

## The Fall 377

### Chapter 377: Risk and Reward

It was clearly not only Zac who had struggled tremendously to withstand the onslaught of impressions unleashed by the Dao Funnel. Everyone had various degrees of struggle written on their faces, with most in the building even shaking as they had their eyes shut tight as they strained to endure.

Zac's mind churned as he resisted the constant lure of the truths of the universe, and he tried to make his sluggish mind find a way to lessen everyone's burden. He finally remembered the plan from earlier, and he slammed down at a second stone disk next to him, immediately cracking it.

But his addled mind soon realized that someone had already opened up the Origin Dao to the third layer, and when his eyes reached the people sitting outside the arches he realized they were even worse off than those sitting inside.

The Origin Dao might be like the Cosmic Water; Great in small quantities, but it could quickly become a dangerous poison if you indulged in too much of it. Perhaps someone like the Great Redeemer would be able to absorb it all, but he was at Peak D-Grade and he was perhaps planning on absorbing it over decades.

What they were doing right now might be equivalent to jumping into the Nexus Water-pond to take a bath. The only difference being that it was their souls that would take the hit rather than their bodies getting blasted to pieces from absorbing too much energy. That wasn't the only problem though, even if it might be part of the reason almost everyone seemed to have one foot in the grave.

Something was assaulting the people stuck in meditative poses. They were pitch-black specters, reminiscent of those poor souls who had been corrupted by the splinter in the Eastern Trigram sect. Perhaps they were just another set of hallucinations brought by the massive surge of Origin Dao, but Zac felt a huge amount of resentment coming from the ghosts, which was completely different from the enigmatic and almost addictive feeling that came from the other hallucinations.

The ghosts weren't attacking anyone, it rather looked like they were praying to or even begging for mercy. Others held their translucent head in their hands, radiating hopelessness. Zac's thoughts immediately went to the visions he was forced to endure while he formed his Dao Fragment. Was this the souls of those that Salvation killed?

They flocked around most people, though Zac noted with relief that his sister was completely spared. The same went for Ogras and Janos, while a few more were less crowded as well. His sister had somehow managed to make her way back to her spot in the second layer, and he realized that it was her who had cracked open the array, releasing the Origin Dao to the outer layer.

He couldn't confirm that the ghosts were actually harming anyone since they never touched anyone, but he did note that those that were more crowded seemed to be struggling more. A lot of them were bleeding out of their noses and ears, looking like they had suffered some type of hemorrhage.

But what was even worse was that he saw indistinct silver fractals appearing on the foreheads of those who struggled the most, and even in his currently muddled state he had no problem remembering where he had seen that particular design before. It was the same fractal that shone on Salvation's

forehead, though his tattoo was far more intricate than the nascent inscriptions on the people around him.

Was the funnel trying to convert everyone around it, turning them into raving lunatics like Salvation himself?

Worry gripped Zac's heart he and arduously got up to his feet in his eagerness to help everyone. But what should he do? Everyone was in an extremely fragile state, likely fighting a desperate battle with their souls on the line. Dragging everyone outside might have the opposite reaction of what he hoped, as it might cause a disturbance that made them lose focus and destroy their minds.

His eyes darted to the crystal pillar next to him, but he eventually looked away from that as well. The soldiers stationed outside had standing orders to quickly evacuate everyone in case the arrays were deactivated, and that would be the same as him dragging people outside himself.

He needed to do something by himself, but he was in no condition to start swinging his axe around in the building. Not that he thought he could actually destroy any of the ghosts with [Verun's Bite]. But he did possess one weapon that seemed effective against the dead, so he released his Dao field for Dao of Trees, hoping it would bring some vitality to everyone while it drove the ghosts away.

His soul was already battered and bruised, feeling like when he had overtaxed his mental energy during a fight, but he persisted in using it when he saw many people regain some color on their faces. Even the silvery fractal that had appeared on a few foreheads had started to dissipate slightly.

Best yet was that the ghosts started to fall apart, releasing soundless wails as they turned into motes of dust.

The Seed of Trees worked wonders, so he kept his Dao Field going for as long as he could. But his vision started swimming after only 30 seconds, and he was forced to stop. At least everyone looked noticeably better by that point, and Zac could only pray that the extra energy would allow everyone to beat the side-effects of the Dao Funnel on their own.

He believed that as long as they managed to improve their Dao Seeds the corruption would be pushed away by the pure energies of the Daos, just like when he condensed his fragment. The moment the two Stars appeared all the discordant visions had been pushed aside, allowing him to finish his meditation in peace.

This was all he could do, as his mind was starting to tear and distort once more from the beckoning visions and intrusive whispers. He sat down at the mat again, which helped a little bit with the chaos in his mind. He closed his eyes and desperately focused on the small space that he created when he managed to form a Dao Seed from his own effort.

He needed to turn calamity into an opportunity once more since the funnel obviously wasn't out of Origin Dao just yet. It was either that or flee from this place, taking the winnings before losing everything. But Zac wouldn't stop now that he had come this far. This was a unique opportunity, and he couldn't leave his people behind in any case.

