

The Fall 987

[Chapter 987 - That He May Grow Arrogant](#)

Zac's bones groaned under the burgeoning pressure as the stellar wrath of his opponent consumed the whole arena. Her radiant shroud had already spread to the very edges of the arena, and the blue sky had been turned into a star-spangled black. But it in no way resembled a calm summer's night. Instead, the lights felt like barely contained conflagrations holding the wrath of the Heavens.

The chains of [Love's Bond] were already dancing around him, but their dance of Inexorable Death wasn't enough to push back the environment his opponent had created. This wasn't the result of a skill, or Mana, for that matter. This was a true Domain, a path similar to Dao Intent where one elevated their natural Dao Field through various means.

With a powerful Domain, you'd have a home-field advantage in any environment. And Zac could tell his Dao Fields would be torn apart if he tried to fight fire with fire. Zac didn't know the exact numbers, but he suspected the Domain strengthened his opponent's skills by at least 20% as a Cultivation Manual would. Simultaneously, he felt his energy a bit turbid, though he could overpower it with his superior Daos and Attributes.

Soon, stars conjured by a skill joined the glimmering firmament, and they fell at him like a meteor shower. The scene was just as impressive as some of the Hegemons he'd fought, and Zac immediately discarded a fleeting idea to win without using any skills. His defenses had gained a huge boost after upgrading his two Dao Branches last month, but that didn't mean he could just take a falling star to the face.

Four small skeletons appeared behind Zac's back as a complex sigil appeared beneath his feet. It looked like a five-meter-wide summoning circle leading to the deepest recesses of the netherworld, and dense plumes of death rose around him. Simultaneously, an oppressively dark coffin appeared above his head, and the arena shook when the first stars slammed into them.

By this point, Zac was already running, the rune beneath him seemingly tethered to his body. The Stellar Mage mage was slightly disadvantaged by the limited size of the arena. She seemed more suited for large-scale destruction, much like Zac's human side. Still, it was like Zac tried to force his way through a Heavenly Tribulation as stars exploded all around him.

It took just a second for Zac to reach his target. But by that point, she disappeared in a flash of light, leaving a collapsing star in her place. It imploded almost instantly, but a swirl of darkness swallowed it and deposited it right where he felt a hint of life in the madness. A pained and enraged scream echoed from the other side, and Zac was upon her a moment later, his chains forming an inescapable net.

The Stellar Mage didn't try to back away again, instead clawing straight at him with her glowing hands. It looked like she was about to rip apart the fabric of reality, and the light was blinding. Yet Zac wasn't phased in the slightest as Death and Conflict fused into his axe, cutting straight at the claw.

A sudden beam shot out from the mage's other hand, giving Zac no chance to dodge. However, the moment it pierced into his barrier, it lost some of its radiance and speed. Za narrowly had time to channel some Dao into his free hand and crush the light in his palm. Simultaneously, his axe slammed into her attack, and her fiery eyes widened in alarm at his monstrous Strength.

Her momentum was instantly crushed by superior force, and her defenses were broken wide open. Zac was already following up on the strike, his free hand piercing forward like a scythe, cutting upward from her waist toward her neck. Her instincts were solid, and she was already moving to divert his attack.

However, the pathbound barrier failed the Stellar Mage completely, and Zac's hand was barely impeded on its approach. A moment later, his fingers stopped right at her throat, barely piercing her skin. Zac prepared to stop any follow-up attack, but a powerful force pushed him back as his vision shifted, once more returning to normal, where the surroundings were in plain view.

The duel was over.

Zac had won after taking advantage of what had felt like a huge loophole. Having driven himself almost mad trying to fuse Life and Death, Zac had ample experience trying to fuse two different concepts. And with the fundamental understanding of patterns imparted by Ultom, Zac could tell the Stellar Mage's fusion of concepts was flawed in a few spots, even if they looked okay on the surface.

If she formed a core following that pattern without fixing those issues first, she would lose almost 20% of her maximum energy capacity, and issues would crop up when drawing large amounts of energy. Actually, the loophole this Stellar Mage had was far worse than the weakness of the man Zac executed earlier.

With the fight over, all the skills had been forcibly canceled by the arena, and any hints of their battle were already gone. Zac didn't care, more focused on his Status Screen.

[Mana: 2,146]

Zac had 1,978 Mana after his earlier transgression, which meant he'd gained 100 Mana from winning, and another 68 Mana for pointing out the critical weakness in her blueprint. It was an unusually high bounty, according to Catheya, who mentioned that most bounties were below 20 points. Zac wasn't surprised, considering how much it'd affect her future core.

Upon closing his Status Screen, Zac noticed the girl was looking at him oddly, or rather glaring at him with a fiery look.

"What? Not convinced?" Zac said.

"I don't understand. Your core was riddled with weaknesses. I was sure I hit a weak spot on your pattern before you defeated me. Yet I didn't get a single point of Mana in return. What in the Heavens is going on?!"

