

The Fall 800

Chapter 800: Perfection

A ripple passed through Zac's Duplicity Core, and a few seconds later another wave of death spread through his body, almost fusing with the impossible volumes of unadulterated death accumulated by the [Nine Reincarnations Manual]. The chill of death was still there, as was the raging storm in his mind. However, it no longer threatened to consume his sense of self, to convert him into an unthinking Revenant.

Being Draugr was to be one with the Abyss, and the pitch-black ocean in his Soul Aperture was less than a shadow compared to the lake from which his race sprung. But that didn't save his harried Soul Core from getting almost drowned by the raging waters. The golden ocean was rapidly shrinking as well, unable to counteract the ferocious momentum from its nemesis.

Zac felt himself slowly losing control, but a loud snap startled him awake. It was the Array Disk in his hands that had cracked, unleashing a storm of unrelenting death upon the area. The wooden cabin around him instantly rotted away and crumbled around him, but the energy didn't spread too far.

It was somehow contained above him, no doubt a part of the array's function to help with this final step. The churning clouds of death were mesmerizing, and Zac felt some echoes of the higher truths hidden within. However, he quickly refocused on the task at hand. Insights were good and all, but surviving this tribulation was even better.

He hurriedly took out the life-attuned Array Disk and started up the second set of revolutions. He knew that he was at the most precipitous state right now, and he desperately held on while the cycle began. As long as he could withstand this first revolution, the golden ocean would come to his aid in containing the deathly ocean.

Zac once more found himself in a state of limbo, where all thoughts were expunged except his desperate struggle to contain the chaos in his mind. The staunch willpower he had nurtured through innumerable life-and-death encounters had come to his aid, turning into an indestructible wave breaker that kept his Soul Core just safe enough to withstand the surging tides.

Each second was agony, but he held on, refusing to give in to the abyssal ocean. And finally, a surge of warmth entered his soul as the first revolution finished and brought with it a wave of untainted life. The golden ocean roused itself, finally starting its counterattack to reclaim its lost ground. It was still not nearly as powerful as the churning black waters, but it was a start.

One revolution after another passed through the small disk in his hands. He was getting closer to a state of balance every minute, but Zac was forced to swallow Soul Mending Pills as though they were candy to prevent his Soul Core from crumbling prematurely. As he had suspected, the war that raged by the time he finished the seventh cycle surpassed what the method called for.

His shimmering core was completely submerged by this point, drowned by towering waves that slammed into each other.

Yet Zac pressed on, a sheen of madness glimmering in his abyssal eyes. He held it all together with a small film of Mental Energy and sheer will, and black veins stood out all over his face as he started the

eighth cycle. It felt like an eternity, but finally, a crashing wave of mental energy full of vigor eventually returned.

His whole Soul Aperture was veritably vibrating by this point, but he pushed on. There was no turning back now. Not only would it cause a tremendous backlash, but it would just make his future breakthrough more difficult. The energies crammed into his aperture had already surpassed what it could withstand, so what good would continued cultivation do? He needed to break through and increase the capacity of the tank.

Not to mention he'd already broken one of the Array Disks.

A sense of hollowness spread through his body as he extracted all the accumulated energy of Creation he had gathered, and he pushed it right into the array. He let the disk do its thing as he used every ounce of will and remaining energy to simply stay coherent, to stave off the tendrils of life that were poison to his Draugr form.

Zac wasn't sure his Soul Aperture would last the whole cycle no matter how strong his will was, and he desperately searched for solutions. Eventually, he could only swallow Soul Mending pills by the handful while pushing a huge amount of Miasma to his head, using it to pressure the aperture from outside to maintain a semblance of equilibrium.

Somehow, Zac managed to pull through, but he was still filled with trepidation as a storm of life came rushing back into his mind. He was rapidly losing control, and a crack from the array in his hand unleashed a wave of life into the surroundings, pushing the deathly clouds that still raged to the side.

It almost looked like the siblings to the clouds of [Rapturous Divide] had been summoned, and a war to match the one in his mind erupted all around him. It even started dragging the ambient energies of the whole area into its struggle, and the opposing Daos in the Orom World were more than willing to comply. Zac wasn't surprised, and he could only hold on for dear life as the storms inside his Soul Aperture grew even more ferocious.

There was no ebb, only a flow that kept gaining momentum. The waves in his mind had grown so massive that they resembled mountain ranges by this point. It looked like two tectonic plates had collided, with his Soul Core submerged deep in the heart of the chaos. Life and Death had taken the main stage of his soul, but a shadow of his third Dao played an important part.

The small avatar had already left its position on his Soul Core, and it kept dancing among the frothing waters. One moment it looked like a human swinging a golden axe, and the next it was an abyssal Draugr with an axe wrapped in chains. As it swung its weapons, the oceans answered like an army roused by a powerful general.

His world shook as the war raged on, and cracks spread across the domed sky. The storm reached a crescendo, and Zac found his consciousness twist as a crack echoed out from the depths of his mind.

