

## The Fall 407

### Chapter 407: Mastery

Sweat ran down Zac's back as he weaved back and forth among the pack of plagued Apes. Their quest was to cleanse the area of corruption, but Zac had found the insane beasts living in the area excellent sparring partners.

The progression through the third floor had gone quite smoothly, but the quests started to become harder. Twice they decided to just find and kill the guardian rather than completing the quest as it was simply more convenient that waste multiple days on a single level of the third floor.

One of the times they had been tasked to lead the defense of a town beset by a beast horde for three days until reinforcements could arrive. Zac had hoped to use those beasts to work on his skills, but they proved too weak to make any real progress. After a few hours all of them were tired of killing an endless deluge of critters who were only around level 50 to 60, and Ogras flashed over to kill the alpha to end the level early.

The other time some knowledge of arrays was needed, and neither of them would be able to solve the problem without spending a couple of days in research. They once more decided to not waste time on such a low level and destroyed the body of the deceased ancestor that the array was supposed to restrain. It made the descendants quite pissed off, but it didn't matter to them as they moved on to the next world through the array.

They had also gotten a chance at seeing Galau's skills in battle, and Zac had to admit that he was much stronger than expected. Due to his timid character and somewhat cowardly nature Zac had always thought that he wanted to switch occupation mainly due to lack of talent in combat. But that probably wasn't the case.

A red flare had illuminated the sky when they arrived at the sixth level, making Zac hurry over with the help of [Loamwalker]. He had found Galau desperately fighting off a huge pack of mangy wolves with a large two-handed sword. Both the choice of weapon and the aggressive battle-style created an odd disconnect with the usually timid youth, and Zac could only attribute it to his Clan.

They seemed to be solely focused in one direction in hopes of one day creating a real powerhouse, and all their youth were probably required to follow the same heritage. The heritage itself was one that felt pretty similar to his own battle-style, one of full-frontal assaults and massive swings causing widespread destruction.

The sword even contained a familiar feeling as it crushed rather than cut the beasts, and Zac realized it was a high-tier Dao Seed of Heaviness. Galau had chosen a different path than himself though, so the feeling the swings emitted were slightly foreign to Zac. They seemed to go more in the direction of Ilvere, focusing on momentum and impact.

The scene had made Zac question how someone with such a class would swap into a mercantile class, and the answer was simple. Galau's hope was to gain the option of choosing a traveling merchant class with the help of his year of trading in the Base Town, and the impressive profits he had accrued.

Such a class would be a hybrid class, focusing both on battle and business. After all, one would need the prerequisite power to defend oneself while traveling the endless worlds of the multiverse. A merchant couldn't simply put his life and his goods in the hands of hired guards, he needed some capabilities of his own in case the guards proved insufficient or if they even turned on him.

Otherwise, the third floor was not much different compared to the second. The settings of the quest were quite similar to the second floor, with the differences being the enemies being stronger, and that they started in different locations.

Most average warriors they encountered were between level 60 and 75, and the level guardians were all recently evolved just like the snake of the second floor. The three had continued to push through the levels at a rapid pace, and only stopped their progress at the 8th level at Zac's insistence.

His body was finally as good as new, perhaps even better than usual as the Splinter was still completely silent in his mind. That together with the setting made Zac confident that he could finally make some progress with his skills. He had essentially spent the first two floors as a vacation to decompress from the constant running back and forth on Earth.

It was only after he had slowed down in the Base Town that he realized he was tired to the bone. Stress and trauma had accumulated on top of each other, but he had simply pushed it deep down as there were too many things that only he could handle. And if he didn't, then people would die.

Besides, the enemies were too weak for him to be able to push himself at all, which made it pretty much impossible to improve his skills. Simply activating a skill over and over wasn't enough to improve the proficiency of the skills. It was as a lot more efficient to find insight in the midst of battle.

And the monkeys were simply perfect sparring partners.

The corruption they were supposed to root out had turned them extremely aggressive and almost as tireless as zombies, and their bodies were sturdy enough to take a beating without dropping. Best of all, there was a huge number of them occupation the valley, so the risk of him running out of targets in the short run was quite slim unless he unleashed [Deforestation].

A punch imbued with murky energy ripped toward him, but he effortlessly redirected the force downward with his palm, giving him a huge opening to cut the beast's head clean off. The edge of [Verun's Bite] was already by the throat of the monkey, but it only left a shallow cut before Zac backed off again.

The monkey became doubly enraged after having been toyed like that, and a burst of black energy rose from its sturdy frame.

Zac felt he had thought about the Dao in a too shallow a manner until now. He had considered them almost the same as a skill, a boost that would make his active skills more powerful. But the Dao was so much more than that. The Dao was the deeper truths of the universe, what everything was based on.

This was something he had realized after talking with Galau over the past days. The youth wasn't some great warrior, and neither was he from some peak force in the sector. But his family could be considered a strong Peak D-Grade force with hundreds of D-Grade warriors, and they had a rich warrior culture.

