

The Fall 851

Chapter 851: Blueprints

A small smile spread across Zac's face as he heard the familiar voice. This was obviously not a recording, meaning he had managed to brute-force his way through this trial as well. So he swapped back to his human form while the clouds shifted, forming a tunnel that no doubt led to his teacher's domain. He walked toward the edge of the floating disk, but he shot one final look at the last lingering remnants of his skill.

[Desperation's End] had a glaring weakness, being the slowest skill to activate between both his classes by far. Even then, Zac was extremely happy with it. His Fetters of Desolation-class had a lot of skills that bound enemies and whittled them down, but it lacked direct lethality. So that the class's ultimate finisher was a blast of utmost destruction had pretty much added an entirely new tool to his toolbelt for his Draugr class.

Not even his [Arcadia's Judgment] contained this level of raw power, though it did deliver two consecutive strikes – the initial swing and the following eruption from below. That kind of design had its advantages as well, where the first strike could take out defenses while the follow-up went for the kill.

This new finisher of his required some more preparation, but that was fine with Zac. His other skills would bind the enemies to his calamity, and [Desperation's End] would sever their path. And he even had the perfect trump card in case he needed to speed up the process – his Void Energy. The Void Energy wouldn't allow him to instantly deliver a strike, but it would drastically cut down on his casting time by instantly conjuring fully-formed singularities and wings.

Furthermore, the skill was a novel expression of the fusion of the two Daos that made up the foundation of his class; Axe and Pale Seal. The skill even required both Daos to even function, so it was a huge relief that he had eventually learned to braid his Daos with his homemade method.

It wasn't too uncommon for high-quality skills to require more advanced control of Dao, but Zac had still been a bit surprised the System added such a skill to his class. Perhaps it was a reminder to keep working on his Soul, as the requirements to activate his skills would only grow more stringent down the road.

There were still a lot of things to discover about his skill, since this was the first time he activated [Desperation's End] without the prison brand limiting him. For example, those two singularities were actually controlled by him when he shot them out. That probably meant there were other ways to use them than simply bashing them into the conjured blade. That was simply the most fundamental technique he had gained an inherent understanding of the moment he got the Skill Fractal.

However, figuring out the details would have to wait, and Zac turned his head toward the now fully-formed tunnel. It looked stable enough, but Zac still felt his heart shudder as he stepped off the floating platform and entered a pathway made out of clouds. Thankfully, it held, and Zac flashed forward, soon appearing in a new world.

This time, Zac didn't find himself on the moonlit floating island where he met Yrial the first time. Neither was it the odd gemlike world he had vaguely spotted beneath the clouds. Instead, he found himself walking across a field filled with flowers, the scene somewhat reminiscent of the Dao painting he was

forced to purchase with his credits last time. However, here the flowers were far more varied, creating a mesmerizing explosion of colors and scents.

In the distance, a wooden pergola had been erected, and the thousands of pieces of hanging silk cloth that made up its ceiling were dancing in the breeze. The tintinnabulation from chimes hidden among the silk bands and the rustling of cloth and leaves were the only sounds, together forming a harmonious melody that soothed Zac's soul.

Zac walked over, and he found the familiar figure reclined on a set of pillows with a bouquet in his hands, his features full of beauty and ambiguity. Having gained some experience since last time, Zac realized that his master wasn't simply almost impossibly beautiful. Seeing his features now, Zac could spot echoes of both fire and ice in perfect harmony.

It was Dao, just like he had seen when looking at Iz Tayn. Or was it perhaps more apt to say it was affinity, where great attunement with one's Dao slightly changed one's features to get more in line with the heavenly truths? And would that explain why he so often heard he looked rugged but mundane, even if Zac felt his appearance had markedly improved through his two Race Upgrades? His features lacked any hint of the Dao, thus making him appear worse than it really was to cultivators.

More importantly, just how talented had Yrial once been? Certainly, the mark of Dao on his features was just a whisper compared to the palpable feeling he got from Iz Tayn, but Zac suspected that weird girl was close to the peak of the Multiverse in terms of heritage or talent. Still, it possibly meant Yrial possessed affinities beyond pretty much anyone else he had encountered.

Even then, he had fallen before even confirming his Dao, proving that just talent and hard work weren't enough to reach the peak. The Multiverse didn't lack the hardworking and the talented. You needed luck and opportunities as well.

"I told you to return in ten years at the earliest, and you appear in front of me in ten years almost to the day?" Yrial asked with a raised brow as Zac entered the carpeted pergola. "Did you miss your beautiful master that much? It must have been difficult, only having 'A Flower of Fire and Ice' to remember me by. Or did you ignore my requirements, forgoing decorum in your greed for my treasures? Which is it?"

"Definitely the former," Zac reluctantly answered, remembering all-too-well the capricious nature of his departed master.