A blast of pure mental destruction ripped apart the rotten shreds of his cabin before leveling the trees around him. Zac inwardly breathed out in relief that he hadn't taken out the [Mind's Eye Agate] for his breakthrough, seeing as its benefits rather came during prolonged cultivation sessions. It would have been a huge loss to destroy that amazing treasure so soon after getting it.

Zac could feel his perception expanding along with the unfettered wave of Mental Energy. It crossed the waters of the small lake, and cascading waves rose like soldiers answering a call. The mental wave kept stretching for hundreds of meters in each direction, a supreme presence lording over the no-man's-land.

However, Zac's nigh-omniscience didn't last long. He found his expanded vision blur as his mental energy started to spin, forming a soul hurricane as it pulled back into his mind, bringing all the attuned energy in the area with it. First, the surrounding hills and rivers were drained of meaning, and the lake shared the same fate a moment later.

Next came the mysterious clouds of life and death, kept together by some inscrutable markings Zac couldn't quite make out. It all was all dragged in by an unrelenting pull, and Zac screamed with pain as a tidal wave of Life and Death poured into his glabella. It was like a heavenly spear cut through the two raging oceans before it slammed into his Soul Core.

The core was already covered in cracks by this point, and this was the straw that broke the camel's back. Zac was beset by a soul-rending pain as his core exploded. Thousands of shimmering shards ripped through the ocean with unstoppable momentum, forcibly ending the war through mutual destruction.

The outburst of power completely destroyed the walls of his Soul Aperture as well, and there was suddenly no clear divider for his mind any longer. It was just like before he had awakened his soul. However, instead of a murky ball of congealed energy, his soul now looked like a mottled ocean that stretched for miles in his mind.

The two seas had been reduced to a messy mix of gold and black, looking like two oils that refused to properly mix. The waters kept squirming from the proximity, but something kept everything in place; the innumerable shards. They had become fixtures in the ocean, each one connecting a ball of water to it through some unknown means, either surrounding itself by life or death.

The scene was extremely chaotic, but it wasn't completely out of Zac's expectations. He had known that his soul would shatter like the last time, judging by the terse description of the process, and he already knew the solution. He needed to start gathering and fusing the broken shards before he died.

The problem was how. The second reincarnation was similar to the first, but there were also clear differences. Zac had hoped that he would find some clues by this point, what to aim for. How should he fuse shards that had all been tainted, surrounded and marinated in a soup of life and death?

Were you meant to make a choice at this point, where living cultivators focused on the life-marked Soul Shards, and the undead on the deathly ones? That way, you could form a soul better suited to your path. But that wouldn't work for him, someone with two races and an equal focus between life and death.

Could he form two soul cores, one for each element? Would that ruin the method, which called for both oneness and the law of nine?

He didn't know if he was doing the right thing, but he also knew that each second was precious at this stage. He could only start imposing his will on the shards, slowly arranging them by their respective elements. For now, he started at one corner of the ocean to see if his theory was correct, while maintaining some control over the rest of the waters, preventing it from dissipating.

Soon enough, the pockets of life melded together, but Zac frowned when another problem immediately cropped up; the shards refused to fuse like the last time. The golden waters were in the way, acting like some sort of insulation.

Was he supposed to mix life and death, after all?

He urgently redirected a couple of shards, but as expected, it worked even worse. If life and death had mixed so easily, the fusion process would already have started up when the chaotic soup was created. Zac wracked his brain, desperately trying to match any piece of information he had gathered over the past months with what he was seeing in his mind.

Suddenly, a snippet from Aia Ouro's missives resurfaces in his mind.

While the ultimate goal of nurturing one's soul is to empower it and allow it to become a greater extension of your will, the methods to accomplish this varies greatly. Generally, a distinction between Attuned and Unattuned Soul Strengthening Methods needs to be made.

The ultimate goal of the attuned Soul Strengthening Methods is to remold one's soul, to push it closer to your Path and your Dao. In terms of Body Tempering Methods, they will provide you with a constitution. Just as a fiery tempering technique might award its practitioner some manner of Fire Constitution, so can the fiery Soul Strengthening Method provide you with a soul attuned to fire.

The benefits of this should be clear for any practitioner of the Dao. An attuned soul will empower the matching Dao, just as the constitution will empower the matching skills. The drawback of this gift is the narrowing of one's path. A Dao of a different peak will become harder to wield, and soul skills of clashing elements will become weakened.

From there, it had gone on to explain that most methods delayed the process of attuning one's soul, as to not prematurely lock in users before they had confirmed their path of cultivation. But what if the [Nine Reincarnation Manual] differed from the norm, and already at the second Reincarnation meant for you to attune your soul?

If true, it directly clashed with Zac's assumptions after reading that missive. It had also gone on to describe unattuned methods, such as the [Thousand Lights Chapter] and a few other methods. These methods didn't provide an attunement to your soul, but high-quality methods instead made up for it by producing stronger souls that weren't forced down a certain path.

