

## The Fall 814

### Chapter 814: Mastery

Zac appeared in the teleporter of Samsara's Edge with a flash of light, and he settled inside one of the empty buildings as took out an information crystal. It was a short missive on mastery skills, something he had picked up for 150 Purchase Points when buying the [Armament Mastery] skill. Even now, he hadn't actually read it, afraid that its contents would influence his training right when he was at the beginning of learning.

Now that he had reached peak mastery he didn't have those reservations any longer, so he curiously read through the materials. Most of the missive was a list of different categories of mastery skills, along with examples. There were a lot more types of mastery skills than he had expected. They included not only weaponry, but also all kinds of arcane specialties and crafts.

The latter, unfortunately, only worked for non-combat classes though, dashing Zac's hopes of an easily-acquired skill like alchemy or blacksmithing.

The most relevant part of the missive related to upgrades, and it was quite straightforward. The consensus was that the Mastery Skills weren't technically true skills. They didn't contain the essence behind the teachings, and it was more accurate to consider them daughter arrays to the System. Therefore, the only step needed to upgrade the skills was to increase the detail of the pathways, and he already knew how to do that.

However, the missive also included an extremely interesting snippet of information, something which confirmed a suspicion of his. Mastery skills had two empty sockets, where one was recommended to leave a pattern representing one's Daos. That meant, he could leave two marks of his Dao Branch in [Axe Mastery], and the impartments would be slightly adjusted to suit his flavor of axe usage.

The same could be said for his armament mastery, but that was where Zac became a bit hesitant. He hadn't spent much time as a human lately, and his Evolutionary Stance had fallen even further behind. However, he couldn't help but wonder if the addition of an armament wouldn't help elevate that stance as well.

He had the skill already, and the ability to make something of it. Using a coffin and chains might not be the optimal route for his human side, but the vision from [Armament Mastery] had shown that only one's imagination limited what kind of armaments could be created. Perhaps something like vines?

Would it be a mistake, locking the mastery skill to his Fragment of the Coffin? Should he avoid attunement altogether, or should he balance the skill fractal out with the Fragment of the Bodhi? Part of him wanted to return to Pavina and confer with her on this matter. But he didn't, his hesitation about divulging his duality keeping him at an impasse.

Ultimately, he decided to add his Life-based Dao to the skill fractal. He'd had constantly been going over his stances over the past month, and the more he thought about it, the more sense it made to mirror his two sides. He had ultimately returned to the basics, but some things wouldn't change with his path.

One stance represented change and breaking fate, the other stillness and inevitability. One side was Death, the other Life. Evolution and Inexorability, these two represented polar opposites that would grow over time, until they reached the highest domain.

Zac felt that his two sides needed to stay aligned, even if their core values were each other's opposites. Like yin and yang. For while the two stances were separate right now, Zac had the notion of fusing the two into one supreme path through conflict down the road.

Having arrived at this conclusion, Zac immediately set out, filled with motivation as he entered the facilities at the edge of the city. He booked an unattuned cultivation chamber, which was a higher-quality version of the [Fractal Framework Array]. Unfortunately, there were no attuned life-death chambers in this place, so Zac would have to do it on his own.

Zac took out two attuned natural treasures just in case he needed some liquid inspiration, but Zac didn't think it would be required. The array hummed to life, and he infused the skill fractal of [Armament Mastery] into a large crystal in the center of the room. At the same time, he felt a soothing stream of pure Mental Energy seep into his soul while his thoughts became as clear as crystal, proof of the high quality of the chamber.

Things progressed as expected over the next few hours. The basic patterns of the skill fractal were as simple as they came, barely at the level of a low-quality skill. Most of the effort was spent adding two Dao arrays to the skill fractal. The patterns were a simplified manifestation of his Daos, their appearance based on the two Dao Avatars in his Soul Aperture.

The two trees, one radiant and the other withered with the coffin hanging from its only branch, were now residing on one of the outer cores each. The axe avatar that looked like himself had once more taken its place on the main core, and its eyes were closed in meditation.

Eventually, the upgrade process was complete, and Zac eagerly returned the skill fractal into his pathways before opening his Skill Screen.

[E] Armament Mastery (Bodhi & Coffin) – Proficiency: Early. The seed is planted as you strive for mastery. Upgradeable.

