

## The Fall 826

### Chapter 826: Harmony

Not once since stepping into the Integration Stage over half a year ago had Zac felt this in tune with his creation, where he and his Dao were on track for becoming one and the same. The Inexorable Stance was no longer just an extension of his will, it melded with his whole body. He had turned into an immovable fixture in the midst of Kaldor's madness, an island of death that the warriors born from the reaver's killing intent couldn't breach.

At first, Zac wondered if he had somehow leapfrogged a whole level and stepped into the Conception Stage, but he immediately realized he was overestimating himself. Even Monarchs who had studied their Daos and techniques for eons were hard-pressed to ever reach that level of technique, and it was much too early for Zac to take that step.

Neither was his state the result of deepening his foundations in the Integration Stage. Zac could tell that he had still just begun his work on his integration – the mysterious sense of unity came from somewhere else, from something that Pavina hadn't prepared him for; his soul.

More specifically, it was thanks to the skeletal framework he had set up for the [Thousand Lights Avatar].

His own movements and that of his Dao Avatars were almost in sync as Zac fended off the mad assault of his skeletal adversary. When he swung his training axe, so did the avatar swing his chained axe of death. When Zac manipulated the chain formation erected with [Chainbox], so did the black tendrils from his Branch of the Pale Seal dance in his soul aperture.

With Zac being the target of an unprecedented wave of killing intent and pressure, he had been pushed to the limits to make the most of his technique. The fluctuations and concepts generated by his Dao Avatars had grown stronger than ever and were even further empowered by Zac opening his [Spiritual Void]. Unknowingly, this power had then spread into the thin strands of Mental Energy Zac had started drawing along his skeleton.

That was the first and easiest step of the [Thousand Lights Avatar] – to just set up a framework to build upon as he progressed. The method had suggested the original user, the Eidolon, to form it based on their favorite appearance. Since Zac wasn't an amorphous wraith, he had chosen to instead form the frame based on his skeletal structure.

From there, he would gradually fill out his body, from copying pathways to flesh and muscle until his body was filled by a secondary soul of sorts. This initial step hadn't taken too much work, allowing him to mostly complete it while resting. Most of the work came from engraving a set of patterns that prevented the mental energy from immediately dispersing.

The initial step might have been straightforward, but it hadn't brought him any benefits either. Zac had tried to make use of his nascent avatar in the wilderness, both by instilling it with Dao and trying to use it to push his mental energy into his skills quicker. Neither really worked. It was more efficient to infuse his muscles with his Dao if he wanted to empower his body, and the pathways were much-too-thin to carry the required amount of Mental Energy to bolster a skill with a Dao Branch.

Now, this weak framework had become some sort of bridge, improving the harmony between himself and his Dao Avatar. It blurred the lines between corporeal and spiritual, where it all moved toward a singular unity. It was still far from perfect, but it did make his stance more natural, putting not only his mind but his whole body in the right state.

Zac had no idea this kind of thing was possible. Pavina didn't cultivate her soul at all, apart from using some sort of warrior method that passively strengthened its defenses over time. Thus, she had never mentioned that soul and technique could empower each other. If anything, those who had powerful souls and thus high control rather focused on intent, where cultivators integrated their path with their weapons or spells rather than their technique.

This was great news for Zac, who had not been able to make a lot of use of his extraordinary soul except for withstanding the remnants and performing his crude version of Dao Braiding. The former was a stopgap to avoid going insane, and the latter was nothing special. His braiding was even worse than what some F-grade talents could perform.

The remnants were providing a powerful hidden ace while also helping cultivate his soul, but Zac was ultimately receiving somewhat limited returns from cultivating his soul even if it was the most time-consuming aspect of his path. He had previously hoped on making use of his soul cultivation to form axe intent, or even some technique-based intents like 'Evolutionary Intent'.

Zac had figured that between the crystallization of his path, his rapidly improving technique, and his powerful soul, he might be able to add intent to his repertoire, but he had been utterly incapable of forming even a wisp of intent. Unfortunately, it looked like intent required affinity that would allow him to better control the insights in his Daos.

The failure had made him uncertain about persisting with his soul cultivation beyond what was necessary for the remnants, since those years would be better spent on exploring Mystic Realms, battling to hone his Dao and techniques, or refining his skills. Even some side-professions seemed more efficient for his goal of catching up to his mother and saving Kenzie before it was too late.

However, his current state had shown him a new direction.

It was still just a shadow of a path, but Zac could feel it brimmed with possibility. To fuse his soul and link it with his Dao Avatars, essentially a fusion between Man and Heaven. This would be a system of his own creation, something that took advantage of both his refined soul and talent for improving his technique.

