

The Fall 812

Chapter 812: Formation and Integration

Zac obviously understood that it was bad to rush a Dao breakthrough with treasures, but that didn't seem like what Pavina was referring to when saying that breaking through would be detrimental to him.

"Do you know about the stages of combat technique?" Pavina asked.

"Like forming a path or Dao Intent?" Zac ventured hesitantly.

"Intent is somewhat related, as are most things when it comes to cultivation," Pavina slowly said.

"However, it is ultimately somewhat different to what I am referring to."

"If you hadn't formed a path, you wouldn't have been accepted by the Orom. Now, you've started working on a combat technique unique to you. From the ground up, by the looks of it" the Revenant Monarch ventured, getting an affirmative nod from Zac.

"However, you have just started the journey. Most factions call the state you're in the Formation Stage, though you have blurred the lines a bit."

"Formation stage," Zac muttered, the term not ringing any bells.

"Truthfully, the vast majority of cultivators take a shortcut for this stage," Pavina said as she gazed at Zac with a small smile. "They choose to walk in the footsteps of their predecessors, learning established the techniques of their clans or sects before anything else. It is a central part of a proper heritage."

Zac's nodded in agreement. He had read through the techniques of the Blade Emperor Heritage back home many times. Even if the methods and techniques listed there required a sword, Zac had still used them as reference many times when consolidating his foundations. By now, he had almost completely moved away from the concepts in that Heritage through multiple iterations of his two stances.

"In the Formation Stage, you gradually create a technique suited to your temperament, build, weapon of choice, Daos, and so on. Bit by bit, you incrementally improve your technique until you've reached the limit of what you can accomplish. At the peak of perfection, this technique allows you to utilize every fiber of your being to accomplish your goals," Pavina explained. "After mastering this stage, you reach the next; integration."

The now-familiar sense of deadly crisis immediately filled his heart as Pavina lazily pointed her finger in Zac's direction, and it felt like a spear of untold power was pointed straight at his soul.

"You have great instincts," Pavina nodded. "In the integration stage, your Dao and your technique become one as you directly instill the heavenly truths you have gained into every action you take. At this stage, even those who follow a Heritage have to reinvent the technique they learned growing up, adapting it to perfectly suit their path. This is an impassable barrier for most, even Hegemons, when they have to transition from being a follower to a leader."

"Striking will be as effortless as taking a breath, but as powerful as a thunderclap. The difference between someone who has entered the Integration stage and someone who hasn't is almost as palpable as the difference between someone who has infused their skill with their Dao and someone who hasn't."

Zac's eyes widened a bit in shock, since that was no small improvement. Of course, the description was a bit imprecise considering the various levels of Daos, but it was just an idea.

"You said earlier that I have blurred the lines?" Zac hesitantly said. "What did you mean by that?"

"In your case, you are forming a technique, where most of your inspiration comes from your Daos," Pavina explained. "There's not anything inherently wrong with that, but your foundations are lacking. It's making you create inefficient movements and techniques. If you don't shore up the foundations with combat theory, your technique will end up with too many exploitable flaws that will be difficult to fix without reforming the whole stance over and over."

"You're saying should improve my skills and technique first, and integrate my Dao later?" Zac asked with a thoughtful frown.

He had always thought his method was the way to go, where he slowly improved his combat style by drawing inspiration from his Daos and his path. But from how Pavina described it, he had been putting the cart before the horse to some degree.

"Have I been wasting my time?" Zac grimaced.

"You're just a child, so how much time could you possibly have wasted?" Pavina laughed. "You have created a decent foundation, and your style of self-discovery will aid you immensely down the road, where more orthodox cultivators will run into roadblocks. However, you are creating extra work for yourself. That might be fine on the outside, but here in the Orom World? Or with the deadline with my Master?"

"Right now, you are trying to integrate your Daos and path into your combat style, but your stances are still not mature enough to properly bear their weight. Especially not your Dao Branch. So every time you gain an epiphany or deepen your understanding of combat, you both need to alter your combat style, and then figure out how to properly integrate your Dao into the equation.

"Continuous improvements are a given on the road of cultivation. But if you first reach a point where you master your weapons and yourself, you will waste less time infusing your insights and reiterating," Pavina patiently concluded. "Simply put, you know too little of basic combat theory to efficiently integrate your Dao. You need to learn to walk before you can run."

Pavina's words perfectly echoed what Kaldor said before he threw Zac out of his castle. Had the Izh'Rak Reaver actually spotted this weakness somehow? Had Kaldor watched his fights in the Arena, perhaps? Until now, Zac had held some reservations to what this newly minted Monarch was saying, but his instincts now told him that what she said was mostly correct.

And this basic truth wasn't something that would change because of his zero affinities or dual classes.

