

The Fall 801

Chapter 801: Singular Unity

Zac gazed at the eight shimmering orbs floating in his mind, urgently trying to figure out a solution for the final missing core. Soon, his attention turned to the clouds containing vast amounts of life- and death-attuned energies. At first, he had simply assumed that the nebulae were left-over energies from the process. After all, his soul oceans had contained far more energy than necessary, so it made sense that there would be some remaining.

But what if that wasn't the case? Zac immediately had an idea, and streams of Mental Energy emerged from the eight fully-formed cores. It felt so natural, so easy. Before, he could arduously control two streams, to form his crude Dao braids. But now, he was actually controlling eight of them, though their movements were a bit stiff.

Still, that was enough for Zac's purpose, and he made the streams catch large globs of nebulous dust before dragging it all toward one of the cores. It was one of the first two he had formed, and Zac looked on as he drenched it in the two sets of clouds, prompting the familiar explosions to erupt.

It was like magnificent fireworks had gone off around the core, and Zac felt the immense pressure the explosions put on the core. The chaos continued for a few moments, and Zac's brows furrowed as doubt crept into his heart. However, a small stream of shockingly pure light was eventually squeezed out from the heart of the core, its radiance almost blinding.

Zac's eyes lit up, and he gingerly took control of the sliver as he helped drag it out from the core. He first planned on pushing the attuned clouds away, but he quickly realized that the clashes didn't impact this pure string at all. It was his soul, condensed and refined to an unprecedented state. Some random life-death explosions weren't enough to harm it even if it was just a thin string.

His instincts were correct, and it looked like the tendril knew what to do on its own. The eight attuned cores kept rotating in that mysterious pattern, and it was like they formed some sort of vacuum at the heart of it all. The scene made Zac think of a yarn winder, and his gaze turned to the other eight cores.

He had figured out the method to refine the cores one final time, but he had a feeling that execution could still impact the end result. If he put pressure on just one core at a time, he would eventually form eight unconnected strings. Wouldn't it be better to extract all eight strings simultaneously, allowing them to form a proper yarn?

Zac had spent years looking at the intricate patterns on the Array Disks of the [Nine Reincarnations Manual], and he was almost certain his theory was correct as he looked at the pattern of the eight outer cores. Zac didn't quite understand the underlying meaning of their movements, but he had sensed the same truths hidden in the clouds that sprung from the Array Disks.

The essence of the soul strengthening method was hidden in that dance, and he needed to imprint that essence into the ninth and final core. Zac immediately spread his consciousness, pushing his recently improved control to the limits as he rekindled the conflict between life and death throughout his soul.

As if sensing his desires, the avatar for his Branch of the War Axe that had been sitting in the middle of the circle stood up. It immediately began its dance of conflict, swinging its axe as it kept swapping between incarnations. Wherever the avatar passed, the struggle was pushed to the next level.

Controlling so many clashes simultaneously was far beyond what he could normally manage, but Zac kept eating pills and incense sticks found in Aia Ouro's Spatial Gem. The effect was getting worse and worse, but it was enough to help him maintain control of the process. Soon enough, eight pristine strings slithered toward the center of his soul, almost drawn together as though by magnetic attraction.

Soon enough they touched, and a ripple spread out through Zac's soul as his perception shifted once more. Before, he had already sensed that the eight cores were connected, but that feeling was far more palpable now. He finally understood the true meaning of 'From Eight Trigrams a system is formed, where the singular unity is supreme'.

The moment the eight strings connected, they entwined into a small knot that became more and more complex as it and the outer cores kept spinning. The newly forming core was the real center of his soul, and Zac felt the walls of his Soul Aperture reform around it.

The bigger the shimmering ball grew, the more space was crammed into his Soul Aperture. It was already multiple times greater compared to before, yet the ball kept growing. It almost felt almost like he was forming an inner world, but Zac knew that this wasn't a true space like the one a Monarch formed.

It was rather his mind conceptualizing something intangible, a place where the line between thought and reality were blurred. But it was undeniable that the ninth core's growth meant his soul was becoming more powerful. Of course, the price of the growth was that the eight outer cores kept shrinking, though their colors grew more and more intense.

In Zac's opinion, it was a worthwhile trade, but nothing good can last forever. The oceans had left behind shocking amounts of energy, but the clouds were growing dim. No matter how much the Dao Avatar urged its surroundings to struggle, the eruptions grew further apart and weaker. Thankfully, the strings had already stopped growing by that point.