A wailing scream of danger dragged Zac out of his thoughts, but it was too late. He had messed up, allowing himself to be consumed by his discovery in a fight that allowed for no distractions. A fist hidden behind a glaring-red array was closing in on his heart, and it was too late to dodge. Zac could only minimize the damage, and he furiously spun his torso as his chains pulled the attack off-mark.

Still, Zac's vision turned white from pain from having a part of his lungs and ribcage disintegrated as Kaldor's fist grazed his torso. If he had been just a heartbeat slower, Kaldor's attack would have hit him square in his chest, destroying his heart and most likely shattering his whole upper torso.

There was no longer any doubt in Zac's mind about the veracity behind the intent within Kaldor's punches. The killing intent was real, and if Zac slipped up, he would get himself killed. The wound in his

side was dripping with ichor, but his powerful durability was thankfully coming in handy as the bleeding stopped almost immediately without even using any skill.

Still, Zac knew he wouldn't be able to keep going much longer. It wasn't the wound – this was nothing compared to some things he had been through. The real problem was that Kaldor was still ramping up. With every clash, Kaldor's momentum increased, and the dense haze of bloodlust grew thicker.

Zac was struggling to regain control of the fight, but even with his latest breakthrough, he had only gone from being the weaker side to barely hanging on. It didn't matter if Kaldor was only relying on insights at the level of Peak Fragments – the condensed bloodlust more than made up for the lacking foundation. If things kept going, there was only one outcome – death.

Over and over, Zac rallied, putting everything he had learned to use. His whole body was becoming one with his Dao Branches, and every movement was in accordance with his path. Yet a second wound soon joined the first, and then a third. The only thing Zac had gained from taking those terrifying punches was a short breather, but Kaldor soon snatched back this advantage with his unrelenting assault.

Pain racked Zac's body, and the whole world was a hazy red as Zac desperately held on, but those three shimmering aquamarine lights from Kaldor's skull started to look like the light at the end of the tunnel. The suppression was complete and suffocating, with Zac barely clinging on to life through his mastery of death.

It was time to disengage.

Kaldor had gone far beyond the agreement of the duel, and Zac had already gained an epiphany in the heat of battle. If Zac kept pushing it, he would eventually fail to turn these deadly strikes into glancing blows. There was no point in persisting in this sham of a trial.

However, just as Zac was about to step back, even sacrificing [Chainbox] to delay Kaldor if needed, he felt a terrifying energy congeal right behind his head. He was forced to lunge forward to avoid a huge red brand that had appeared in the air, the first time those arrays didn't form attached to Kaldor's limbs.

The brand immediately erupted, ripping space apart before releasing a tumultuous shockwave. If Zac had retreated into that thing, his head would have been blown right off. The scene thoroughly infuriated Zac, the dark swirls of oblivion gathered in his mind as he readied himself to fight fire with fire.

But it took time forming even the smallest of Annihilation Spheres, and the detonation had pushed Zac right into Kaldor's waiting arms. Zac desperately swung his axe to force the reaver into defense, but another large array appeared like a shield while a killing strike continued toward Zac unimpeded. There was just no time, and Zac went with the only solution he could think of.

The red haze suddenly dispersed within a meter and a half from Zac, and Kaldor's two arrays sputtered and died out. The churning Daos in Kaldor's body had been muted as well according to Zac's [Cosmic Gaze], and the skeleton stopped in his tracks for an instant.

Zac saw his opportunity, and he immediately gave up on activating [Abyssal Phase] with Void Energy. Instead, he slightly altered the trajectory of his axe, passing right through the spot once guarded by the sanguine barrier. At the same time, Zac used all four chains to delay Kaldor from resetting his punch, which was no longer powered by his killing intent.

One attack sped up while one slowed down.

Crackling sounds echoed out as fetters snapped, but they were joined by a blissful clang as Zac's axehead slammed straight into Kaldor's chest, prompting sparks to fly. The strike contained everything Zac had to give, but the exoskeleton was just too hard. Not even a scratch was left on its alabaster surface, yet it almost felt like Zac's wrist would snap from the rebound.

Zac didn't fight the powerful counterforce and instead used it, along with Kaldor's delayed punch, to create a ten-meter distance between the two. Kaldor didn't move after the exchange, and the red haze around him slowly dissipated as the two combatants stared at each other in silence. One silent and brooding, the other panting and covered in wounds and black ichor.

"It's my victory," both suddenly concluded.

"Your victory? Have you lost your mind?" Zac immediately swore, losing all decorum as he felt another wave of anger growing in his chest. "There's a limit to how shameless you can be."

The reaver was already cheating by using extremely refined Arrays in this duel, both empowering his strikes and using them like actual skills. Even then, Zac had completed his task and landed a hit, only to hear he had lost? Had Kaldor ever planned to give him the Splinter? Or had he become obsessed with it, wanting to keep it for his own?

"You have guts kid, talking to me like that," Kaldor snorted as the last of the red haze reentered his bones. "This is obviously my victory, with you using that weird skill."

