree, and Zac guessed that he had lost at least a good five years of protection. Zac was hopeful that the gain in his soul strength would offset the loss this time, but if he used the same method in combat it would be a pure loss. Besides, forcing open the gates repeatedly might cause the prison to crumble altogether, so it definitely wasn't something he could use unless he was absolutely pushed to the edge.

Seeing that everything was in order with his remnants Zac instead turned his attention to his body, and he couldn't help but lament at his lack of preparations. He had managed to perform a perfect Reincarnation, but at what cost? His whole body was a mess, and Zac could feel that his soul was still pretty fragile.

His experience was a great example of the difference between a Manual and a Heritage. The manual was short-worded and obscure, sometimes intentionally as to make it harder for outsiders to glean information. But a Heritage also contained the experiences of the predecessors. If he had the Heritage for the [Nine Reincarnations Manual] he would have known exactly what the reincarnation entailed.

The undertaking would still have been dangerous since he would always be unable to gather the Dao clouds. But he would have been able to prepare himself better, like getting his hands on safer treasures to help with the fusion. Still, there was no use crying over spilled milk. The gains far outweighed the costs as far as Zac was concerned.

Zac soon started to observe his evolved soul from a utilitarian standpoint though. He had spent a small fortune and risked his life to reach this stage, and he needed more than a nice view. Luckily, it didn't take long for him to start digging out the changes from his evolution.

First of all, his new soul seemed extremely stable compared to his old one, no matter if you looked to the size or mass of it. Harming it would take a lot more force compared to before. Zac couldn't be sure, but he suspected that his resistance against mental attacks was stronger right now compared to when he actively used [Mental Fortress] before.

His raw defenses were most likely inferior compared to when he used [Soul Guardian] on his old soul though, but that was to be expected from an E-grade Mental Defense Skill. His pool of Wisdom obviously provided the same degree of protection, but it was like the same attack now would need to destroy a big boulder instead of a fist-sized stone. The same amount of force would have a much smaller impact.

The second gain was how clear everything felt. When he observed his Dao Avatar it felt like they hid a lot more secrets compared to before, and hundreds of ideas flicked through his mind as he turned his attention to the pathways in his body. He didn't feel smarter by any means, but it was like his mind had become more in tune with the Dao.

Concepts he had studied before that had felt obscure and inscrutable were now within reach. He felt full of inspiration, which was exactly what he needed for the next step of his plan. However, he first had to check something, and two thin streams of Dao emerged from his avatars.

It worked!

Zac's looked on with desperate hope as the two streams moved together, but his abyssal eyes closed in dismay when the two strands touched for just a second before they disintegrated. It was a failure, after all. He had hoped that his evolved soul would help him improve his control over his Daos, but it was only partly a success.

He now found it absolutely possible to activate two Dao Fragments at once without straining himself. However, his control over them wasn't any better than before, which essentially meant that Dao Braiding still was an impossible goal. After all, it was the control itself that was key, not being able to activate the fragments.

Kenzie had often tried to explain how she could fight so dynamically, and it always boiled down to her Dao. She was able to control her streams of Dao with pinpoint precision thanks to her own talents along with Jeeves' assistance. She could even attach it to streams of Cosmic Energy and form elemental skills from scratch. However, this type of handling required both talent and affinities, of which Zac had neither.

But Zac suddenly froze as he felt a flash of inspiration. Perhaps there was a unique path he could take.

Two thick streams of mental energy emerged from the core of his soul, and they moved around in his aperture like two flood dragons, twinning around each other as they moved. It was obviously Zac who did it, but his eyes lit up at the result. Wasn't this Dao braiding, except that the energy currently lacked any Dao?

Instead of using his Dao as the guide and his Mental Energy as the fuel like normal cultivators, what if he did it the opposite way? Form the braid with streams of mental energy with the help of his unusually powerful soul, then Infuse the streams with Dao like they were some sort of cables. From there you could infuse your skills with the newly formed Dao Braid.

The moment the thought ignited, Zac was completely unable to let it go. If this truly was possible, then the biggest detriment of his abysmal affinities would be solved. Truthfully, Zac felt that having no affinities for Daos wasn't that bad in terms of cultivation. He could still gain insights from battles, and he suspected that he would be able to keep improving as long as he kept getting his hands on treasures.

Meanwhile, those with low affinities would sooner or later find themselves hard-capped in their cultivation, where they wouldn't improve their Dao Seeds or Dao Fragments no matter what.

However, his inability to manipulate his Dao was starting to become a problem. Braiding two Late-Stage Fragments and infusing them into a Skill was almost as powerful as infusing the skill with a Peak-Stage Fragment. Above that were Dao Arrays, something that talented E-grade cultivators could make use of.

As grades progressed, the cultivators utilized their Daos would keep improving, while Zac used the crudest method. It hadn't been a real problem so far, but it would become a bigger and bigger issue as he progressed. He already had to eke out more and more advantages to cancel out the increasing boost from cultivation manuals, and adding Dao manipulation to that would be extremely tough.

But Soul Cultivation might be his key to retain his advantages.

The minutes passed as Zac kept trying to form his backward-braid, but he was soon enough forced to stop before making any real headway. His vision had started to get blurred as his wounds made themselves reminded. He sighed and stopped the experiments, and simply ate a few healing pills before lying down on the ground.

But he could feel it. There was hope.

Zac got no opportunity to celebrate though as sleep took him the moment his head hit the ground. He had no idea if one hour or one year had passed when he finally woke up, but a quick check proved that the correct answer was actually three days. He should have known that reforming his soul would stress his mind, and immediately starting to perform a series of experiments was overdoing it.

His mind felt a lot better after the rest though, like it had somehow stabilized. Of course, the attuned oceans in his mind still raged like before, and Zac guessed they'd never calm down. Zac wanted to check things out some more, but he suddenly sensed a presence in the distance.

"Triv, come in," he said.

"Young master, are you okay?" Triv hesitantly asked as it floated into the cultivation cave.

"I'm fine," Zac sighed as he turned his gaze toward the ghost. "I just- Uh?"

Zac forgot his word as Triv had started to vibrate as the ghost moved away.

“Please, your eyes. You’re almost like Lady Vilari,” Triv croaked as his spiritual form shuddered.

Zac was surprised by the ghost’s reaction, and he concentrated a bit to properly restrain his aura. He was always containing a large part of it naturally, but it wasn’t hard even for Zac to hide even more of it. In fact, it went even smoother right now compared to before, which meant Zac had found yet another benefit of soul evolution.

“That’s better,” Triv sighed. “Lady Vilari has been waiting outside for a few days on your command.”

“Oh, right. Send her in,” Zac said, a bit embarrassed he had forgotten about his undead general.