It looked like he had reached a limit of how far he could condense the outer cores. They had shrunk to a third of their original size, but they emitted shockingly deep auras of life and death. The eight strings detached from the outer cores the next moment and were dragged into the inner core which was now twice as large as the outer ones.

However, even with the esoteric patterns almost melding the eight strings together, they were still not perfectly fused into one core. Zac hesitated a bit before he made his decision, and the treasure he had just bought appeared in his hand. He had initially planned on saving this thing until he formed his Cultivator's Core, but he couldn't be picky at the moment.

He remembered all-too-well how the soul shards slowly hardened during his last reincarnation, and he was seeing that exact same phenomenon in the central core. He needed a final push, and he placed the Natural Treasure against his forehead, hoping that the suction would activate again.

It was a success, and the small vortex by his glabella opened once more, dragging torrential amounts of rampant energy from the treasure. It was just like Zac expected. During the last reincarnation, he had

used multiple treasures to perform a perfect reincarnation. This time, it hadn't been needed so far, but that was only because he had overdone things with the two oceans.

It was like two waterfalls came cascading down from the heavens above. They slammed into the newly-formed core, where the Dao Avatar was already waiting. A final series of explosions gradually squeezed the inner core tighter and tighter, forcing it to shrink. Soon enough, it was impossible to tell that there had ever been eight distinct strings.

It was now a radiant sun, far eclipsing his previous core in both size and density. The moment it formed it was like something snapped into place, and Zac was beset by an unprecedented state of clarity. Hundreds of thoughts rushed through his mind, seemingly unconnected impressions and insights forming a greater whole. It was all one.

Zac slowly opened his eyes, a wide smile plastered across his face. He had done it – a perfect reincarnation.

His gaze alone caused ripples in his surroundings until the brand on his hand sprung to action. The sense of limitless power was subdued, his soul output once more restrained to what was permissible in the Orom World. He wryly smiled as he looked down at his hand.

He had held onto a small hope that disintegrating his Soul Core, thus technically dying, would have tricked the brand into dissipating, but it didn't look like the Orom was so easily fooled. Even with the prison brand limiting his mind, Zac could still sense the improvements to his soul. If his old soul was a fortress surrounded by a moat, then his current soul was like an impervious mountain.

The dampening ocean of his previous reincarnation was gone, but the nine Soul Cores created a mysterious formation as they swirled in his mind. The outer layer of attuned cores created a nigh-impenetrable barrier protecting his true core. No matter how much rain or lightning rained down on its surface, it would stand tall.

Even if some terrifying Mentalist unleashed an overpowered strike at him, Zac knew that he could sacrifice one of the outer cores, essentially making him a cat with nine lives. He wanted to find out what other benefits his latest breakthrough brought, but he was wrung dry. Eventually, he gave it up altogether and focused on recuperating.

Zac spent the days barely moving an inch. His only actions were to turn back into his human form and light five sticks of soul-nurturing incense around him. He wasn't only focusing on letting his drained Mental Energy recuperate, but he was also immersed in the stream of impressions he received when his soul was perfected.

He had been beset by a series of epiphanies in regards to all facets of his cultivation, from his Daos to skill upgrades, to improving his two stances. Zac wanted to burn those impressions to memory before they turned into a confusing haze again, but he eventually had to admit defeat after five days. Anything he had lost by this point had become too muddled to make any sense of.

Perhaps he'd regain that sense of inspiration down the road when touching upon something tangential. Perhaps not. In either case, it was time to move on to the next step of his plan. Just as he had hoped, the Orom hadn't skimmed out upon breaking through his soul. It was considered a lot harder compared to simply forming a Dao Branch, and Zac guessed his method was quite unique as well.

Altogether, the breakthrough had netted him just over 11,000 contribution points, far better than his estimates. He had expected the breakthrough to provide somewhere between 4,000 and 8,000, but it looked like the Orom was extremely interested in improvements of the soul. The points were more than enough to afford the treasure, but he didn't immediately head out.

Instead, he checked his body for any hidden damage before taking out a [Chainbreaking Pill] and the Stone of Hope. After hesitating a bit, Zac ultimately decided against using the [Spiritual Ice] for now.

The item wasn't reusable, with each use eating up a chunk. The information missive had estimated it was enough for 10 to 15 uses, and they were better saved for the last stretch of levels. There was still some ways to go before that, and Zac took a steadying breath before swallowing the first [Stellar Enkindling Pill].