"What skill?" Zac countered. "I never used a skill. It's my Draugr Bloodline, and you never said anything about those."

"Little bastard, you think you're the first Draugr I've met? Since when did your kind have that kind of bloodline talent?"

"Go visit the Abyssal Shores if you're curious," Zac shrugged as he ate a healing pill, still angry with the shameless reaver even if he had calmed down by now.

"Don't you think I know you're some sort of aboriginal outside the Empire's purview, brat?" Kaldor laughed. "But fine, It might not have been a skill. So, what did you do? If I was at your grade my Dao would have been completely suppressed, cut off from the heavens themselves."

Zac only shrugged in response without any intention of explaining what he did. "Since it's not a skill, why not honor your part of the bargain before anything else? Where is the splinter?"

Kaldor had given in, but Zac still felt cheated. Even if the Izh'Rak reaver lacked any facial expressions, Zac could tell that Kaldor was quite pleased even after having lost. It really looked like Kaldor had been going overboard to dig into Zac's secrets rather than going mad, and he had succeeded.

That final blast right behind Zac's head was probably meticulously planned rather than an unfortunate coincidence, a gambit to force Zac into showcasing any secret techniques he had.

Still, Zac didn't dare complain as he activated the five seals he had formed with his late-mastery [Undying Mark], the healing skill that he had gotten ample experience using over the past few years. The situation was unfair, but there was ultimately nothing he could do about it at the moment.

Kaldor was so far beyond himself no matter if you talked strength or standing, so complaining would do him no good. Furthermore, Zac was asking the reaver to hand over a priceless treasure, which meant breaking the rules of the Orom World. For now, Zac could only pray that him showing off one of his Bloodline Talents wouldn't cause any issues down the road, and thank the lucky stars he didn't need to use the far-more-conspicuous [Force of the Void].

"Now, don't look so glum," Kaldor laughed, clearly understanding Zac's misgivings. "Well, this can be considered my bad. I've been bored the past few millennia and got a bit too excited. How about this? In addition to that accursed item, I'll provide something else. Ask me one question, and I'll do my best to answer without holding back."

Zac's heart shuddered, and he looked at Kaldor with surprise. This was a precious opportunity, even if Zac didn't feel it matched up to being exploited like this. Pavina hadn't divulged too much about Kaldor's origins over the past years, but he had managed to piece together a few things. First of all, Kaldor was from a faction of equal standing to the Umbri'Zi Clan, though it was more of an army than a clan.

Secondly, Kaldor had arrived in the Orom World as an early Monarch, meaning the skeleton had at least some real standing even before he was caught. Why the Orom had actually dared swallow him was unclear, and perhaps only Kaldor himself knew the answer to that question. In either case, Kaldor should possess a lot of information, no matter if it was on cultivation, the Undead Empire, or the wider world.

He needed to make this question count.

"What's the real reason members of the Undead Empire can't cultivate the Path of Pure Death?" Zac eventually asked.

This was the most pertinent question he could think of, where Kaldor also had a decent chance of knowing the answer. Asking about cultivation wasn't too urgent since he didn't have any pressing issues in that regard. The only exception was how to form a core in his unique situation, but why would Kaldor have an answer to that? Besides, he would be able to meet Yrial soon enough, someone who walked a path of duality who was probably more experienced in this regard.

Zac wanted to find out more about the six Profundity Empire and the origin of Leandra's faction, but it wasn't that was urgent either. Even if he got the answers he was looking for, he was way too weak to do anything about it. He did, however, need to know more about the weird rule of the Undead Empire.

His identity was already sensitive considering not only his actions in the Twilight Harbor, but also because of him being an Edgewalker. If there were some hidden issues with walking the Path of Pure Death or Oblivion in addition to all that, he needed to know. It would be critical for his future relationship with the Undead Empire, whether he would ultimately dare go there or not.

"Brat, are you trying to get me killed?" Kaldor muttered, and Zac looked on with confusion as he took out a bottle of white mixture that he started covering his head with.

"Do you know how the Undead Empire was founded?" Kaldor asked as he started covering his neck and chest following his head.

“The ancient undead factions banded together to find refuge during the Dark Ages,” Zac slowly said, not understanding why the skeleton was oiling himself up. “You eventually found the Heartlands and settled down.”

“Our ancestors found no Heartlands,” Kaldor snorted as he steadied himself. “We found what’s now called the Heart of the Empire.”

“The Heart of the Empire?” Zac repeated, drawing a complete blank. Catheya had never mentioned that thing before, and neither was it mentioned in any of the missives he had read in the Twilight Harbor.

“I doubt you’ve heard of it, considering it’s the core of our power,” Kaldor sighed as cracks suddenly appeared all over his body. “After all, it’s an Eternal Heritage holding the key to Death.”