

The Fall 450

Chapter 450: Out of Reach

The encounter with the old seer was pretty jarring, but it wouldn't stop Zac from moving. He had his goals, and he knew that one couldn't get anywhere in this world without knocking out the competition. It was not a matter of Ogras-induced cynicism, but a rather reality forced onto everyone by the System. If there was no conflict, then one would be created.

Hearing the old seer's final words indicated that the worlds he traversed might all be real, but did it really change anything? He could only shrug off any hesitation and insecurities and head toward the next guardian.

Climbing the 8th floor presented a new kind of torture as Zac desperately pushed through the levels. He had almost completely given up on sleep by now, his rest was slightly slowing down while revolving the Fragment of the Bodhi to help recuperate his exhausted body and keeping the Splinter in check.

He had realized that the Splinter wasn't as intrusive when his mental state was in perfect condition, but problems quickly arose after having expended a lot of mental energy. He almost fell into a rage after every straining battle, and he quickly had to restore his mental energies to not go out of control. By this point, he needed to pretty much constantly travel with a Soul Crystal in his free hand to stay lucid.

The problem was that every time he used his Dao he felt as though the Splinter's corrosion got slightly more ingrained into his soul, for good or bad. It did seem that the Dao he forced into his attacks kept getting stronger, but it came at the cost of his mind getting slowly eroded. Zac could only push back against the effects as he kept climbing.

He considered stopping using his Daos altogether until he found a solution, but that would eventually just slightly delay the inevitable. Besides, not using his Daos would effectively end his climb. He couldn't defeat any enemies without them, and he was not ready to stop climbing.

His experiences in the tower had completely remolded him, pushed him toward a peak he didn't even know it existed. It had resulted in his mind getting invaded, but Zac started to believe that his best bet at finding a solution was to keep climbing. The 7th floor rewards were customized for his needs, and perhaps the 8th floor would be even more tailored to his needs.

And what did he currently need more than something to control the Splinter?

He might even find a solution before even reaching the 72nd level, as the 8th floor was a veritable treasure trove. It was almost torture to traverse one world after another and hearing about shocking treasures that would drive anyone mad, knowing that each of them was just out of his reach.

The 65th floor seemed to contain an ancient array left behind by a long-extinct race. It would be able to awaken one's 'hidden potential', which according to rumors meant gaining a huge surge of attributes and perhaps even awakening a constitution. But it was locked behind the floor's quest, and Zac simply couldn't complete it. So he could only take out his frustrations on the guardian before moving on.

The next floor contained what Zac guessed was a top tier E-Grade Axe Spirit Tool, but it was in the hands of a peak E-Grade warlord. This one wasn't quite as alluring as the previous floor, but it would still be a

huge boon to have an alternative to [Verun's Bite]. This was especially true as it was rumored to have 'a corrosive attunement', making it an extremely good weapon of choice for his Draugr-form.

Zac initially thought that he was doomed to get not his hands on it, but news spread that the warlord had suddenly died just as Zac was about to finish things up on the floor. He couldn't join the fight for the warlord's hoard though, as he was running out of time. He could only grit his teeth and move on to the next floor, leaving the treasures behind.

It almost felt like the System kept throwing out more and more alluring baits in his path in an effort to stop him from climbing any further. It was to the point that Zac wondered if it was some sort of trail that tested his determination, and Zac staunchly kept his eyes on the prize as he kept moving toward the next levels.

Missing out on all the treasures was a big disappointment, but he did make some startling progress with his experiments. Zac had almost reached a 40% success rate in forming the bronze flashes since getting to the 8th floor. He still needed to use his crude method of stabbing himself in the shoulders, but with the help of the Fragment of the Bodhi he was able to keep experimenting even after accumulating one grisly wound after another.

Zac had initially been afraid that the experiments would worsen his mental condition even more, but he soon realized it was the opposite. His mind actually calmed down after having shot out a bronze flash. It almost felt like some sort of mental bloodletting where the darkness in his mind was expelled through the Dao Implosions.

The explanation that Zac felt was most likely was that the Splinter of Oblivion had a part in the creation of the bronze sparks somehow. Perhaps it acted as a base to what the two fragments would fuse into, like a blueprint to the higher Daos. That would explain the increased success rate of forming the Bronze sparks compared to his trials during the 7th floor.

Before the only energies from the Splinter that suffused his soul were the small amounts of purified energy that the Miasmatic Fractals slowly let out of the cage. But now his soul was completely infiltrated. The improvements felt like a small silver lining to the mess he found himself in, but there were still some parts that he hadn't figured out.

Things weren't working out as he had hoped with his third Dao Fragment. No matter how many times he tried he simply couldn't form some equivalent of the bronze flash when trying to fuse the Fragment of the Bodhi with the Fragment of the Axe. The same problem arose when trying to fuse the Bodhi with the Coffin.

Only the combination of Axe and Coffin worked, leaving Zac wondering just what was missing. Did the second fusion require another method of activation to work? Or did it only work because the destructive flash leaned toward Oblivion rather than Creation?

His utter failure was another hint that he was on the right track about the Splinter, but he still wasn't completely convinced. The two Grand Daos of Creation and Oblivion were extremely high concepts, and pretty much all lower Daos should contain hints of both of them. The Bodhi wasn't pure Creation, and the Coffin wasn't pure Oblivion.

Not even the higher concepts of Life and Death that he was striving for were pure Creation and Oblivion. So it was a bit odd that he couldn't mix the Fragment of the Axe, which by itself should lean toward Oblivion, with the Fragment of the Bodhi.

There was no real way for him to verify what was really going on at the moment. For now, he could only take the opportunity to self-medicate while working out the possibilities and limitations of the bronze flashes. It seemed that desperation had played a part in managing to actually use the Dao Implosion.