A radiant power spread through his body, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief. It had been some time since using any leveling pills, and he had both been blasted by Heavenly Lightning and Chaos since then. Along with the continuous ministrations of [Purity of the Void], Zac knew he would be able to reach High E-grade today.

It didn't take any effort to gently guide the powerful ball of energy toward a node right by his heart. The pill energy immediately forced its way into the small vortex, and it didn't even take five minutes before Zac shuddered as cracking sounds echoed out from his chest. The mysterious domain of [Stone of Hope] had already activated, but Zac still puked a mouthful of blood before slumping over.

His heart had been lacerated from the explosion, but what would have been a lethal wound before the integration, was now just a minor tribulation. Having a broken heart wouldn't even phase a Hegemon, and someone like Zac with massive pools of both Endurance of Vitality could seal his blood vessels and survive for hours in this state.

That was more than enough time for Zac who swallowed a healing pill before activating [Surging Vitality] with his Void Energy. His heart started to rapidly reform, and it was back in working order within five minutes, allowing Zac to continue his work without wasting too much of the medicinal efficacy of the precious pill.

He had already been somewhat close to breaking open the latest node, and most of the pill energy remained. Capitalizing on his momentum, Zac pushed the shimmering ball upward until it reached his throat. That was the location of the final node in the middle E-grade, acting as the gate between the head and the body.

More and more energy crammed inside, and even Zac started to be filled with trepidation as he felt the buildup. Suddenly, he had an idea, and nine streams of mental energy poured down from his Soul Aperture. Before, his mental energy hadn't been powerful enough to make much of a difference when breaking nodes, but things were different now.

The wreckage around him was ample evidence of the potency of his soul.

The nine streams started to enclose the node, each attuned core forming one superimposed barrier after another, alternating between life and death until they all were sealed by his inner core. Half an hour later, Zac felt the familiar buildup. Reality shifted as a sharp pain erupted in his throat. But not a drop of blood was lost this time.

There was some internal bleeding though, so Zac activated [Surging Vitality] again as his heart drummed from the excitement. His idea had worked even better than expected, with the mental barriers providing even more protection than the [Chainbreaking Pill]. The makeshift barriers had ultimately collapsed from the outburst, but that was partly due to him being unaccustomed to controlling so many threads of Mental Energy at the same time.

The moment the inner layers had been attacked, he had lost control over the outer ones, making things a bit chaotic. As long as he had some practice, Zac believed he would be able to double the strength of his barriers.

Zac felt a surge of glee that almost matched the one he felt after evolving his soul as he took out a Supreme Nexus Crystal to begin the process of filling the nodes. Having successively opened the node in his throat without much issue was a huge accomplishment. Certainly, he had used pills to lessen the impact drastically, but Zac knew that the biggest obstacle of being a mortal in the E-grade had finally been overcome.

With his previous preparations along with the mental barriers and [Spiritual Ice], he was finally confident in tackling the final 25 levels of the E-grade without breaking his brain. It might have cost him a fortune and a lot of headaches, but he was finally there. Now, he could fully turn his attention to the D-grade.

A couple of days passed until the small whirlpool in his throat finally gained a momentum of its own, prompting a surge of Cosmic Energy to course through his pathways before calming down. He had reached level 125 in his human class, and he immediately opened his quest screen with anticipation.

Empyrean Aegis (Class): Form one major and one supporting Dao Branch. Reward: Empyrean Aegis skill. (1/2)

The System wasn't holding back against this time around, demanding two Dao Branches to complete his quest. Even an elite like Catheya hadn't planned on going down that kind of difficult route until an opportunity presented itself. Then again, it could almost be considered a freebie for Zac since that he was planning on forming multiple Dao Branches anyway.

As for the name of the skill, it was almost definitely a defensive skill, which was exactly what he was lacking in his human form. It also put less pressure on the final skill evolution that awaited him; [Hatchetman's Spirit]. If he hadn't been given this kind of skill from the quest, he would have been forced to somehow turn his domain skill into a more defensively oriented one.

As long as this skill delivered, he could focus on strengthening the domain aspects of [Hatchetman's Spirit] instead. It was perfect since Zac had found some inspiration in the forest of life before. He would hopefully be able to recapture that feeling down the road as long as he traveled the other life-attuned zones for a bit.

Having filled the nodes in his human side, Zac quickly rebuilt his cabin before swapping over to his Draugr side. Another few days passed until he reached level 125 there as well, prompting him to gain a second class quest as expected.

Desperation's End (Class): Extinguish one million souls. Reward: Desperation's End skill. (0/1,000,000).