His first instinct was to go for his second fragment since both Trees and Sanctuary were at the peak by now. But he reluctantly had to give up on that idea. Forming the first Fragment had been extremely

exhausting, and his condition was exacerbated by providing a respite to those around him. He wasn't confident in forming another Fragment as things stood.

Besides, there was the issue of balance. He was afraid that if he formed a Life-attuned Fragment while his Dao Seeds of Rot and Hardness were still only at High mastery, then his evolution of Undying Bulwark might become messed up. It was a safer option to work on his two final Dao Seeds instead, even if the benefits might be worse.

He desperately closed his eyes again to shut out the hallucinations, and this time he focused on the Seed of Rot, going over all aspects of rot and putrefaction he could. Rot was the seed that he felt was furthest from upgrading, whereas Hardness still had the residual boost of his Dao Vision and recent battles with extremely sturdy foes like the Battleroach King and the Cyborg. Even the imperviousness of the environment in the Underworld had given him some inspiration.

Zac quickly slipped into a deep meditate state again, his mind diving toward that empty universe where only the Dao existed. But just like last time his ascent was intercepted by an onslaught of visions.

Various scenes where he killed his foes with the help of the Seed of Rot started to flash by his eyes. This time the fights almost exclusively took place in the Underworld against the Roaches and the invaders. But just as he expected the visions turned on him soon enough, and he soon found himself the subject of an endless cycle of rotting away before everything just turned into a chaotic blur.

But the vision felt far less real now, like a weak mimicry of the terrifying experience he endured the last time. His hypothesis had been correct. Part of the trouble had come from forming a Fragment under these weird conditions. Upgrading a normal Seed might prove a deadly challenge for others, but Zac had long gotten used to this sort of struggle due to the Splinter stuck in his head.

Both his body and soul were stronger the usual as well, something that he had realized long ago. This had only been further improved by the unknown energy that continuously seeped out from the Splinter of Oblivion. Even though upgrading his Seed was easier it was still a draining task. It was like the Origin Dao from the funnel was a reservoir of tainted water, and he had to manually siphon out all the poison before he could drink it.

Time passed as Zac worked with everything he had to complete his goal. He didn't know how long it took until the funnel was completely drained of energy. After improving Rot he didn't even dare open his eyes again since his mind felt extremely fragile after enduring another round of visions. He didn't trust himself to not go astray if he looked upon the various hallucinations that the Origin Dao brought on, and could only keep focusing on his Daos.

But with risks also came rewards. Not only had he gained the Dao Fragment that he hoped for, but he even managed to push his final two Seeds to Peak mastery. In fact, after being forced into those cycles of death and despair he felt he had gained more than just the final mastery of the respective Seed, and that forming a Fragment related to death on his own wasn't impossible.

He only needed some sort of spark of inspiration to bring enough momentum. Zac was elated by the amazing results of the funnel. He had been happy if he just got the fragment and nothing else, but he got so much more than that.

Luckily the effect of the Dao Funnel seemed to have subsided by the time Zac managed to upgrade his Seed of Hardness as well, which was lucky since he wasn't sure what he would do if he had no Dao Seed to focus on. Pained groans could be heard from all directions as people arduously got to their feet.

Zac slowly opened his bleary eyes, taking in the surroundings for the first time since he unleashed his Dao Field. All the ghosts were gone, as were the tempting hallucinations in the building. However, his eyes were drawn to the dense fractals inscribed into the walls, and he even forgot to check on those around him.

"Don't look at the walls," Kenzie tiredly said, dragging Zac out of his reverie. "The Origin Dao changed the fractals somehow. They contain the Dao now."

Zac quickly looked away, since he was in no condition to keep pondering on the Dao. But horror flooded his heart when the first things he saw were the unmoving bodies on the floor.

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A prickling sensation entered Void's head, prompting him to look far into the distance. He even forgot about the half-dead anointed he held by its throat, or the hundreds of unmoving Zhix warriors strewn across the royal chamber.

"So they actually managed to open it," Void muttered, some delight filling his heart.

The change in fate made him lose interest in interrogating the miscreation in his hand, and he cracked its huge neck before throwing the oversized Zhix to the side like a piece of garbage. He had wondered if those humans would ever figure out what they held in their possession, but he had underestimated them.

Less than a month had passed since they got their hands on the Funnel, but they had already managed to release the seeds stored inside. Void had feared that it would take them years, but perhaps having enslaved a couple of alien forces worked in that man's favor. He had even considered throwing out a hint about the Funnel when he met the Super Brother-Man, but in the end he opted against it, afraid that it would increase their vigilance.

"Do you think it will work?" the curious voice of Inevitability asked from the side.

Void looked over at his child, sighing at the sight of her face full of revelry. What would their Lord think of such a bloodthirsty subordinate? Slaughter was just a means to an end, not something to base one's cultivation around. That path was a dead end, where you were no better than a beast. He knew he would have to educate her better going forward.

But such a small detail couldn't dampen the sense of victory in his heart.

"It is too early to tell," Void said with a small smile as he once again looked in the direction of Mr. Atwood's small island kingdom.

"Our lord is not so easily denied. It's always good to have a back-up plan."