You could liken forming a stance to building a house. Right now, he was essentially ripping parts off from ceiling down to foundation every time he found some issue, which caused a ripple effect of issues cropping up. Pavina wanted him to first lay a solid foundation so that any future improvements would require less invasive adjustments.

This was both good news and bad news. The bad was that he seemed to have wasted some time over the past years. The good news was that he had still made enough progress to shock most Hegemons,

even while following his imperfect training methodology. If he adapted his learning style, he might make even quicker gains going forward, which was great news considering how much he had on his plate.

"In particular, your control of those chains of yours is atrocious," Pavina added, dragging Zac out from his thoughts.

"I used a shield in the F-grade," Zac wryly smiled. "I swapped over to this for various reasons."

"An armament box is preferable to a shield for an offensively geared warrior like yourself," Pavina nodded. "But your understanding of how to use it is laughably shallow."

"Armament box?" Zac asked with confusion. "The coffin?"

"Armaments or Weapon Boxes are an interesting but slightly uncommon subdivision of weaponry," Pavina explained. "They take many shapes, but they can most easily be likened to Mother-Daughter arrays. The box is the mother, and what it releases are the daughters. In your case, it's a coffin and chains. But it can be anything from a sheath and flying swords to a hive and millions of poisonous insects."

Zac knew of the concept, and he had even seen it a few times. But like Pavina said, it wasn't that common a method, mostly because they had high demands on the user. Shooting out a thousand flying swords from a jumbo sheath had the potential to unleash terrifying waves of destruction, but that was only if you could properly control and empower them.

Not only did it require much more energy to keep going than a singular weapon, but it also put greater demands on your soul. Furthermore, while more units might mean more theoretical power, the risk of inadvertently creating an opening due to the complexity increased. This had become painfully apparent in his fight with Pavina, where the chains ultimately caused more trouble than they helped.

"Can you teach me?" Zac asked with some hope.

"I am hesitant to directly teach you any techniques," Pavina rejected. "Your cultivation method is one of self-discovery, and me influencing your path will do you no good. I can help you point out the weaknesses in your basic combat theory through dueling, but you will have to find the solutions yourself."

Zac nodded. He was somewhat disappointed, but he knew it might be for the best. However, there was one part he didn't quite get. "How does holding back my breakthrough factor into this?"

"Breaking through right now will not aid you in the short term. If anything, the small boost of strength the prison brand will allow you to keep will become a crutch as you strive to improve yourself, hindering progress," the Revenant said. "But also, it is theoretically easier to step into the integration stage the lower your Daos are."

"The moment your foundation is set and you have had some initial success with integrating your Dao, then you can form your second Dao Branch. Infusing the new insights into your technique will be far easier than forming your Dao Branch first and then infusing it. It might save you months, years even. Besides, following the standard path, your Dao Branch will likely be better in tune with your desired outcome."

Zac felt immensely lucky he had stumbled onto this opportunity. He had consulted over two dozen cultivators in this place over the past years, but no one, not even Travo Raso, had been nearly as helpful as Pavina had. Not since taking Yrial as a master had he received such incisive guidance on how to improve and climb out of the pitfalls he had inadvertently jumped into.

"Incidentally, if you complete the Formation Stage and have initial success with your integration, you should be able to pass the fourth band of the Wilderness," Pavina said.

"There should be stages after integration?" Zac asked curiously, considering integration only seemed to take you so far.

"Of course," Pavina nodded. "After integration comes conception, where the perfect fusion of technique and Dao gives birth to something greater than the sum of its parts. It will allow you to bring forth might that rival that of skills with a simple swing of your blade. Add Miasma to the equation... and few will be your match."

"How many bands would someone that mastered the conception stage walk?" Zac asked curiously.

"Mastered the conception stage?" Pavina snorted with disdain. "Even an early Monarch would be able to walk freely in the wilderness."

"What?!" Zac exclaimed. "That powerful? Then it's the peak of technique?"

"Not at all," Pavina said. "But it's enough to become a foundation when confirming your Dao. But it is not the end. The next stage after conception is the Domain of Worldly Laws, but it requires an extremely deep understanding of the Dao."

"Worldly laws..." Zac muttered. "So all Divine Monarchs have mastered the Conception Stage?"

"There are innumerable too many paths to power. Altogether, I'd say that less than 1% of all Divine Monarchs have mastered the Conception Stage," Pavina smiled. "For example, mages generally don't train in this way. It's mostly infighters who follow this path, and many of us don't even put that much weight into integrating their Dao with their technique."

"But if it provides that much power," Zac hesitated.