The skill was still upgradeable, though Zac read in the missive that D-grade was the last stage of the skill. After that, you would have to search for answers yourself, which Zac figured was fair enough. A Monarch really should be at the stage where they knew what to do. The two Daos he had instilled into the skill were listed as well, proving his infusion had worked.

Zac hesitated a bit with his next step, but he ultimately chose to leave the chamber and transform into his human form elsewhere, before renting another upgrade chamber.

This time, he was planning on upgrading [Axe Mastery], but he was a bit hesitant on how to form the patterns for his Dao Branch. It felt weird trying to draw a small version of himself, like how his Dao Avatar looked. Ultimately, Zac created two different patterns, each one looking like one of the two axes his avatar used as he swapped between forms.

The upgrade went without any surprises, and he immediately returned to his temporary home in the city. Full of curiosity, he activated [Axe Mastery], and he saw the familiar trajectories appear in the living

room. Zac started following the guidance, but a frown eventually appeared on his face after a couple of minutes.

The proposed trajectories were identical to when he used the Peak Mastery F-grade skill. There was nothing new that was shown. Zac thought it over before he infused the fractal with his Branch of the War Axe, and he nodded in satisfaction when they changed. Exactly how the strikes differed were a bit hard to pinpoint, but as he went through the motions, they felt extremely comfortable.

That didn't mean the old trajectories were bad or anything. It was like the difference between wearing a nice-fitting suit and a tailored one. But having taken a shortcut into the Integration Stage once already, Zac could tell this wasn't the same thing. While there were echoes of his Dao behind the small alterations, the swings were still just normal techniques.

The more he followed the patterns, the clearer it became. The mastery skill showed a shadow of the Integration Stage, where pure technique had started getting influenced by heavenly truths. Even if there was just a hint of it inside the swings, Zac was ecstatic, as he instantly detected a few mistakes he had committed with his old integration of the Evolutionary Stance.

But Zac believed that as long as he managed to grasp these differences and the underlying reasons behind them, he would not only have an easier time integrating his Daos in the future, but also understand his Dao better. He tried imbuing his other two Daos Fragments into the skill fractal as well, but unsurprisingly, he was met with resistance before it failed. He had branded the fractals with his Daos, and the others wouldn't work anymore.

He kept experimenting with the two skills for two days until he returned to the wilderness in his undead form, this time starting from the second band.

Zac was no longer solely focusing on the chains as he began his latest assault on the wildlife, but he was rather integrating what he had learned over the last month into his reformed Inexorable Stance. It mostly went fine, but he found himself unable to completely utilize all the tricks he had picked up from [Armament Mastery].

There were simply too many variables to control. Himself and his axe, along with the constantly moving chains. That alone was hard enough to keep track of. Add to that one or multiple enemies, most of which wouldn't react as one hoped. Thankfully, there was ample room for improvement.

The more he fought, the more the lessons from [Armament Mastery] were elevated from being a mastered ability into instinct that required no thought. One day, the complex movements would hopefully become second nature to him, so that he could solely focus on his axe and his enemy.

The days passed as he moved across the second band of the Wilderness. He didn't move past the midpoint, content in fighting the earlier parts. This time around, he occasionally swapped over to his human side to reference the teachings hidden inside the E-grade [Axe Mastery]. Unsurprisingly, it was also this skill that first reached middle proficiency after just two weeks.

It had roughly been eight years since the integration by now, and he reached Peak Proficiency of the F-grade [Axe Mastery] during the first year, inside the Tower of Eternity. Since then, he had continued improving his axework on his own, and he had already discovered most of the lessons in the upgraded version of the mastery skill through battle.

Some discoveries allowed him to advance his techniques, but reaching middle mastery was mostly about gaining a deeper understanding of many things he was already doing by instinct. After having reached middle mastery of [Axe Mastery] he focused more on his other mastery skill.

Of course, Zac's true goal wasn't to evolve these skills. It was to improve his techniques, so most of his time was spent in combat or meditation where he inched closer to perfection. Because of that, it took another two months before he reached middle mastery of [Armament Mastery] and managed to infuse the concepts into his Inexorable Stance.

A lot of time had passed already since accepting the quest, but Zac wasn't stressed at all about not having returned to the third band all this time. He knew just how much he had improved over these four months. He would be able to push deep, deep into the third band by the time he returned, perhaps even conquer the whole thing. But for now, he left the Wilderness to visit his new teacher.

"You're back," Pavina nodded when Zac finally returned to her mansion. "Close to four months. Not too long, not too short. Interesting. Come, show me what you've learned."

