

## The Fall 748

### Chapter 748: Imprints

Zac woke up with a start, his still mind scattered by the electrifying experience he'd just endured. He instinctively raised his arms to block the punishment from above, but he soon realized the oppressive presence of the Heavens was gone. It still took him some time for his mind to snap back into focus, and he breathed in relief upon realizing his surroundings weren't shrouded in oppressive darkness.

He was still illuminated by the dark gold of the sky above the surface, meaning he hadn't been dragged into the depths once more. He looked around to orient himself, and he realized that he was actually hanging from a ledge, the four chains of [Love's Bond] lodged into the wall to prevent him from being carried away by the currents.

It looked like Alea had saved his bacon when the Lightning Tribulation had knocked him out. A wave of shame hit him, and he shook his head as he dragged himself up to the ledge. He had entered the valley to find a way for Alea to evolve, yet it was he who had snatched the opportunity in the place.

Certainly, the egg was impossible to bring away even after he had risked it all, but he hadn't even stopped to consider whether [Love's Bond] might have wanted that amazing bead of pure light as well. He had just shot forward and gobbled it up like a frenzied beast.

"I'll find a way to make it up to you, I promise," Zac sighed as he caressed one of the chains, but there was no response as usual.

However, there was one startling change, and Zac looked at the chain in his hand with marvel. It was still pure black like it had been since the start, but it was now covered in a somewhat familiar pattern. The engravings were black as well, but they emitted a dense aura of death, making them light up under the scrutiny of [Cosmic Gaze].

The script didn't seem like an actual skill fractal or something like that, but they rather reminded Zac of the markings on the Stele of Conflict. Of course, their instilled meaning wasn't at the same level. The stele held the fundamental truths of conflict, profundity at its highest level. Meanwhile, it looked like [Love's Bond] had been marked by the deathly runes that had surged like a storm in the valley.

A thought struck Zac, and he took out [Verun's Bite] as well. As expected, the axe was covered in similar brands. These markings were golden in color rather than the black of the coffin, and they formed a spiderweb-like array with the red veins that already covered the bone of the edge. Zac looked down at the axe thoughtfully, not sure what to make of the situation.

It really looked like he would have to do something soon.

His axe was already leaning toward life before this, both from the nature of beastcrafted weapons and from the treasures it had eaten. It was instilled with the unsurpassed lifeforce of the dragons, and it had drunk the blood of innumerable beasts to complement its nature. Now, it was covered with patterns that held the essence of Life.

While it was great for his human class, it might become a problem for his current form. Should he get another axe to complement Verun? Or should he try to instill another set of brands on the weapon, adding death to the life? Both solutions had their pros and cons, but now wasn't the time to go over it.

Things had gone out of control once again, and he looked at the surroundings with some helplessness. The mountain that held the secluded valley was partly gone, ripped at least into two parts. The ledge he was sitting on was probably a section of the edge of the valley judging by the scorched runes that were engraved on the rock around him.

But the rest of the valley itself was simply gone.

There was just ocean as far as the eye could see, meaning that the pedestal, the egg, and most of the runes most likely had been dragged to the depths of the Twilight Chasm by now. His whole body hurt, but he knew he couldn't stay. The last time he came to this place, the outburst was just a shadow of what he had unleashed today, and who knew how many elites were on the way to investigate the commotion.

He took one last look at the scorched walls, the marks that once held the tapestry of Twilight all but illegible by now, and he scratched the back of his head with a wry smile as he set off. For a moment there he had felt like a true Heaven's Chosen, seizing the Dao and bending it to his will. However, the True Heavens wasn't messing around, slapping him back to reality before he had a chance to properly enjoy the experience.

As to why he was mostly fine, it was clear his [Void Heart] had once more come through for him. It had been completely silent since he woke up a few moments ago, and Zac's chest was all pins and needles and covered in red scars that looked like angry veins. It was no doubt a side-effect of the node having drawn all the tribulation lightning into the void before it could cause any real damage.

Luckily, he had activated his [Void Zone] just before getting zapped the final time. It hadn't managed to impede the Tribulation Lightning at all for some reason, but it did allow him to avoid getting overwhelmed by Twilight Energy while out of commission. Going by the amount of Void Energy left in the tank, Zac figured he hadn't actually been unconscious for more than a couple of minutes.

Zac pushed through the churning waters as quick as he could muster, heading further toward the center of the chasm rather than back toward the edge. Almost an hour passed, at which point he was finally forced to deactivate the field of nullification that kept the Twilight Energy at bay. Zac braced himself for a struggle now that he didn't have his hidden node to help, but he was surprised to see that it wasn't that bad at all.