"It's a matter of time invested compared to what you get in return," Pavina explained. "You should have realized this while traveling the Orom World. Elevating technique doesn't come easy to most people, while you appear to be decently talented in this regard. Most are better off working on other methods to improve themselves. Bloodlines and constitutions, Domains and Intent. Body Refinement, Soul Cultivation, Earthly and Heavenly Harmonization, and Mystical Calculation. These are just a few. Many clans, sects, and factions have their own unique abilities that will help their members on the road of cultivation."

Zac recognized some of the methods Pavina listed, but not all. The list almost felt overwhelming, considering it proved there were so many ways he could still improve in his current grade.

"Supportive professions and methods such as formations, divination, poison mastery, trapping, beast mastery are others. Your utilization of a supportive armament could be considered such a path," the

Revenant added. "So just a few of all Monarchs focus on perfecting technique. But all Divine Monarchs have inherently entered the integration stage based on their understanding of the Dao alone."

"So many methods," Zac muttered with dismay.

"It's not like you're supposed to study them all. As I said, there are many roads to power. What are you going to do? Cut yourself into pieces so you can walk them all?" Pavina snorted. "Even if you're supremely talented, you have to discard some and focus on those that bring the most value for the time invested."

"For example, what if you grew another arm? In theory, it's another limb to hit your enemies with, so shouldn't you grow it? What about 5 arms? One hundred? Cultivation isn't just about adding new tools to your belt," the Revenant explained.

"But the Heavenly Talents have more layers of advantages compared to normal people," Zac said.

"Of course," Pavina nodded. "Otherwise, they wouldn't be Heavenly Talents. Background, talent, opportunity. It all plays a factor in how many unique advantages you can accumulate into one path. But an understanding of one's self is the most important in reaching the greatest heights. Too many geniuses find themselves stuck too early.

"They consider themselves the proud sons of the Nine Heavens and integrate one grand heritage or concept after another into their path. Eventually, their baggage becomes too heavy, and their cores or inner worlds fail to contain it all," Pavina smiled. "Then again, those who don't take risks will never stand out from the masses. And out of hundreds of trillions of geniuses who risk it all, a Supremacy might be born."

Zac slowly nodded as he took a deep breath to clear his mind. The A-grade was too far away for him to even consider, and his thoughts turned to his options for getting stronger over the next three years.

It was also just like Pavina said. Cultivation wasn't just about adding new tools to his belt. He had so many things to work on, from his soul cultivation, to Daos, to his technique. He'd die an old man in the E-grade if he strove to perfect every single facet, so there wasn't a need to add anything more at this point.

"So, what do you recommend I do?" Zac eventually asked after having digested Pavina's teachings.

"Return to the second band, and fight without instilling my Daos and technique?"

"If you feel that perfecting your combat technique is the best way to spend your time, then you need to first shore up your foundations. Let me ask you, have you upgraded your mastery skill?" Pavina asked.

"Uh..." Zac coughed, having pretty much forgotten about those skills.

"I thought so. Felt too talented for the basic courses, eh?" Pavina grinned. "I could sense that you have [Axe Mastery] at least, which probably is why your axework is far superior to the control of your chains. Go evolve your [Axe Mastery] and then buy [Armament Mastery] if you have an available slot. Come back when both are Middle E-grade Proficiency. I'll spar with you again at that point."

"Thank you so much," Zac said as he stood up, realizing the session was over.

“Those small suggestions can’t be considered anything much,” Pavina laughed. “You’d get the same advice in any sect or clan.”

“Still, it was helpful to me,” Zac said. “I’ll remember the favor.”

From there, he left, immediately heading for Samsara’s Edge. Five days later he emerged from the Contribution Store with a skill crystal containing [Armament Mastery]. He hesitated a bit, but he eventually went into one of the empty houses to learn the skill. The reason for his hesitation was that [Armament Mastery] actually took up the same spot as the peak proficiency [Bulwark Mastery], forcing him to give up on the old skill to learn the new.

Zac quickly shook off the hesitation and rebranded the skill. He had already made his decision long ago, and all of his shield-based skills except [Vanguard of Undeath] were gone. That skill would eventually make the transition as well, as soon as he decided on exactly how he wanted to reform it. He had held off until now, as the way he fought using Inexorable Stance kept changing.

Hopefully, he would find the answer for that issue as well as he progressed toward the integration stage.

A wave of nostalgia hit him as the familiar guiding lights appeared in his vision as he activated the new skill, this time pathing trajectories for the chains of his replacement coffin. It was just like when he learned the basics of swinging his hatchet back on Demon Island, lost and alone in a forest crawling with Barghest, Gwyllgi, and Imps.

Zac only played with the skill for a few minutes before teleporting to the Wilderness, but he chose to enter the first band. His meeting had been a wake-up call. It was time to build the foundation that would take him all the way to Divine Monarchy and beyond.