His left arm was a mess after having ruptured dozens of times, but he had managed to successfully destroy a strong beast in the heat of battle once with the help of the Dao Implosion. The key seemed to be adrenaline, or rather battle lust. When he was just experimenting while traversing the worlds he was too calm, and that led to him being too slow in moving the bronze spark out of his body.

It was as if he was energized, then the blob of energy he created would be energized as well. Zac even tried to slap himself and roar on top of his lungs to get his blood pumping, but it wasn't very effective. Only his true fight-or-flight responses seemed to be working, perhaps as they activated some primal part of his brain.

His theory of the origin of the flashes also gave Zac some clues into what needed to be done to somewhat formalize his 'creation'. The largest problem was that he had no control over the energies he created, and he could only push it forward. But perhaps there was a solution; he needed to take control of the Splinter of Oblivion.

If the flashes were truly created with help from the debris of the Splinter, then he needed to somehow form a connection with it. It would allow him to guarantee a successful formation, rather than leaving things up to fate. It would perhaps even allow him to stabilize the volatile energy long enough that he could infuse it into skills rather than just throwing it away like a hot potato.

Messing with the Splinter would come with huge risks though, and Zac wasn't confident at even attempting to opening the miasmic cage in his mind before his soul was a lot stronger compared to now. It once came back to a lack of time. He wished he could jump into some time chamber and practice [Nine Reincarnations Manual] until his soul was strong enough to withstand the Splinter's influence.

However, Zac didn't spend all his time on the bronze flashes as they were still somewhat of a long-term goal. He had gained many other new upgrades that needed to be better understood, such as his new Dao Fragment.

One slightly surprising benefit was just how much stronger the fragment had made his Hatchetman class.

Zac was currently assaulting a massive army on the 67th floor, and he was being pelted from all directions as he tried to reach the princess in the middle of the army. He was somewhat confident that she was the level guardian, and Zac had immediately set out toward her army the moment he learned of her insane crusade.

This level was the same as the previous ones on the 8th floor. He had quickly learned of rumors talking about a divine tree that was about to bear fruit. Elites from all over the world were getting ready to compete for the natural treasure as the fruit seemed to possess the capabilities of opening the "third eye".

The effect of the third eye, or the soul's eye, sounded a lot like his Danger Sense after asking around, and he felt that combining the two might almost turn him permanently omniscient like when he used [Hatchetman's Spirit]. But he could only ignore the temptation while cursing the fact that he was too slow. If he had another month left on his climb he could have cleaned up on these last levels, but now he didn't have the leeway to take any detours.

Targeting one of the amazing treasures that appeared on each level now would essentially erase any chances of completing the floor. so the treasure had to be more tempting than an upgraded title and a tailor-made reward by the System itself. And while the treasures thus far had all seemed extremely valuable they weren't quite at that level so far.

That didn't make the situation less frustrating though.

Luckily he had a whole army to take out his annoyance on, and a storm of purple leaves flew around him as he waded into the army that desperately tried keeping him at bay. It was [Nature's Barrier] that had changed its appearance after getting infused with the Fragment of the Bodhi and reaching Peak Mastery.

Not only had the leaves become shockingly sturdy, but the skill even provided a restorative effect in the eye of the storm now. It was just like the hidden world within the cherry tree's canopy in the vision. If Zac had the fragment while fighting the swordmaster in the Battle of Fates he probably wouldn't have needed to use any other defenses than this skill.

His defensive skill wasn't the only one that had benefitted from gaining the Fragment of the Bodhi. Pretty much every single nature-aspected skill in his repertoire became stronger in one way or another, just like how Coffin added all kinds of effects to his death-attuned skills.

The forest created from [Hatchetman's Spirit] now provided a defensive sphere from the outside. It wasn't too useful for Zac at his current stage, but it would help with keeping allies safe in large-scale conflicts. The skill had also reached Middle Proficiency on the last level since he was pretty much forced to activate it during every battle now.

One surprising skill that benefitted from the Dao Fragment was [Loamwalker]. Not only did it increase the distance he could travel with each step, especially inside forests, but Zac even felt a mysterious energy rising from the ground and entering his body with every step. The energy was an earthy brown when he looked at it with [Cosmic Gaze] and he guessed it was earth-attuned energies.

He didn't have a use for the attuned energies, but being able to move much faster was a godsend.

The fabric of space cracked as Zac closed in on the princess' command tent, and a wooden hand covered in leaves and flowers quickly emerged, causing verdant lights to fly around its fingers in an exuberant dance. An outsider might think that the vibrant image might mean that the massive hand was about to bestow a blessing on the lands, but the reality wasn't quite so benign.

Zac had quickly figured out the fundamental use of the Fragment of the Bodhi apart from the healing. Life mutated and grew far beyond its normal means within the canopy of the consecrated cherry tree, and Zac was able to bestow that same effect to his skills. That meant that it wasn't simply a defensive or offensive boost to his nature skills, but rather a foundational empowerment.

[Nature's barrier] naturally became even better at defense as the leaves mutated, but the hand instead evolved in a more forceful direction, which was evident by the terrifying aura it had started to radiate. A two hundred meter wide array appeared as an immense pressure forced the average soldiers down on their knees.

An enormous sword saint appeared in the sky above the command tent, likely the avatar conjured by the princess he was targeting. She was currently on a path of carnage to earn the respect of her father, but her path was littered by the bodies of innocent civilians who were unlucky enough to live too close to the border of a rival kingdom.

Zac had no moral issue with taking someone like this out. She didn't respect the lives of others to attain her goal, so why should he respect hers? The massive sword saint aimed her sword at the core of the array which also meant that the wooden hand above it was targeted.

Destructive energies started gathering around the avatar, but Zac wasn't worried as an unassuming trunk descended from the core of the array.