A small smile spread across Zac's face upon seeing the Stellar Mage's perplexed and frustrated expression. Just as expected, his blueprint looked weird to an outsider. Lord Engo immediately understood what was going on, recognizing that his Daos were held together by the concepts of the Void and simultaneously existed in two states.

But what about a normal E-grade cultivator, especially one unfamiliar with his path? His blueprint must look like the crude scribbles of a fool, full of weaknesses. It was a far cry from reality, where the esoteric concepts of his core were validated by an Eternal Heritage.

Truthfully, his Void Core Blueprint could probably be somewhat improved now that he had advanced two of his Dao Branches. But that was just some small adjustments to incorporate the most recent gain, nothing like the loopholes he'd sensed in the fusion between Wrath and Stars.

"You might have just missed them," Zac smiled.

The girl clearly didn't buy the excuse, and it looked like she would explode for a moment. Zac briefly wondered if cultivating an emotion like wrath was like having a Splinter of Oblivion. But she took a steadying breath, and profound tranquility returned to her eyes as she bowed at him.

"Well, thank you for your leniency and for pointing out such a critical weakness. I've been here three years, yet this is the first time someone's noticed anything amiss with my solution."

Zac felt a bit odd being thanked for snatching her Mana, but he guessed it made sense. What was a few hundred Mana in the face of the chance to improve their Cosmic Core? It was just another Mission or a few months of accumulating the beginner's monthly stipend.

"Mh," Zac nodded and walked back toward Catheya, who was waiting outside the barrier.

"I was hoping I'd get to see some of your real strength this time," Catheya said with some helplessness.

"I thought I'd made a lot of improvements over the years, but I can't even tell what level you've reached. I can't believe that girl only managed to force a single defensive skill out of you."

"Just lucky I found a pretty big weakness," Zac smiled, turning to Ogras, or rather Catheya's shadows.

"Why not challenge that girl as well? Her path is quite interesting. And since she cultivates wrath, she might say yes out of anger."

"It's tempting, but she seems to have calmed down already," Ogras answered. "Besides, she seems like a troublesome opponent for me. It's hard to hide in shadows when stars illuminate the whole arena. Let's split up for now so we can cover more ground. I need to target the easier prey before their duels are claimed."

"Not everyone can be so carefree," Catheya agreed, glancing at Zac. "You should probably not be so overbearing, easily overpowering the enemy in a few seconds. Sometimes, onlookers might feel they can beat you and challenge you right after winning. But that won't happen with a performance like that."

"Hm," Zac muttered, having already come to a decision. "Can I display my blueprint without entering a duel? Like an invitation for people to challenge me?"

"Sure, just ask your guide," Catheya nodded, and Zac's Trinity Core appeared in the air a moment later.

"What the hell is that?" Ogras blurted, while Catheya's mouth opened as she blankly stared at his blueprint.

Their reactions were just like the Stellar Mage's, and Zac immediately felt his idea would work.

"Draugr! I challenge you!" a shout reached them before Zac could say another word.

Zac turned around and found a green-scaled humanoid running over, looking at him like he'd won the lottery. He'd clearly missed the fight just now, thinking Zac was a weakling judging by the core.

"Alright," Zac nodded solemnly, though he was inwardly laughing. "Here is fine."

This was exactly why he'd wanted to showcase his blueprint. What could be better bait to get some challenges than a core full of apparent weaknesses? This way, he might be able to pass the limit of the ten monthly challenges. Catheya had already confirmed that if you were the one getting challenged, you'd still get the full amount of Mana from winning, no matter how many battles you fought.

That was the reason why she pretended to be weak earlier; she'd already made sure to fill up her monthly quota of duels and then used the Grand Firmament Coalition to make some extra money. He had to admit, it was a great scheme, and he even felt a bit bad ruining it for her.

"A martial duel? Great, great!" the bulky warrior grinned as two cudgels appeared in his hands.

Zac smiled as the warrior's core lit up above his head while the surroundings faded once more, this time in a much smaller area. Unfortunately, this time Zac didn't see any weakness as critical as the one in the Stellar Mage's schematic. Some sections felt slightly weird, though Zac couldn't pinpoint why.

That was fine, though. Not everyone would have easily exploitable weaknesses, and it was good to see what kind of bounty, if any, this kind of imperfection held. The wall parted a few seconds later, and the melee cultivator rushed forward, his two cudgels radiating an immense light. It seemed as though he had attached two neutron stars to their heads.

Zac immediately guessed he cultivated toward the Peak of Taiji, which governed Light, Darkness, and Gravity. It wasn't as rare a path as the Peak of Impetus in the Frontier. For example, Ilvere's Fragment of Momentum belonged to this peak, as did Ogras's shadowy Dao. However, this was the first time Zac saw a combination of Light and Gravity in what seemed to be another Dual Branch-setup.

Light clashed with the black of death as Zac activated his Inexorable Stance, his two Daos already coursing through the framework of [Thousand Lights Avatar]. He became one with his path, his strikes filled with suffocating pressure. However, he didn't go all out, only barely fighting at the skill level of the Early Integration Technique.