Zac immediately shot forward once more, the chains of [Chainbox] forming a strangling tangle of cold hard metal while he rushed straight for the Revenant herself. Pavina smiled as she looked around, and she started to once more clash with the chains to force her momentum on her surroundings.

However, Zac was like the surging tides as he unleashed a ceaseless barrage of strikes. Every time Pavina flicked one of the chains, another one came to the rescue by offsetting the momentum she created. Even then, Zac found himself overwhelmed, even if Pavina only used techniques equivalent to the Formation Stage.

Still, he managed to hold on for almost 20 seconds before he found a finger pointed against his heart as she broke through his defenses, forcing an opening when he tried to land a strike with his axe.

"Continue," Pavina said as she took a step back, and the two resumed their duel without missing a beat.

Last time, their sparring session didn't even last two minutes. But this time, they fought for half an hour. Even though Zac gradually improved as he got used to fighting a person rather than a bunch of beasts, Pavina managed to land a strike at his vitals almost fifty times.

"Not too bad," Pavina nodded as the two stopped. "While four months is too short to make any real progress with your armament, they are no longer an active hindrance, at least. Rest an hour, then we duel again."

Zac nodded in thanks. Her comment wasn't the real teaching, it was the duel itself. Every time she had tapped his vitals she had pointed out a glaring weakness in his stance. He closed his eyes and replayed the fight in his mind, going over every single moment in search of solutions. Just like she said the last time, he would have to find the answers himself.

Soon enough, Zac stood up and started to slowly swing his axe as the chains drew graceful arcs through the air. In his mind, he once more saw Pavina's hand heading for his heart, and he shifted his weight while the chains moved to intercept. However, he soon stopped with a shake of his head and reset his position, trying something else.

His first response would have solved the attack if it was static, but it wasn't like Pavina wouldn't adapt and change her attack if he directly tried to block. Over and over, he replayed that first hit, not only going over his measures but how the Revnenat would respond. Eventually, he found a solution as he managed to force a situation of mutual destruction, where his chains would have pierced her gut if she went through with the strike.

From there, Zac would have seized the momentum, where he could strike her down with his axe before she could attack again. In this manner, Zac went through the whole battle one exchange after another, trying various things to solve the most glaring issues that Pavina had pointed out. The Revenant Monarch didn't offer any further advice, and she had closed her eyes in meditation while Zac entered an almost magical state where he knew no exhaustion.

Eventually, he had found solutions for all the strikes Pavina unleashed, though they were still just theories that needed to be tested and confirmed. He stopped swinging his weapon and turned to Pavina, who eventually opened her eyes and leveled an even stare at him.

"I'm sorry, how long was I doing this?" Zac coughed, realizing he had completely lost track of time.

"Three," Pavina sighed.

"Three hours?" Zac muttered. "It actually felt like long-"

"Three weeks, you lunatic," Pavina said with a roll of her eyes. "What kind of person overshoots their one-hour deadline by over five hundred hours?!"

"What?" Zac exclaimed as he looked around.

"I must be a more talented teacher than I thought with how I managed to inspire an epiphany," Pavina smiled, clearly not as annoyed as she pretended. "Well, luckily I wasn't in a hurry. Come, let's see if your bout of inspiration bore any fruit."

The two battled again, and while he was still essentially toyed with, Zac managed to stretch the time between hits by another fifteen seconds.

"Not bad. It seems this path is right for you," Pavina eventually nodded. "Go ahead, figure out the kinks somewhere else. Come back when you've reached high mastery with the two skills."

"When can I start properly integrating my Dao again?" Zac asked before he left.

"After you've reached Peak Mastery of the two skills and consolidated what you've learned," Pavina said without hesitation. "Now, go."

"Alright, thank you again. I'll see you in a few months," Zac smiled.

"Bring something to drink the next time, will you?" Pavina said. "Common courtesy."

"Of course," Zac hurriedly nodded as he took out a couple of barrels from his stock. It was lucky that more than half of the Spatial Rings he had snatched in the Void contained liquor, with how thirsty all the residents of the Orom World were. Otherwise, he would have run out long ago.

Zac exited the mansion, leaving the Revenant standing by her meditation spot, her eyes fixed on Zac's receding back.

"Absolute monster..." Pavina muttered with shock evident in her eyes. "What kind of progress is this? Is this the Heritage of Draug? But why is his spirituality so faint?"