

## The Fall 820

### Chapter 820: Gunking Up

Zac had prepared for this step since he accepted Kaldor's challenge, and with his latest spending spree, he had everything he needed to make the most out of his upcoming tribulations. So he made a beeline for his cultivation cave upon leaving the Contribution Store, and he arrived at the small island in the no-man's-land between life and death a few days later.

Years had passed since he leveled the local plant life during his second reincarnation, but the vegetation had long since regrown thanks to the dense ambient energy. There were no signs of any habitation, but Zac's surroundings suddenly shifted after he entered a dense patch of undergrowth and activated an array disk.

A latch appeared on the ground, and Zac opened it before jumping down. Behind him, the illusory arrays sprung back to life, hiding the entrance from any passer-by. Further and further down Zac went, until he reached a cave 200 meters beneath the ground. The air shimmered as he passed through a checkpoint, and he was immediately assaulted by the ferocious waves of stockpiled energies.

Almost three years ago Zac had looked into creating this place to restart his Soul Strengthening cultivation, since he figured he might as well work on his soul while he digested what he had learned in the Wilderness. Building such a place on top of the island felt too exposed for a permanent residence, so Zac decided to dig into the ground.

To his surprise, Zac had stumbled into this place by chance. The cave was clearly manmade, but it had taken advantage of the energy veins of the neighboring zones to create a gathering formation. It was far superior to the one Triv had erected inside his Cultivation Cave back home, and even more efficient than the gathering array he had purchased in the Contribution Store. Thankfully, there was no cultivator around, and the signs indicated that it had been abandoned for a long, long time.

It looked like Zac wasn't the first life-death-cultivator trapped in the Orom World. Zac didn't know who his predecessor was since there were no messages or heritages left behind, but it had saved Zac a lot of effort. He only needed to make some minor alterations to make the energy flow better suit his Cultivation Method and erect a couple of arrays, and he was done.

A prayer mat was left in the center of the cave, and Zac was immediately inundated in the struggle between life and death as he walked toward it. He had already planned out how to extract as many benefits as possible from the tribulations, and leveling pills was just part of it.

He could do the same with his soul.

However, Zac didn't immediately start up the cultivation method, but he first slotted five Life-attuned Cosmic Crystals into an array, followed by five Miasma Crystals of similar rank. The powerful energies sealed inside the crystal joined the ambient energy, pushing the environment to the next level.

The expenditure was beyond exorbitant with each one of the crystals being worth hundreds of D-grade Nexus Coins, but they would last him over a month. More importantly, they allowed Zac to push the quality of his cultivation environment to a similar level as the hidden cave he had found at the bottom of the Twilight Chasm.

Next, Zac released some Void Energy to take out his [Mind's EyeAgate] before slotting it in a grove just behind the Prayer mat. Going further from his prayermat, he installed an array disk the size of a barrel lid. On it, Zac placed an intricately engraved chest, and he immediately opened its lid.

Inside was the black and golden spiral-formed crystal of the twin-souled Realm Spirit, and they greedily started to absorb the energies in the cave the moment they were sealed. Even then, Zac saw how much weaker the lights were already, and he felt some regret as he placed his hands against the smooth crystal. He felt a weak nudge, proving that the spirits were still alive.

But he didn't do something soon, they'd perish. He had tried all kinds of things since he first took them out a few years back, from sealing to nurturing, but he couldn't replicate Qi'Sar's array at all. They definitely wouldn't last the full ten years that the old realm spirit mentioned. He would be lucky if they survived more than a year.

Occasionally letting them feast like this seemed to help a bit, but he knew they would stop absorbing the energies in a day or two, unable to continuously draw sustenance from the ambient energy. They were like plants dragged out of the soil, and anything he tried was just a temporary relief. Hopefully, he'd return to Earth in time.

If not, it was simply not fated. Perhaps the spirits would turn into some useful treasure upon their death.

Finally done with his preparations, Zac returned to his prayer mat and took out two of the bottles he had bought. Zac left them alone for now, and instead withdrew the densely inscribed Array Disk for his Soul Strengthening Manual.

The cultivation methods of the first two reincarnations were simple enough. Zac had essentially been able to zone out and let the array do its thing, but those days were over. The third method of the [Nine Reincarnations Manual] required not only active participation, but also an actual understanding of life and death.

Five streams of Mental Energy were dragged out from Zac's soul as he activated the array. Four came from his life-attuned cores and one from his central core. Joining them was a stream of insight coming from the Bodhi Tree in his Soul Aperture. Zac had long realized that using his human side to cultivate Death didn't help him at the current stage of his method, so he had swapped over to circulating life when human since that was what he was more accustomed to.

The continuous drain of energy would keep going for almost an hour, but Zac would be busy during that time. The outer cores of his soul suddenly sped up as Zac imposed his will on them, and their trajectories grew more and more inscrutable. Of course, Zac was extremely familiar with what the patterns entailed. They represented his Daos of life and death.

Their movements drew two separate pathways in the hidden space of his soul; one of life, and one of death. The cores were often precariously close to colliding, but they never actually collided. However, a great tension was building up through the pathways, and Zac almost felt like he was watching two armies simulating a war.