Since he was holding back, Zac only managed to seize the advantage after a minute of furious clashes. The radiant force of the cudgels had become restrained at every side. The warrior desperately tried to break out, but chains were everywhere. Death was everywhere. Even pure light could die and be winked out, just like stars eventually running out of fuel.

It might have looked like an even match, but the warrior kept falling just short of striking Zac's barrier. This, too, was by design. Truthfully, it was even harder to control the fight to this degree than claiming a clean victory. Eventually, Zac felt enough time had passed and "seized an opening" to end the fight. He was pushed back by the invisible force, confirming the duel was over.

"What the—" the warrior swore, looking like a windfall had slipped right through his fingers. "Do you dare fight me again, but with skills?!"

"I dare not," Zac smiled, ignoring the challenge since you couldn't farm Mana from the same person repeatedly.

He'd already gotten 100 Mana for his win and another 12 for piercing a small weakness. This man wasn't as thankful as the Stellar Mage, though. He probably thought he'd get a huge bounty by pointing out several glaring weaknesses in his blueprint, but he didn't even get the chance to strike at them.

"You better hope I don't run into you in the wild," the warrior growled before stomping away.

"Sorry about that," Zac smiled as he walked back to Catheya, who still looked at his core with shock in her eyes.

"You really did it...?" Catheya whispered before she looked at Zac hesitantly. "But it looks so..."

"Ugly," Ogras added from the shadows.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Zac laughed. "It incorporates some pretty uncommon theories that make it look weird. You can challenge me if you want to test it out."

"How would I beat you? I'd just be giving up my Mana like that guy just now," Catheya snorted before looking at Zac. "Does it really work? Have you fused Life and Death in one core?"

"You knew?" Zac smiled. "That forming a Life-Death core technically is impossible?"

"I-" Catheya hesitated.

"It's fine," Zac shrugged. "I've known for a while those elders have tried to steer me toward Death, thinking I can't get both. Luckily, the inspiration of that place showed me a path."

"Heaven's favored son," Ogras swore. "You reach a bottleneck, and an ancient inheritance pops up from the depths of the void."

"Something like that," Zac smiled, but his grin died down upon seeing Catheya's crestfallen look. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I was forbidden from mentioning it, but I always hoped you could prove convention wrong," she whispered. "I keep failing you."

"What are you talking about?" Zac said with a roll of his eyes. "Few have helped me and my cultivation as much as you have, to the point you could be considered half a teacher. You have no reason to feel bad."

Catheya smiled, but her brows soon furrowed again. "But what if it..."

"Then I'll deal with it as it comes," Zac shrugged. "I'm not planning for failure at this point."

"So it's an impossible core," Ogras muttered. "No wonder you had to spend a lake's worth of water and a full epiphany on that thing. I don't understand it at all, but I can tell it's incredibly complicated."

"It should work," Zac nodded. "It'll just be a pain in the ass to create. I'll probably have to get a lot of Mana to—"

"Excuse me, Sir, I would request to exchange pointers," a voice suddenly interjected.

"Alright," Zac smiled, turning around to see a cultivator wearing flowing robes and holding a stone urn.

"Disgusting," Ogras swore. "People stick to him like flies to dung because of that messed-up core. I'll catch up with you two later. Some of us have to work for a living."

"Thank god I've completed my duels already," Catheya agreed. "I'll just watch to see how this pans out."

Forty minutes later, Zac had regained all his lost Mana and more. Attracted by his ugly blueprint, 21 warriors had challenged him as he and Catheya leisurely walked from street to street. Zac handled them all the same; a duel without skills where he narrowly won, and the opponent just barely failed to hit his supposed weaknesses.

Catheya looked like a proud parent upon seeing Zac use her scheme to scam people out of their Mana. Unfortunately, Zac knew he couldn't pull something like this forever. Sooner or later, rumors would spread about his weird core and the fact no one managed to even hit him, let alone defeat him.

He still worked quite hard to make sure as few as possible realized there weren't any real weaknesses to his core. After all, some might think the bounties still were there, but his in-fighting technique was too good. That way, people might come for him in the Orange and Red Zones in the future, hoping to rely on their skills or perhaps numbers to defeat him and recoup their losses.

For now, Zac wanted to keep getting challenged until word got out, making use of the steadily increasing foot traffic toward the mission center. But just as a 22nd target was about to take the bait, the people on the street suddenly stopped in their tracks and looked around. Zac was the same, as he'd just heard a bell go off in his mind.

"A global message," Null said. "Want me to play it?"

"Play it," Zac said.

'Beware, fellow guests of the Perennial Vastness! There is a devious newcomer in our midst. The name of this undead Draugr is unknown. But in the few hours since arriving, he has callously murdered another guest on the streets of Vastness City. He has also created an intentionally crude blueprint and is using it to trick people into duels.'

'Do not fall for it! His attributes are extremely high, and he's estimated to have entered the Integration Stage of techniques. Few first-echelon cultivators are his match in a pure martial clash.'

And just like that, Zac saw his money-making scheme reach a premature end.