It was like the Twilight Energy was suddenly unable, or perhaps rather unwilling, to burrow into his body, and he was beset by less than a third of the invasive infiltration compared to before. His first instinct was that it was thanks to his breakthrough, but he soon concluded that wasn't the case. Having a greater foundation would help against the Twilight Energy, but the effect wasn't this pronounced.

Something else had changed, and Zac didn't need to be a betting man to figure that it was related to the events inside the valley. He wasn't sure if the effect was permanent or not, but for now, he would make the most of it as he created some distance from the shattered mountain.

Zac made good time over the next few hours, and he passed by four mountains until he finally stopped. At that point he found a secluded cave and sealed it up, hiding himself to go over his gains. Having the marks of his Path engraved on his Spirit Tools was an unexpected boon, but that obviously wasn't the biggest win of the day.

The blue screen listing his Dao appeared, and Zac looked at it with marvel.

Branch of the War Axe (Early): All attributes +50, Strength +2250, Dexterity +1000, Endurance +150, Wisdom +250. Effectiveness of Strength +25%.

Evolving the Dao to a Branch unfortunately didn't quite result in a doubling of its attributes, with the flat boost going from 2,250 to 4,000. However, the real gain with a Dao Branch was the force they brought to bear in a fight rather than the jump in stats. It was a qualitative leap in how they empowered skills, in a far more palpable way compared to the difference between a High and Peak Dao Fragment.

Zac had experienced the difference during his fight with Yanub Mettleleaf. His defenses had simply crumbled in the face of the treant's Dao Branch, like he was trying to block a raging flame with a paper sheet. With this, Zac felt he wouldn't be completely outmatched in a direct clash even with the rankers of the trial, though the top names no doubt were still a bit out of his reach even with this latest breakthrough.

Going into the valley he hadn't expected to progress his Dao at all, yet he walked out with a Dao Branch. With how recently he evolved his Fragment of the Axe to the peak, he figured he was years of building a foundation from actually taking this step. But that light had changed everything.

Thinking back to it, Zac still couldn't believe how magical that thing was. It was so far beyond any Dao Treasure or Origin Dao he had encountered so far. It was a blank slate, yet it contained everything. He hadn't even managed to absorb 1% of the light before it slipped out of his body, yet it had pushed him this far. If he had managed to make use of even half of its efficacy, he might very well have pushed all his Daos to the limits of the E-grade.

If he could only get more...

Zac quickly shook his head, knowing he was being too greedy. He hadn't even heard of something like that before, meaning it was beyond rare. Either it was something that could only be encountered by chance, or something that was hoarded by the people at the top. And after going over the events in the valley, Zac started to feel he had a better understanding of what was going on with that valley, and the implications weren't great.

The mystical Egg that Va Tapek made him bring here was some sort of purifier by the looks of it. The mountain had most likely contained an ancient gathering array, and the empowered Twilight Energy had entered the egg through the pedestal.

The egg, in turn, somehow purified and elevated the base concepts that was the foundation of Twilight Energy, and the result was the mysterious runes and Dao Clouds swirling around in the valley. However, even those miraculous things were just a by-product, with the essence of the egg's output being steered toward the light above the egg.

Zac had felt the effect of that light on his own Dao. It didn't connect him to the mighty, yet distant, Grand Dao like Yrial's impartment did. For a moment, he was the Dao. While the line shone on his soul, he had understood it as clearly as though it was his second nature.

Before he had entered, he hadn't actually been clear on what form his first Dao Branch should take. But seeing the runes of his path swirling around him, the clashing war between Life and Death, something

had clicked. Of course, it was all thanks to that light that guided the way, but it was till just as clear as before, in contrast to how he felt after most bouts of inspiration.

Focusing on his path had allowed him to learn and consolidate the part of the Dao of Conflict that he needed, infusing it into what was now the Branch of the War Axe. The added epithet of 'War' to his Dao was based on conflict, and it had been symbolized by the very struggle between life and death that was central to his path.

He was a bit unclear on the purpose of infusing Twilight into the miraculous light though. It had such an amazing effect in its pure state, and adding something external felt like it would just blemish it. Was it about efficacy, that the light was hard to absorb normally? The light had provided earthshattering benefits to an E-grade cultivator like him, but for a Monarch, it might be insufficient.

As to who was growing beads of supreme Twilight in the heart of the chasm, it wasn't hard to figure out. The real question was why the hell Va Tapek was working with the Eveningtide Asura. Until now, Zac had worked under the assumption that Catheya's Master had been working alone, or perhaps in conjunction with the other Monarchs from the Undead Empire.