This simulation wasn't autonomous. It required constant input from Zac as he visualized the trajectories and what they meant. A single slip-up would noticeably reduce the effect of the cycle, and resting for

just a minute could ruin it altogether. Zac glanced at one of the pill bottles with hesitation, but he ultimately chose to wait.

Fifty-five minutes passed as Zac continuously pushed the cores through countless revolutions of life and death. Finally, a torrent of life-empowered energy came crashing back from the array, and Zac immediately uncorked one of the bottles and poured out a pill into his hand. The small pill was shockingly powerful, and it had emitted such immense fluctuations it almost managed to hypnotize him.

He still wasn't sure this would work, but he threw the golden bead into his mouth before it made him lose control over the trajectories in his mind. The pill melted before he even had a chance to swallow, and just a moment later a sandstorm of golden grains had entered his Soul Aperture.

It was the medicinal efficacy of the pill he had just ingested, the [Divine Elevation Pellet]. It could tenuously be considered a soul nurturing pill, but it wasn't something designed for mentalists. In fact, no self-respecting mentalist would willingly use this pill, even though its name was quite impressive.

It was a unique pill of the Orom World, sold by some unknown Emerald Badge from what Zac had gathered. Its use was simple; it forcibly empowered souls with life, providing the user with Contribution Points and a somewhat stronger soul. On the surface, it sounded great for any cultivator walking the path of life. A soul more in tune with their Dao, without using any Soul Strengthening Method at that. What's not to like?

The problem was that the pill contained a large amount of impurities, meaning it provided short-term benefits while potentially causing big issues down the road. It was a pill born from the desperation of this prison, where it was better to sacrifice some of your potential than being culled. It would buy the warriors some time, giving them a chance to turn things around.

Obviously, things rarely worked out for these people, but it was still a pill that had a steady demand in Samsara's Edge. Unsurprisingly, there were quite a few similar pills on the market, for various attunements. Of course, the second bottle Zac had prepared was the same, but for his undead side.

Zac was taking a calculated risk here. Adding impurities to his soul at this stage might interfere with his Dao Breakthroughs, but he dared use these pills since he had suppressed his cultivation for so long. He was right at the cusp for both the Daos, and even if he met resistance, he could simply eat an additional Dao Fruit to crash through the barrier.

The ferocious sandstorm instinctively sought to join the returning surge of Mental Energy, but Zac held half of it back, instead pushing it into the four Divine Cores. Meanwhile, he guided empowered torrent toward another spot of his soul; a small golden globe that was barely visible next to the far larger outer cores.

The ninth outer core.

This little pellet had been formed the first time he activated the cultivation method, but it had been even smaller back then. Every time he practiced the [Nine Reincarnations Manual] since then, the new core had grown a little as it was flooded with energy from the other cores. By now, it was roughly a tenth the size of the original cores, and Zac estimated it would take around 15 years of daily cultivation to fully form it by normal means.

It wasn't a lot, but it also wasn't little.

Especially when considering that he would need nine cores of life and death to reach the maximum number of cores. And that was just the first half of the method. Going by his observations, there had to be a subsequent period of strengthening his cores after they were all fully formed. Altogether, Zac figured the third reincarnation would require a century of focused cultivation.

A century was not too much, even for an E-grade cultivator, but it showed why so few bothered with Soul Strengthening. By Zac's estimates, the third Reincarnation he was working on was equivalent to the second half of the E-grade in terms of stage. To spend a hundred years in the E-grade, where you spent almost 18 hours a day on Soul Cultivation, was unacceptable to most people.

It wouldn't leave enough time for all the other parts of cultivation, which meant it would either ruin your momentum or leave you with glaring weaknesses. Only a Soul Cultivator would feel this trade-off worthwhile. Or Soul Cultivators and Zac, rather. Even then, the Mentalists would probably be able to speed up the progress compared to someone like Zac, who didn't have a unique soul any special affinities in that regard.

His only strength seemed to be that his soul had unlimited potential, and it didn't get stuck in any bottlenecks, just like his body. Most people couldn't cultivate Soul Strengthening Methods even if they wanted, considering their souls would simply stop improving after a bit. Their souls would strengthen as their realms increased, but that was the extent of it.

But Zac was unwilling to spend a whole century on the third reincarnation, no matter how useful an empowered soul was. Luckily, he had found some ways to shorten that duration. First of all, there were the two splinters who continuously fed his soul with high-grade energy. Secondly, he had realized that the stronger the outer cores were, the quicker each revolution would be.

And the quickest way to improve the outer core was to snatch various opportunities. He had seen just how much time he had saved on the Second Reincarnation by visiting the Twilight Ocean. Without the unique environment and all the lucky encounters in that place, he would still not have passed the Second Reincarnation, even if had circulated the method every single day.

Even the life-and-death struggles had honed his mind and shored up his foundations. Secluded cultivation simply couldn't compare.

This didn't change with the third reincarnation. He had already consumed some resources he found in Aia Ouro's Spatial Crystal along with some treasures in his Spatial Rings. These treasures had helped him not only grow his main core but also condense the attuned energies in his outer cores.