The way the youth spoke about the Dao was a lot deeper and more reverent compared to Zac, like it was the basis of everything. Even worse, Galau hadn't strictly said it, but he had indicated that if Zac didn't get a deeper grasp of the Dao, then he risked getting stuck in a bottleneck. Or even worse, create a shaky foundation for future cultivation.

This was something that Zac absolutely wanted to avoid, but he somewhat knew the reason for his current predicament. For one he came from a world recently integrated, and the Dao wasn't an ingrained part of his life yet. But more importantly, he had advanced too fast.

Not only that, but he had also done it mostly through artificial means. Some of his insights came from battle, but it was mostly his skill visions and treasures that had propped up his Dao through unnatural means.

His situation with his Dao insights was akin to Pill Toxicity as he saw it. He had eaten too many 'pills' related to the Dao, and while he had gained a tremendous burst in power in just one short year, it had damaged his foundations. He felt he needed to get a better command of his Daos if he wanted to keep smoothly progressing in the future.

Having a lacking understanding of his own Daos would not only negatively impact his fighting prowess, but it might hamper him in all kinds of ways.

Alyn often talked about the importance of a foundation. The most important part of becoming a successful cultivator was taking things one step at a time, and not hurrying for quick gains. Moving too quickly might inadvertently cut your path of cultivation short, as you find yourself having created a cracked foundation that couldn't support your continued progress.

Luckily there wasn't any actual toxicity in his body, he was only suffering from progressing too quickly. The problem was easier to solve than such a troublesome matter like actual pill toxicity. He would simply have to slow down his cultivation as soon as he had dealt with all the threats to Earth.

He would take a couple of years to digest everything he had learned since the start of the integration and stabilize his foundations while shoring up his weaknesses. It would slow down his progress, but it would probably also quicken it in the long run. Besides, wasn't there some time to do it now?

He kept the Fragment of the Axe active in his axe as he tried to pry out all the secrets it contained. The words written at the beginning of his guide to formations felt all the more poignant as he marveled in the feeling of man and axe becoming one.

It is folly to believe the study of formations to be differentiated from other pursuits such as Alchemy or even fighting. All are children to the same parent, the boundless Dao.

It was not that his skills became stronger by infusing them with the Dao of the Axe. The skills themselves were part of the Dao, and imbuing them with the truth of their origin allowed them to exhibit their real power.

Or something like that, Zac couldn't be too sure.

But he felt he was on the correct path, and he kept at it for hours, a lone human fighting a sea of enraged beasts. The church that had 'hired' them for this mission stayed outside the valley, as the corruption could affect people as well.

However, Zac had found that his Dao of the Coffin had no trouble refining the energy just like with the poison, grinding it down to unattuned Energy that was expelled from his body. Zac suspected that if he wasn't stuck in a bottleneck he'd even be able to use the cleansed corruption to open up nodes, though he would have to sit in this valley for years to absorb enough energy for a single node.

But Zac felt it was an important distinction. He might not be able to absorb Cosmic Energy like a Cultivator, but he could perhaps build his own system. He could get himself poisoned on purpose, and then slowly convert the poison into energy.

He wasn't sure if it was efficient enough for it to actually be worth the time and suffering, but it was worth keeping in mind. For now, he let his Dao Fragment passively course through his body as he focused on the axe.

There would be time to work on the Dao of the coffin after they had left Galau on the 30th level.

He had considered swapping over to his Draugr form in this secluded valley, but he had eventually decided against it. He really wanted to try his two new skills, but he still didn't have a too great a grasp on Galau's capabilities. The Allbright nobleman might be spying on him at this very moment, it wasn't like he had the ability to know if that was the case.

He had already drawn a large enough target on his back from his actions, and he didn't want to tack on the fact that he ran around with two classes. Who knew how the reaction would be if that got out to the forces waiting in the Base Town.

It didn't mean he had nothing to do just because he couldn't work on his Undying Bulwark class. His primal axe kept sweeping along the aggressive monkeys following a set pattern, switching between sweeping arcs meant for widespread destruction, and quick jabs meant to maim or grapple enemies.

It was the method provided by [Axe Mastery], and he had been working on pushing that skill toward the peak the past day. He was swapping between using the training fractals to guide him for an hour and then trying to apply those tactics in battle against his extremely willing sparring partners.

The monkeys were luckily extremely fearful of his Dao Field for the Dao of the Coffin, likely because it could destroy the corruption in their bodies. The moment he unleashed his Dao Field, which now had a diameter of over a hundred meters if he pushed it, the monkeys would run for the hills.

Pushing Axe Mastery to the peak was probably not something that would help him in the tower, but it was still something that needed to be done. It was proof of a basic grasp of his weapon, and something that would positively impact his class choices. How would he get a good axe class if he couldn't even be bothered to max out his most basic axe skill first?

His efforts paid off soon enough, and a prompt told him that he had finally reached the peak of the skill. A familiar sense of pressure in his mind made Zac's eyes lit up, and he quickly flashed away from the valley while he blasted his Dao Field at full force to deter the monkeys from following him.

He found a secluded spot and put multiple layers of arrays down before he sat down and closed his eyes. The skill had actually provided him with another vision, and Zac's heart beat with excitement as he let the vision take him away.