Yrial smiled as though it was a matter of course, slightly waving the bouquet in his hands, which released a wave of perfume while the cloth above his head parted, letting the rays of the sun dance on his face and his long hair. Zac inwardly groaned, but he still kept himself from interrupting on until Yrial had showcased his face from a few different angles. Only then did Zac dare speak up.

"The situation on the outside has grown a bit messy. I need to leave my home planet soon, and there is a small chance I won't be able to return before becoming a Hegemon."

If all went according to his plans, he would return after fetching the Ferric Worldeater by the Void Gate. However, this was ultimately his first excursion without any real protections. It wasn't some system-based trial like the Twilight Ocean, where his enemies were all bound to be the same grade as he.

It was rather a beast tide in a foreign land, where both Peak Beast Kings and hostile Hegemons, even Monarchs, could appear. There was no way to tell how things would play out, especially with his escape bangle down for the count for the foreseeable future. That's why he wanted to see if any quick power-ups were waiting for him with his master, especially survival methods.

Since Yrial had been a wandering cultivator all his life, and going by the quest Zac got when he became his disciple, the Lord of Cycles had to be good at fleeing from his enemies. Zac needed some of those abilities since that was one department where he was currently lacking. Otherwise, Zac might find himself stuck on some hostile planet or Mystic Realm, at which point he only had one option – push to Peak E-grade before using his Perennial Vastness Token.

"You're pretty confident about evolving even with your trashy constitution," Yrial commented as he lazily returned to a lying position, but his exquisite brows were slightly furrowed as he looked at Zac. "More importantly, what was up with that display of yours, ruining my blueprint? Did you forget everything I said the moment you left ten years ago? You were supposed to create a cycle."

"Well, some things happened," Zac sighed. "It looks like forming a cycle is impossible with my affinity. It requires a level of control I can't reach no matter how much I train, so I was forced to make some changes."

"Well, I knew that was a possibility," Yrial shrugged.

"You knew?" Zac exclaimed. "So you sold me that skill just to mess with me?"

"I only guessed it," Yrial smiled. "Who knows what rules your weird body follows? But I figured that even a failure could be useful in helping you find your path. And I think I was right. Life and Axe, Axe and Death."

Two miniature swords suddenly appeared, one wrought from white-hot flames and another one of pristine ice. Suddenly the two clashed, which released outbursts of energy that lit up the whole pergola.

"Two opposites reborn through the forge of conflict. Interesting enough. That final creation of yours was somewhat impressive, but you're far from realizing its potential. And looking at what happened to the blueprint, that doesn't bode very well for you, even if some of the damage was because of the thuggish way you painted your path."

"You've called that wheel a blueprint twice now, what do you mean? A blueprint for a cycle?" Zac asked, his eyes turning away from Yrial's simulation of his path.

"You could say that," Yrial nodded as the two swords fused into a wheel that looked a lot like the yin-yang symbol. "But also for something else. It was a template array for condensing a Cultivator's Core. If you managed to paint your cyclic path on the wheel, it meant you would be qualified to make a run at Hegemony. But look at you, how could you possibly form a core with such volatile energy? You'd blow up."

"It's that bad?" Zac grimaced. "Then how do Edgewalkers normally do it?"

"Edgewalkers?" Yrial smiled. "You don't hear that term often. I guess you've done your research. We'll get to that later, but first, let me check you out. The Daos you infused into those windblades of yours were quite interesting."

"It wasn't a-" Zac muttered, but he shrugged and stopped when he saw Yrial wasn't listening, his eyes glued to what Zac assumed was his redacted status screen.

"You.. what!" Yrial blurted. "Those Daoblades weren't some simple skill? They were just pure Dao and energy?!"

"Well, yeah?" Zac nodded as though it was a matter of course, taking some pleasure in his master's shocked face.

"How is this possible?!" Yrial continued, his pristine face starting to distort as he shot to his feet, any hint of his lackadaisical demeanor gone. "How can a legendary garbage like you have formed three Dao Branches in ten short years? Did you fall into a vat of Primal Dao?"

"Primal Dao?" Zac said with a shake of his head, but his eyes suddenly lit up. "Wait, is it like a pristine white light, giving off the aura untainted by worldly Dao?"

"You..." Yrial wheezed. "You didn't..."

"Well, no," Zac said, prompting his teacher to breathe out in relief. "It was only a couple of motes, not a whole vat."

"Brat, are you trying to kill me again?" Yrial swore as his gaze grew distant. "Why did I never have this kind of luck back then? If someone had thrown some Primal Dao my way, would I have found myself stuck without ever confirming my Dao?"