But from the looks of it, that was not the case, unless he had completely misunderstood something about the purpose of that valley.

Zac quickly gave up though. There was simply too much he didn't know, from cultivation to the motives to the old monsters outside. But one thing was for sure; if Alvod found out he was behind this as well, then he might very well be in deep shit. Hopefully, his sight had been blocked after being booted by the System, but Zac still had a bad feeling about it.

Unable to do much about the situation, Zac instead turned his sight inward, and he breathed in relief upon seeing that his body was in its normal state. He still remembered how his body had been starting to transform for a moment, his skin turning green as markings covered his hands. In fact, he had seen that exact phenomenon before, on the avatar of the Eveningtide Asura. That was the second clue that he had inadvertently thrown a wrench into Alvod's plans, rather than Va Tapek's.

Zac had made a cursory scan before, but it really looked like the odd effect had been dispelled either by the Dao light, or perhaps by him renouncing the path of Twilight. Unlike his weapons, Zac didn't get a set of patterns of his own though. He still looked like a normal Draugr without any mysterious runes to represent his path. But perhaps there was something else that had changed with his body.

Miasma started coursing through his pathways following a set pattern, but there was no response from the energy around him. Zac tried again, this time with a different cultivation manual, but the result was the same. Nothing. He had held onto a small lingering hope after being so in tune with the cosmos for a while, but it looked like he still was a piddling mortal.

His affinity hadn't increased at all, and a few experiments confirmed that his Dao control wasn't any better either.

Still, Zac figured it might be for the best, and he finally turned his gaze toward his Soul Aperture. His soul might have been the area that most directly benefitted from being washed in the glow of the Dao. As expected, he felt that the oceans in his mind had once more been elevated to even greater heights, and

watching the waves crashing against each other almost felt like watching a Dao-instilled treasure like the Big Boss's Big Wall.

More importantly, it felt like the oceans were more in tune with himself. It wasn't like he could command them at will, but their insights better matched his own somehow. And it wasn't really a surprise. Before, they had mostly been infused by the insights hidden inside the Twilight Energy, with some craps coming from Divine Crystals and Miasma Crystals.

But now, the waters had gobbled up and copied the very essence of his path thanks to the bright light and the almost endless amount of Dao in the valley. The two avatars of Bodhi and Coffin looked mostly the same, but Zac noted that they were a bit larger compared to before. He didn't really know what that meant, but he figured it was a good thing since they also felt more 'real' somehow.

Perhaps it simply meant he had solidified his foundation, taking him one step closer to forming his other two branches.

The biggest transformation was obviously the Dao Avatar that represented his Branch of the War Axe. It still sat on top of his soul core, with an axe in its hand, but it almost felt like a real being rather than an avatar. Furthermore, it kept changing. Zac curiously observed the avatar as it kept transforming. The avatar had looked like him in his human form before, but it was now in a constant flux between his two identities.

One second it was a human, the next a Draugr, though the Draugr had his true appearance rather than the one Zac used for Arcaz Black. As it switched back and forth, so did the weapon in its hand change. Unsurprisingly, it was the very same axes Zac had conjured while forming the branch.

One was pitch-black and wrapped in chains, and it emitted an extremely oppressive aura. Zac felt suffocated just looking at it, and it felt like those chains were binding him rather than securing the edge to the handle. It was inexorability taken form.

His human form instead held an axe radiating a golden gleam, yet Zac found it impossible to pinpoint what kind of axe it was. One moment it looked a bit like the hatchet he had used when the integration took place, and in another, it resembled [Verun's Bite]. But it also looked like a thousand other axes all at once, always changing unpredictably.

The change in the avatar no doubt reflected the integration of Dao and Path. The insight that he had added to his Fragment of the Axe was mainly related to conflict and struggle, and it was filtered through the two stances he had developed over the last year. Yet, as he looked at the two weapons the avatar held, they never emitted an aura of either life or death even if they clearly represented those paths.

It was a pure branch, rather than mixing it with snippets from his other Daos. It was possible that he would try something like that in the future to better integrate his other two Daos into the Dao of the Axe, but for now, he felt it more prudent to delve deeper into conflict, since it was what bound his Daos together.

There were no other changes he could find, but that was more than enough. He had pretty high hopes for the Twilight Ascent before entering, but the gains had far surpassed what he even dared hope for. His attributes had more than doubled since Kenzie was taken and Thea killed, and most of it was thanks to the Twilight Ocean.

Now, he just needed to make sure he'd survive all the enmities he had created getting this far. First off, he needed to leave the chasm before the Eveningtide Asura returned with a vengeance.