It had also mentioned that even unattuned methods often used various Daos to improve their cultivation speed, and Zac had ultimately categorized the [Nine Reincarnation Manual] into this type of method. After all, while he steeped his Mental Energy in life and death, his Soul Core had stayed completely untouched by those elements.

But seeing the situation in his soul, he wondered if his understanding was flawed, and he focused on a random shard surrounded by a bubble of extremely pure life. He exerted his will, and he was filled with a mix of elation and trepidation that the exuberant energies entered the shard, indelibly marking it with Life.

The glee came from having found the path forward, while the trepidation came from the ramifications. Still, Zac couldn't worry about the future right now, and how an attuned soul would affect him. He could

only put his faith in the System once more, hoping that it hadn't provided him with a method that would clash with him being an Edgewalker.

He spread his consciousness, and one bubble after another started shrinking. However, by the point the surrounding bubbles were absorbed to two-thirds, Zac met an insurmountable resistance. Zac panicked for a moment, but he figured it was a result of him overstuffing the oceans. Thankfully, a solution quickly presented itself as the waters around the shards exploded, leaving puffs of attuned vapors.

Meanwhile, the explosions exposed glimmering Soul Shards hovering inside the haze.

Zac felt like his mind was about to split apart as he desperately imposed his will all over the place, trying to do keep the uncontrollable ocean in check. Eventually, large pockets of shimmering gems floated in his aperture, half of them pale gold and the other turquoise. Their colors looked slightly diluted compared to the oceans, most likely because of the pristine white of his broken soul core.

Seeing that some chunks had been processed, Zac exerted tremendous pressure on the crystals, just like he had during the first reincarnation. Immediately, the pieces started to fuse, and the process looked a lot like previous times. As two crystals fused, a more condensed one was formed that was just slightly larger than before. In return, it emitted stronger energy, and its color was slightly deeper.

Having found the correct method, Zac immediately got to work, fusing some parts while attuning others. He worked his way through the large space of his Soul Aperture like a conveyor belt, but he suddenly encountered an issue. Two crystals had formed, one shimmering in gold like a piece of divine amber, while the other emitted the deathly chill of a supreme Miasma Crystal.

They looked immensely powerful, either one of them more than a match for his previous Soul Core thanks to the enormous amount of energy added from the ocean, the accumulated energy of the Array Disks, and the torrential amounts of energy he had swallowed from the surroundings. However, Zac could feel that they had reached sublimation after only having absorbed a fraction of the shards of his soul.

He tried to forcibly squeeze more into the cores, but it was simply impossible. As he pushed one shard inside, another one was pushed out, maintaining equilibrium. His mind worked with lightning speed, for once utilizing the thousands of points in Intelligence he had racked up to confirm something.

"Nine," Zac muttered, realizing that each attuned Soul Core contained exactly 729 shards, which was nine by nine by nine.

It definitely wasn't a coincidence, and he immediately stopped trying to force any more into the cores. Instead, he exerted pressure on some of the unattached crystals, and the familiar process started up once more. Two Soul cores eventually turned to four, and four into six. Zac had no idea how much time had passed by this point, but he was exhausted.

Worse yet, the protective bubbles around the remaining shards in his aperture had started leaking, the attuned waters turning into a haze as they slowly shrunk. Thankfully, he had already processed more than half of his soul, and he had more than enough attuned energies to spare. Still, his vision was starting to blur and his speed was slowing down, so he threw an item into his mouth as he kept working.

It was a mental stimulant found in Aia Ouro's Spatial Gem, an item equivalent to a Solider Pill for the mind. A surge of mental energy stormed into his aperture, immediately putting pressure on the remaining shards to speed up their transformation. Unfortunately, the energy was "unliving", and not a true replacement to his own spirit, and it wouldn't be able to replace any soul shards that were lost.

However, it did help to some degree, which was better than nothing. It gave him the strength to keep working, and it managed to buy enough time to form another set of attuned Soul Cores.

Four cores of life shone like radiant suns, as they leisurely floated in his Soul Aperture. Meanwhile, four aquamarine moons emitted opposing energies as they formed a complex dance with their opposites. The scene was oddly reminiscent of the situation the remnants found themselves in. However, Zac felt like these eight cores didn't just restrict each other, but they empowered each other as well.

They rotated in his soul like eight miniature celestial bodies, and his mind had changed from an ocean to a small corner of space. The oceans were partly gone, sacrificed in the formation of these marvelous Soul Cores. Remaining were just vast hazy clouds in gold and aquamarine, nebulae shrouding this soul in mystery.

Zac could feel a connection between the cores, and he knew that he could draw energy from either one or all eight at once, depending on how much force he wanted to exert. They were separate, but they were also one. The total power they contained was amazing, but Zac wasn't satisfied. After all, there were only eight of them.

Nine Dharmas, Nine Heavens, Nine layers of the Abyss. That was what the method called for, and Zac knew that he was still short of perfection.

Problem was, he had run out of soul shards.