

The Fall 850

Chapter 850: Paint your Path

The enormous statue of Yrial looked a bit different from how it used to. Today, a haze chock-full of fiery and icy energies surrounded it, and it actually released an aura akin to a real cultivator. It looked like Brazla hadn't lied when he said he needed some time to gather energy. The scene made Zac a bit cautious – why did the second inheritance trial require this kind of energy? Was it related to difficulty, or was it something else?

If it was the former, then Zac held complete confidence, but if it needed the energy to teleport him to some other sector, then it might become a problem. He wasn't willing to leave Zecia again, especially not while his escape bangle still hadn't been repaired. So Zac turned to the Tool Spirit, who was in his warrior persona today, with a mighty broadsword on his back and glimmering armor. "You've worked hard."

"It's nothing to the mighty Brazla," the Tool Spirit snorted, his nose almost pointing at the ceiling. "So, what have you brought today?"

Zac stifled his annoyance as a small mountain of golden ornaments appeared on the floor. One day, he would push down the haughty Tool Spirit a peg or two, but for now, he simply wasn't strong enough. So he could only smile and showcase his offerings; chandeliers, statues, furniture, paintings, and all kinds of knick-knacks he had gathered.

"These are invaluable heirlooms I collected during my last outing. Each one was a defining treasure of great renown," Zac lied as he channeled his inner Calrin. "While they don't contain much spiritual energy, their artistic value is incalculable."

Brazla gazed at Zac for a few seconds before turning his eyes to the shimmering pile of treasures. "Well, they cannot be compared to the artistry of my towers, but what can? I guess these trinkets will have to do. If anything, they can showcase the great gap between mundane artistry and the celestial artistry that is Brazla."

Zac inwardly breathed out in relief that his attempt to pawn off some useless decorations had worked out. He still had a bunch of actual treasures and arrays prepared just in case, but why waste his money if he didn't need to?

"It's their honor to be placed in your grand temple," Zac nodded before pointing at the Lord of Cycle's statue. "If I may ask, what's with the aura?"

"You would have to ask the haughty guy inside," Brazla said in a mighty showcase of his unsurpassed lack of self-awareness. "I was just responsible for collecting the necessary energy. If you ask me, it's a feeble attempt of the Lord of Cycles to match the grandeur of the Towers of Myriad Dao."

"Alright then, so the same procedure as before? Do you know how long it might take?" Zac asked, trying to finagle at least something useful from the Tool Spirit.

"All these questions," Brazla grunted with annoyance. "Do you take the great sage for your tour guide? Just step onto the teleporter and get out of my sight. It shouldn't take too long."

Zac only grunted in response this time as he walked away, stopping right in front of the teleportation array. Since the Tool Spirit was in an unhelpful mood, he tried to gather any hints from the array. Thankfully, it looked the same as last time, which decreased the odds of this being an actual long-distance Teleportation Array.

His gaze once more turned to the statue towering in front of him, and a wave of nostalgia hit him. It was hard to believe that just over ten years had passed since he stood here last. It both felt much longer and shorter than a decade. He was so inexperienced back then, fumbling his way forward as he desperately grasped for the power needed to save Earth from the threats it faced. Now, he was almost completely reborn, but he still hoped Yrial could provide the answers to the questions that were ailing him.

Zac took a deep breath as he scanned his body one final time, making sure there were no lingering threats or weaknesses that might impact him in the trial. By now, he was mostly restored, with only some lingering echoes of forming a Glimpse of Chaos remaining. With that, he stepped onto the teleporter.

The next moment, Zac found himself standing on a floating disk among purple and pink clouds beneath a foreign sky of breathtaking beauty. The scene was mesmerizing, but his attention was soon drawn to the massive object floating in front of him. It was a large disk wrought from stone, its rim engraved with some unfamiliar scripts as it slowly rotated in place like a wheel.

Most of its flat surface was completely smooth, and there were no clear hints to its function. There was a second, much smaller, wheel right in front of him, looking a bit like a daughter array to its 50-meter-tall parent. Zac guessed it was related to whatever trial Yrial had come up with, and a familiar voice confirmed the hunch soon enough.

“Paint your path of Cyclic Supremacy,” Yrial’s voice echoed through the clouds as the smaller disk floated closer, his tone containing a grandeur that felt extremely fake after knowing the real Lord of Cycles.

Zac grimaced as he gripped the disk in his hand, his fears somewhat realized. If it was just about Dao or strength, Zac had full confidence in dealing with the trial, having far surpassed what anyone could have expected for a small local Dao Inheritance. But if he needed to prove a cyclic path, then things had suddenly become a lot thornier.

“Uh, teacher? Master?” Zac hesitated as he looked at the disk in front of him. “There was kind of a change of plans. Can you change the test a bit?”

There was no response, and Zac guessed the voice was pre-recorded, even if Yrial probably was watching from his own dimension. However, there was one change in response to his words; a curtain of fiery ice, or perhaps frigid flames, had appeared in the sky. The fiery sea was in a mesmerizing flux as it passed through Yrial’s cycle between fire and ice, yet Zac was dismayed rather than enraptured as he looked at the masterful Dao control.