He would have to keep looking for materials to speed up the process, be it pills, natural treasures, or unique cultivation grounds.

Hours passed as three more rotations were finished, where Zac ate another pellet after every single revolution. The fifth divine core had enjoyed shocking improvements, but Zac could sense that he would only be able to use these pills for another cultivation session before they lost their efficacy. Even now, a good chunk of the golden mist was expunged by his body before it even reached his Soul Aperture.

Furthermore, his Divine Cores all sported a series of dark-grey spots now, the impurities that had been hidden in the golden storm. Another hour passed and Zac took a fifth pill as the energy from the fifth revolution returned. He was hoping he could change what was about to happen next by controlling the medicinal energy, but he ran into a dead-end this time.

Zac could only look on with some disappointment as the stream of life-attuned energies dissipated into a haze, failing to reach the fifth core.

As the cores moved through his Soul Aperture, the energies were gradually returned to the four outer cores. That, unfortunately, didn't do anything to strengthen them though. It only put them in an excitable state, just like how the seas had started raging in the previous reincarnation. Even then, Zac had to continue, completing one revolution after another where most of the energy was lost to the void.

Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to start up the second half of his method. Zac still couldn't quite comprehend the exact reason for this limitation. If possible, he would have preferred to focus all nine revolutions in rapidly building up the missing outer cores, but he was restricted by the number of cores he had completed.

Four fully-formed cores meant he would be able to infuse the fifth core four times and no more.

Each additional core would allow the trajectories of the outer cores to grow more complex, which in turn would improve his soul in all kinds of ways, including how many energy infusions he could complete. If he had only managed to form one or two outer cores of each attunement, he would have been forced to spend twice as much time on the third reincarnation. At least.

Furthermore, the more outer cores he formed, the quicker the next formation would become. For example, the ninth and final core should only take half the time the fifth did, considering it would be infused eight times per cycle. Besides, putting the outer cores in an excitable state didn't come without its benefits, so Zac let nature take its course as he finished all nine cycles.

By the time the ninth revolution was complete, the Divine Cores moved almost twice as fast as their opposites, and the Miasmic Cores were greatly restrained.

Having finished the first half of the cultivation session, Zac swapped over to his Draugr form and began the work on the second set of revolutions. Just like in his human form, he took a pill each time for the first four revolutions. This one was exactly the same as the [Divine Elevation Pellet], though it was called [Ruin's Gift] and forcibly expanded souls with the taint of death.

Thankfully, Zac was able to form the fifth Miasmic Core simultaneously as the Divine Core, cutting the time spent in half. Once more, four sets of empowered streams of Mental Energy nurtured the growing core before the whole set of Miasmic Cores became more and more frantic, their movements no longer as suppressed.

Zac looked at his middle core that had silently been hovering in the heart of it all during the whole process. As the outer cores had grown more excitable, small motes had started to fall toward the central core, landing on its surface like a thin layer of snow. However, with only four sets of outer cores, the conflict still couldn't reach a level of conflict that also refined the main core, so it simply grew without getting more condensed.

This process would continue for over an hour until the outer cores left their empowered state. With both sets finished, Zac no longer needed to provide any input. The outer cores were like wind-up toys, moving on their own now that Zac had staked and infused energy for the better part of a day.

He could even move around a bit by this point, though too much would shorten the duration his soul got nurtured. Zac stayed put for now, and he took out a third pill bottle and swallowed two pills inside. A ferocious surge of energy barged into his mind, and the small motes of snow were swept up by a blizzard that engulfed his central core.

A burst of synthetic progress was added to his unattuned core. Just like the other two pills, Zac had intentionally chosen a pill that provided huge benefits but contained large amount of Pill Toxins. Unfortunately, Zac found that the unattuned pill wasn't as effective as the two attuned ones. He had feared as much, considering the large amount of resources like this he had consumed not long ago.

Still, it was better than nothing, and Zac figured that it might save him a month or two of hard work. Soon enough, his mind returned to its normal state, signifying that the session was over. Even then, Zac sat unmoving for almost 20 minutes, not immediately continuing his training plan.

But he knew he was delaying the inevitable, he had already made his choice. With great reluctance, he swapped out his prayer mat with a large barrel. Next, he took out a large stone urn sealed with a dense layer of talismans. He took a deep breath before ripping off the talismans. This uncorked the container and allowed him to gradually fill the barrel with its contents.

Zac thought he had been mentally prepared, but he quickly realized his folly. His hair stood on end, his eyes watered, and he was hit by a wave of nausea that almost knocked him out. This was unlike anything Zac had encountered before. It was beyond his scope of comprehension.

The grey viscous mixture smelled like an embattled porta-potty three days into a festival where nothing but eggs and hot sauce was served.

The stench was so overbearing that it could be considered both a mental and a physical attack wrapped into a single odor. Plugging his nose and sealing his pores had done nothing to alleviate the horror – the stench almost seemed sentient, and it refused to be denied.

Yet Zac kept pouring. The road of cultivation was full of tribulations, and this was just the latest one. Even then, Zac felt this one might be even more difficult to overcome than the Heavenly Lightning.