

The Fall 938

Chapter 938: Eating Through

A crackling sound of glass shattering echoed in the cultivation chamber as Zac chewed on the Dao Stone and swallowed it with the assistance of some water. Thank god no one else was in his cultivation cave at the moment. Zac could only imagine what someone like Emily or Ogras would say upon seeing him cultivating more like a beast than a cultivator as he took out a second crystal and bit down.

The shards and dust created from the cracked crystal tasted bland and were incredibly dry. At least his 16,000 Endurance was more than enough to protect the inside of his mouth and stomach from being lacerated by the innumerable sharp edges. More importantly, it worked. Zac could feel streams of pure comprehension flowing toward his mind, where he had his Dao Avatar absorb it before [Spiritual Void] could take too much of it for its own.

The Dao Stones contained Origin Dao just like Ogras said, and not a speck of Origin Dao was wasted with this delivery method. He did have a decent stockpile of the unique resource, thanks to a heated bout of haggling with Ogras. But he absolutely didn't have enough to wantonly release their precious contents, like he sometimes did with Cosmic Crystals to improve the ambient atmosphere. Still, one crystal after another entered his gullet, and the trickle of Origin Dao soon became a steady river that fed his breakthrough.

All the while, Zac held onto his comprehension and his path, refusing to let any sudden burst of inspiration warp it.

The previous insight that had birthed the Branch of the War Axe had been based on the primordial nature of Conflict, showcased by the interrelation between Life and Death. It used war's inexorable and everchanging nature to connect his understanding of the axe with the Heavens, officially setting out on the Path of Conflict.

The second step of his Dao Branch wasn't as grand and far-reaching. It brought complexity back to simplicity, where Zac returned to the origin – his Axe. Back when he had stood in that valley of life and death, seeing the birth of true Twilight with the help of Primal Dao, he had chosen Conflict over harmony. But he still didn't understand how Conflict and the Axe were related back then.

The underpinning rules of Conflict and how it pushed the river of fate forward were undoubtedly important truths of tremendous power, but Zac had long realized that he couldn't only focus on those kinds of concepts. One day, he'd reach those towering peaks where a simple swing of his would contain the primordial principles of Conflict. But for now, he was still cultivating the Branch of the War Axe.

It had taken years of arduous work and reforging his stances from the ground up to reach this point. Tens of thousands of battles, millions of swings and permutations until both Conflict and his other Daos had properly integrated with the weapon in his hand. Now, his foundations couldn't be more solid, and his understanding of the relation between Dao and combat had never been deeper.

The first time Zac had truly seen this phenomenon, except for his Dao Visions, was when fighting Void's Disciple the first time. Back then, his movements had felt like magic, where he moved quicker and more unpredictably than his attributes possibly could allow for. Now, Zac understood that Void's Disciple simply moved in accordance with his Dao.

And truthfully, the seemingly unfathomable Dominator wasn't even close to reaching the Integration stage. Void's Disciple was more like the previous him, grasping after everything before understanding the basics. He had tried integrating his Dao of Space, a notoriously difficult Dao to comprehend, into a set of combat techniques that didn't have the foundations for it.

Still, Adcarkas had been the seed that set Zac down this path. Where Axe became the Dao, and Dao then became the Axe. A million swings, a million permutations – all of them ultimately becoming the fundamental truths of the Axe.

The Dao Avatar in Zac's Soul Aperture was already moving per his two stances, dancing across the stars that made up his soul. One moment he was Inexorable Death. The next, he was Evolutionary Life. But somehow, as more and more Origin Dao entered his body, it almost felt like the flickering axe in his hands became more... apparent.

It was still the same size, and it didn't start radiating blinding lights like the Towers of Myriad Dao. Yet, it somehow commanded more attention, where the small figure's movements were just adornments to the centerpiece that was the weapon itself.