Because the curtain was slowly falling toward his position.

It was like he had been trapped in some cliché ruin where a spiked ceiling was gradually moving closer. In ten minutes or so, he would be drowned in fiery ice. Even if he managed to withstand the domain, it

would no doubt mean the trial had failed, and that he had lost his chance to confer with his master until he was powerful enough to force his way inside.

There was no time to lose, so Zac immediately infused a wisp of Mental Energy into the small disk in front of him to find any clues to what 'paint your path' meant. However, only a second passed before he swore and almost threw the daughter-array into the clouds. The issue wasn't that it was too hard to figure out what to do, but rather that it was too familiar.

The array worked almost exactly the same way as the Dao Discourse Array back in the Tower of Eternity.

If not for the incredibly bad timing, Zac would have found it pretty ironic. It was at the Dao Discourse against the Enlightened Three he finally realized the futility of pursuing a cyclic path of life and death, and instead took his first steps toward his current system. Yet now, he had found himself in a similar situation where he actually needed to showcase a cycle.

This time he couldn't just flood the array with his Daos Mental Energy tainted with Oblivion Energy. For one, he was pretty much tapped out on the remnant front, and his Mental Energy was extremely pure nowadays after years of Soul Strengthening. Secondly, even if he managed to overwhelm the disk, so what? That would probably just count as a failure.

The curtain of cyclic flames kept getting closer, and Zac could only grit his teeth and do his best. He first infused his Branch of the Kalpataru into the small disk, and a radiant tree started to appear on the left side of the wheel. But as the wheel kept turning, the image of the tree was twisted and distorted, becoming indistinguishable before Zac even had a chance to infuse his second Dao Branch.

Let alone try to affect some faux-cycle to trick the trial.

Zac grunted in annoyance as he cleared the disk. For his second try, he instead formed two thick streams of Mental Energy and twinned them into a sturdy braid. Then, he filled the streams with his daos of Life and Death before infusing the Dao Braid into the small disk. The next moment both of his Dao Avatars appeared on the turning wheel.

Unfortunately, the result was the same. The avatars only retained their meaning for a second before they were twisted and broken down, almost as though the huge wheel was a millstone. They couldn't even stay on for more than a few breaths, let alone form any sort of cycle.

"What the hell," Zac muttered, but he refused to give up as he tried one thing after another.

However, no matter how he infused his Daos into the disk, they never fused, and as the wheel kept spinning it ruined every attempt of his. Zac even sent over the chains of [Love's Bond], but while they managed to slow down the wheel, it started to creak ominously, forcing Zac to let go.

There was something special about the rotation, where his own Dao would be attacked if it wasn't rotating in step. However, he was absolutely unable to make that change. It wasn't enough to try and rotate the mental energy on the disk – it had no effect at all. The underlying theory wasn't really a mystery – while the wheel was spinning to represent a cyclic path, the true cycle was conceptual.

If he couldn't infuse that kind of understanding into the wheel, the drawings wouldn't spin, and they would immediately break apart.

The minutes passed as Zac exhausted every possibility he could think of, but it was futile. He simply didn't possess the ability to pass this trial either by hook or crook, and the curtain of flames was getting closer and closer. Seeing he was out of options, Zac growled with annoyance. Since he couldn't fake a cyclic path, he would instead force his own upon this picky wheel.

A keening cry echoed out amongst the clouds as [Verun's Bite] appeared in his hand, its sharp bone edge glimmering in blue and red under the curtain of Yrial's Dao. Eight streams of Mental energy, four instilled with Branch of the War Axe and four with Branch of the Kalpataru, poured into Spirit Tool, instilling it with one-half of his path.

The trial space was fraying at the edges from the immense power contained in the weapon as Zac infused as much of his Dao and energy it could withstand. He didn't use any skills, either his own or Verun's, but instead swung his axe in an inscrutable swing that carried the insights of his Evolutionary Stance.

It wasn't just an empty movement; with the amount of energy crammed into the blade, an actual blade of pure Dao shot forward, looking a bit like his old skill [Chop]. And the target wasn't the canopy in the sky, but rather the Dao wheel. An enormous shockwave caused the clouds to roil, exposing glimpses of a glimmering world far below.

It looked like an enormous crystal rather than a continent, with thousands of refracting lights reaching him through the cracks in the clouds. But Zac ignored the odd scene and instead focused on the wheel.

The attack had left a massive scar on the wheel, drawing a straight vertical line a third into the disk from the left. The scar almost felt like a crack in reality, teeming with churning waves of life. It felt like just the small cracks in the clouds around him, showcasing a glimpse of paradise, though it also contained a foreboding aura from his conflict-based Dao.

The unfamiliar scripts at the edges had been utterly ruined as well, and the wheel had ground to a halt. However, Zac saw that the runes were slowly reforming, and he swapped forms, his eyes turning black as his skin turned pale. Simultaneously, [Love's Bond] hummed as his new axe appeared in his hand.