Finally, it all crystallized, and Zac felt like a spiritual link had been established between himself with the vast cosmos. Suddenly, it was all so clear, and any lingering doubts or hesitations were swept away as the movements of the Dao Avatar changed. No longer was the avatar following his two stances. The avatar was no longer evolutionary nor inexorable – there was no longer room for life and death.

This was an intentional change by Zac. Even if his Daos were all parts of a bigger whole, he didn't want the individual Branches to be influenced by outside concepts. The Daos themselves would be pure and unblemished, diving straight at the truth of their intrinsic nature. From there, Zac could freely create anything he wanted by mixing and matching, from Dual-affinity skills to his two combat stances.

Conversely, if he started mixing too many concepts into his Daos, there was a danger of creating problems with compatibility down the road. It was just like how he had acted with his combat stances at the beginning. He needed to fully comprehend the basics of combat before he fused the Dao into his attacks. Similarly, he should first perfect the principles behind his individual Daos before linking them.

Zac believed that was not only the key to reaching further on the road of cultivation but also to finding the answer to his most pressing predicament; forming his Cultivator's Core. The better he understood each aspect of his path individually, the more success he would find at fusing them.

The avatar had become an extension of the axe rather than the other way around, and the gleaming edge of the incorporeal axe sang as it danced through the solar system that was Zac's Soul Aperture. Zac almost felt like he could hear the sounds of war as the axe moved; the drums, the roars, metal clashing against metal.

He could feel it, taste it. Sand, salt, and metal. The winds of Conflict swept through his mind, his very being. But at its forefront, the axe advanced, crystallizing the lasting impressions into a sharp edge of unmatched destruction. And with that edge came a storm of unfettered power that didn't stay trapped inside his Soul Aperture. It spread throughout his body, filling every single cell of his with strength and ferocity.

Eventually, the deadly but exuberant dance of his Dao Avatar gradually abated before he returned to the central core of his soul. The miniature version of himself didn't look any different from before, but it somehow felt more solid, almost corporeal. It exuded a boundless fighting spirit, an aura with a sharp and heavy edge that seemed capable of cutting through anything. The fundamental nature of the War Axe. With a thought, that feeling exploded outward from his body as an oppressive Dao Field covered the whole cultivation cave.

Usually, when Zac did this, the constant struggle between life and death in the cultivation chamber would explode when bolstered by his Branch of the War Axe. However, this time it was like a third combatant had entered the fray and viciously attacked both flanks. Chaos ensued until both life and death were pushed back from the chamber's core, forming an area of pure weaponized air.

Anyone who dared enter this field would be attacked by innumerable cuts powerful enough to slay unevolved cultivators. Yet, not a single blade of grass was harmed by Zac's churning Dao. This was partly thanks to his powerful soul allowing for greater control over his Dao, but also due to his most recent upgrade to his Dao.

What kind of master wouldn't have perfect control over their weapon?

A moment later, the opposing waves of Life and Death came crashing back with redoubled ferocity, thanks to Zac subtly altering his Domain to welcome and fuse with the two elements. For a moment, he felt he could almost grasp something from the chaotic clouds in the air, a clue to the mysteries he was trying to solve.

But the feeling passed before he even had the chance to take out any treasures to grab hold of the insight. Zac shook his head with helplessness, but he wasn't too disheartened. He knew his current foundations were lacking. In fact, a bout of random inspiration he chanced upon right now might lead him down toward a dead end. He was better off taking things one step at a time over the coming years, instead of rushing for perfection right at the beginning of his undertaking.

Zac glanced toward the sky, or rather the cave's ceiling, for a moment, but the vast pressure of the Heavens showed no indication of descending. This was the expected outcome since you wouldn't get blasted by Tribulation Lightning because of a minor breakthrough, but Zac could never be completely certain which conventional rules applied to him and which didn't.

Seeing as he was really safe, Zac soon retracted his newly empowered Dao Field and instead opened his screens to check on the results.

[Branch of the War Axe (Middle): All attributes +50, Strength +4,750, Dexterity +2,000, Endurance +250, Wisdom +500. Effectiveness of Strength +25%.]

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

150

Class

[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

Race

[D] Human – Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment

[Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

Titles

[...] Grand Fate, Blooddrenched Baron, Connate Conqueror, The Second Step, Singular Specialist

Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star – 14th, The Final Twilight, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao

Branch of the War Axe – Middle, Branch of the Kalpataru – Early, Branch of the Pale Seal – Early

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

27,352 [Increase: 143%. Efficiency: 287%]

Dexterity

11,800 [Increase: 103%. Efficiency: 206%]

Endurance

16,242 [Increase: 134%. Efficiency: 287%]

Vitality

14,192 [Increase: 127%. Efficiency: 273%]

Intelligence

3,763 [Increase: 97%. Efficiency: 206%]

Wisdom

7,603 [Increase: 104%. Efficiency: 216%]

Luck

712 [Increase: 121%. Efficiency: 229%]

Free Points

Nexus Coins

[D] 846,027

The sudden boost in strength was, in a word, terrifying. A single breakthrough had pushed his pool of Attributes by over 12%, most of it into Strength. The breakthrough had provided him with a full 2,500 points in his main attribute. With his large number of titles, those points had been turned into a boost of over 6,000.

Those numbers were almost incomprehensible for most E-grade cultivators and a stark reminder that elevated Dao Branches rarely were something you attained before forming your Cultivator's Core. No wonder someone Dao-blessed like Iz Tayn still felt like an unsurpassable mountain, wielding multiple Daos with these kinds of monstrous base numbers.

The only small letdown was that the breakthrough didn't provide any more Efficiency or Luck, keeping them at 25% and +50, respectively. Then again, it might be for the best. The easier access others had to those attributes, the smaller his relative advantage would be. Besides, the importance of 10 additional Luck was nothing compared to the huge direct boost to his combat effectiveness.

Zac had heard that Earthly Daos, the step after Dao Branches where you had formed a complete man-made Dao based on your path, didn't provide as many base attributes for Monarchs. Instead, they would empower their Inner Worlds to a much more noticeable degree. But for now, his three Dao Branches were still Zac's best bet at vastly increasing his Attribute Pool.

Even better, the Gates of Rebirth had increased the odds of him pushing all three of his Dao Branches to Middle Mastery before leaving for the Perennial Vastness. Zac had a feeling that having all three of his Dao Branches at the same level would help tremendously with maintaining the delicate balance needed to form his trinity core.

Seeing the more tangible gains now only helped increase his motivation to work hard on his cultivation, and he couldn't wait to seclude himself. Zac stayed in his cultivation cave for another two full days as he got acquainted with his unprecedented boost in power. Becoming so much faster and stronger in one go was a bit disorienting even for him, but he soon regained his balance.

A positive surprise was that his foundations had actually healed a bit from the infusion of strength. He had by no means fully recovered, but he could tell he had saved a couple of weeks by upgrading his Dao. It didn't change much for his four-year empowerment plan, but every little bit helped.

For example, he believed he was in good enough shape by now to start using the tainted Lake Water and resume his studies of Duality. The water still held the mysterious insights from the Lost Plane, but his treasure might be gradually getting worse for all Zac knew; he had no real way to measure the wisdom hidden within. But before he could dive into his cultivation, there were a few matters he needed to take care of.

So Zac called over Triv with a mental nudge, and the ghost appeared in just under a minute. The spectral butler had built a manor of their own roughly a thousand meters beneath Zac's cave, not too far from one of the Miasmic Veins reaching up toward Port Atwood. That way, Triv didn't only have a great cultivation environment but was also always close by in case their services were needed.

"Young Lord, your aura has undergone yet another transformation," Triv sighed with amazement. "I daresay that no E-grade cultivator of the Kavriel Province is your match any longer."