A stray thought hit Zac as he formed eight new streams of Mental Energy – should the axe have a name of its own? Or should it be considered part of [Love's Bond] since they were technically just one Spirit Tool? But the name didn't seem fitting for a bladed weapon. Zac guessed he would ask Alea the next time she popped up, but he would simply call the axe [Black Death] until then based on its color and affinity.

A second wave of pure Dao shot forward, and a second scar appeared on the disk. If the first one felt like a tear almost exposing a celestial world, then the second one felt like a festering wound, teeming with death and carnage. It was destruction, a shadow of the abyss itself.

With two scars running parallel across the disk, each one rife with his Dao, the wheel couldn't take it any longer. Small cracks started to spread, forming a spider vein pattern. Interestingly enough, Zac saw how the cracks only seemed to appear in the middle of the disk, between the two scars, while the outer edges were unblemished.

The new cracks started at the cuts and spread toward the other side, almost like they were reaching for one another. Zac looked on with rapt attention, feeling he could actually glean new truths from the scene. The cracks weren't random – they formed some sort of pattern based on his Daos.

It was almost like he was looking at two armies from a great distance, with streams of cavalry reading toward the enemy lines. It was a war between Life and Death, a conflict as old as time itself. Soon enough, the two sets of cracks reached the middle of the disk where they met one another, which rapidly sped up the process.

Zac could only see a hint of something, he did not know what, a moment before the disk collapsed in a burst of energy that threw Zac off his feet. It had almost looked like a third scar had formed where the two lines of cracks met, one that emitted an aura superior to either of the originals. Unfortunately, it had been so unstable that it only lasted a moment.

Seeing the disk break apart made Zac's heart sink. His gambit had failed, where he wanted to forcibly engrave his path onto the disk. But a few seconds passed and nothing happened. Why wasn't he sent out if he had failed? Did he still have a chance to make it? There was, however, one issue remaining.

The curtain of flames was still descending, and it was only a few hundred meters above him now. He looked up at them with hesitation, wondering if he should activate one of his escape means. By now, he had found a few better alternatives to the [Coward's Escape], methods that would allow him to leave the trial without losing all his other quests.

The easiest method was simply to activate a spatial talisman powerful enough to destabilize this temporary space, which would result in him being spat out. That kind of method wouldn't work inside Mystic Realms or top-tier heritages, but it should be more than enough for this kind of simple inheritance.

However, Zac refused to give up just like that, and the Miasma in his body churned as his [Spiritual Void] was unleashed. He was going all out from the start, and a massive Dao Braid entered a skill fractal on his right bicep along with almost a third of his Miasma.

Billowing waves of darkness poured out from his back the next moment, but it didn't turn into a domain of death like [Deathwish]. Instead, the energy condensed into a grid of strings that looked both like some sort of skeletal wings, a mesh of chains, or a spider's web. They stretched out from his back five meters in every direction, the network constantly twisting as it accumulated energy.

One shimmering orb of utter darkness soon congealed at each tip, while [Black Death] in his hand started radiating a gray haze that lacerated the air around it. Zac glowered at the sky, and with a roar swung his weapon in a sharp overhead arc, causing the insanely sharp haze to rush forward. In an instant, the wave transformed into a metallic skull with a huge scar on its forehead.

The skull only appeared for an instant, where its jaws opened far beyond what should be possible. Before disintegrating, the skull unleashed a soundless wail that contained such force that it formed a barely visible blade that shot forward with almost impossible speed. In its wake spatial tears full of the Dao of the Axe swirled around, creating a trail of destruction that slowly expanded outward.

The scene was pretty shocking, but the skill wouldn't end with just one single blade. The two wing-like appendages on Zac's back flapped, and they suddenly expanded five times in size. In an instant, they

reached the size of airplane wings before being absorbed by the two orbs at the ends. With that, a set of soul-chilling runes appeared at the surface of the orbs, at which point Zac finally released them.

The two singularities shot forward with such force they tore straight through space, reappearing right next to the blade which had reached the roiling curtains of flames by now. The moment they appeared their surrounding was sealed as the runes flashed, and it looked like the icy flames had been completely frozen over as they stopped in place.

The blade and two orbs crashed into each other the next moment, and Zac was forced to activate [Profane Exponents] to withstand the cataclysmic eruption that followed. Death and Conflict fused into one, and nothing could withstand its might as a black inferno ripped the whole canopy to shreds. Zac looked at the scene with awe behind his barrier, not sure if even he would survive at the heart of that explosion.

He had tried out [Desperation's End] inside the Orom World before, but the scene back then was barely a shadow of what he witnessed now. For one, the orbs hadn't been powerful enough to seal their surroundings, and the explosion had been like a match compared to today's conflagration.

A few errant waves of fiery ice rained down around him, but the chains of [Love's Bond] effortlessly flicked away the ones that made it past the barriers. A minute later, the sky was clear, void of both his attack and the domain.

"Uh," Zac eventually hesitated as he looked around, a bit hesitant about what he should do now, stuck as he was on a disk flying among the cloud".

"How could I ever have accepted a brute such as you as my discip"e?" a sigh echoed out right next to his ear". "The long years inside this place must have turned me insane, just like the little Tool Spir"t."