"I'm getting there," Zac said with a smile. "Did anything happen while I secluded myself?"

"Another message has been delivered through your Mercantile network," Triv said with some expectancy in their voice. "From the Empire. I took the liberty of accepting it."

"Really?" Zac said with some surprise as he accepted a familiar box.

His message to Catheya had been quite clear: he needed a couple of months more before they met and didn't want to decide on any details before the day of the meeting approached. For Catheya to send a message this early made Zac wonder if something had changed, so he quickly scanned the contents of the communication crystal.

"I am sending you this message under the urgings of Mistress Tavza An'Azol and Lord Kator of the White Sky Phalanx. They have just arrived in Zecia and would like to meet you to discuss the great events happening here. The Undead Empire is sincerely looking for mutually beneficial cooperation in this endeavor, and we eagerly await your answer," Catheya's voice echoed in his mind.

It was a succinct message, but it contained quite a bit of information. Even then, there were no storms raging in Zac's heart. He had expected more powerful people than Catheya to arrive from the Empire Heartlands after realizing she knew about Ultom. She and her Master would have sent word of Ultom the moment they realized something was up, and they alone weren't powerful or connected enough to take charge of a matter this important.

However, the two names listed still surprised him for different reasons. He had neither heard of either Tavza An'Azol or Kator, yet both their origins were familiar to him. Tavza was undoubtedly a descendant of one of the two Draugr apart from Eoz he had seen in his vision. The three of them had been the quickest to emerge from the Abyssal Lake, and it even seemed like Azol was the first.

That didn't necessarily mean the Azol bloodline was stronger than his, but it was still probably one of the strongest branches of the Draugr. Certainly, a once-powerful Bloodline could decline. But if that were the case, then Tavza wouldn't have been the one to receive this opportunity.

As for this Kator, Zac actually found out about his origin from Pavina. She was a subordinate to an Izh'Rak Reaver, so she unsurprisingly knew quite a bit about their armies. Pavina had mentioned the White Sky Phalanx to him once while he visited. It wasn't even considered breaking the commandments since the name was known far and wide. After all, the phalanx had destroyed two A-grade forces since its inception; they were known all across the Multiverse.

The feat didn't sound like much in contrast to how long the Undead Empire had waged its mad war, but Supremacies were all notoriously difficult to kill. After all, they were all old monsters who had survived to the very peak of cultivation. Not only were they unimaginably powerful, but they all had innumerable hidden cards up their sleeves. And as long as the Supremacy survived, so did their faction.

The Supremacy could just relocate and raise new generations of cultivators. Even worse, they could become an A-grade Wandering Cultivator bent on revenge. The amount of damage someone like that could cause an established faction was unimaginable. Zac shuddered at the thought of a ruthless person like The Eveningtide Asura, only at the level of an experienced Supremacy.

It was much easier to wait out A-grade forces. Not even Supremacies were immortal, even if it sometimes felt like it, and most factions couldn't raise a second one to protect them.

Zac was a bit surprised that the Reavers showed up here in Zecia. This region was at the edge of the Multiverse, and jurisdiction was blurry, but Zecia was definitely not within the sphere of influence of the Izh'Rak Reavers. This was solidly Draugr-territory as far as the Undead Empire was concerned. Was it connected to him and his relationship to Kaldor?

More importantly, how should he deal with this matter? He didn't have some perfectly crafted scheme just because he knew something like this might happen.

"When did this message arrive?" Zac asked.

"Two days ago, my lord," Triv said.

Zac slowly went over his options, and he felt a headache coming on. Was it a good sign that he had received this notice, or was it bad? Did it mean Catheya still had some say in matters, or were these newcomers so sure they could control him that they didn't need to bother with any subterfuge?

Then it struck him.

Why beat himself up trying to figure out this mess when he had finally had the scheming shadow back at his side? It was time for Ogras to earn his pay.