Thankfully, the Lord of Cycles quickly regained his wits though he still looked at Zac with a disgusted expression that made Zac think of Ogras. "Well, even a pile of dung will be consecrated in the Dao with that kind of opportunity. So, what else have you been up to? You should have eaten the treasure I provided? Have you managed to excavate the other Hidden Nodes it showed?"

"Well, I think I have more to open, but I can't be sure," Zac said, and Yrial nodded as though it was expected. "For now, you could say I have opened five."

"Brat, are you doing this on purpose? From now on, say your results quickly and concisely or I'll start deducting credit," Yrial said with a roll of his eyes as he started to fan himself with the bouquet out of annoyance. "What else have you improved?"

Zac hesitated a second, but he ultimately chose to follow his original decision. He had argued with himself over just how much he should tell his departed master, where Zac's ingrained paranoia fought with his desire to get proper advice. If he told Yrial too little, Zac would once again get feedback that didn't take into account all aspects of his path, just like how it was with Pavina and Heda.

But if he told Yrial too much, it might have some unintended consequences down the road, though he honestly didn't know what. Ultimately, he had decided to tell Yrial most of what he had discovered about himself and his path, barring only his guess about his supposed connection to Emperor Limitless. Just like Pavina said, some things were better not spoken out loud, though he was worried about the System rather than the Orom this time around.

The benefits far outstripped the risks as far as he was concerned. If someone managed to break into his Dao Repository and extract his secrets from Yrial, breaking the rules of the System-enforced master-disciple contract, having his secrets exposed would probably be the least of his worries.

“I gained a peak-quality Soul Strengthening-Manual in the Tower of Eternity, which I have cultivated to the third out of nine layers, making my soul stronger than most Mentalists’. I have also awakened my bloodlines, which is related to my Hidden Nodes,” Zac said. “Oh, and I have reached the integration stage for the two stances of my technique.”

The Lord of Cycles leveled an even stare at Zac for a few moments, while Zac smiled sheepishly in return. He knew what Yrial was thinking. Even if it felt like his progress had been slow at times, it had to be said that his cultivation speed was monstrous compared to most elites. Accomplishing even one of his breakthroughs in a decade could be considered good, but doing it in multiple branches? Most likely, only Heaven’s Chosen could accomplish something like that.

“Alright, why have you started cultivating your soul? Is it because of your garbage affinities?” Yrial eventually asked.

“Well, it helps with that, but it’s not the real reason. I didn’t tell you the last time I was here, but the System has kind of messed with my path a bit,” Zac grimaced as he roughly explained the situation with the remnants in his mind, though he didn’t mention Be’Zi or their quests.

“Creation, Oblivion, and Chaos... The broken peaks of the Boundless Path,” Yrial sighed. “To think you had been dragged into the schemes of the Boundless Heavens before you even set out on the path of cultivation. Is it related to your races?”

“Probably,” Zac slowly nodded. “The System probably saw an opportunity to try something out when I got my Draugr side, though it might be because it doesn’t want me to turn to my mother’s faction.”

“Why would the Heavens care about something like that?” Yrial laughed. “Don’t let your ego get the best of you.”

“Well, it turns out my mother wasn’t a native of the world I grew up on. She was a Technocrat. A powerful one, probably an Autarch. And judging by what they were up to, they might have been one of the most powerful Technocrat families around.”

“Of course, she was,” Yrial groaned. “No wonder, no wonder. That’s why I couldn’t understand the scripts on that Spy Core of yours – it was the work of those maniacs. Don’t tell me you have started implanting yourself with those cursed components, departing from the natural order?”

“No,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “My mother considers me a failed experiment of theirs, and she kind of left me here before she kidnapped my sister. I can’t be sure, but I think I am completely organic. My mother’s family was annihilated before they reached the stage where they would start implanting me with odd things.”

Honestly, it felt extremely good to finally vent a bit after years of hiding the true facets of his heritage. With both his Sister and Ogras gone, no one really understood what he was going through and the difficulties he faced. So one secret after another was spilled in the pergola over the next hour as Zac roughly recounted what he had been through since they met last time.

“Now, I am getting closer to forming my core, but I honestly don’t know how to tackle that problem. I was hoping you could point me in the right direction, being an Edgewalker as well,” Zac said.

“How could I possibly help you? In fact, don’t talk to me,” Yrial muttered as he pointedly looked away. “I cannot even look at you right now. Mysterious background, being led to weird treasures by the Heavens themselves, bloodline experiments, unprecedented constitution, opportunities appearing wherever you turn. You bastard, did you steal a whole Sector’s providence or something?”

“That’s...” Zac coughed. “I mean it might sound a bit unfair, but it hasn’t been a bed of roses. I’ve lost count of how many time’s I’ve been wounded or almost died by now.”

“Whatever,” Yrial huffed, but he eventually took a deep calming breath. “Alright, your kind master will put aside this injustice for now. Have a look at the realities of pursuing Hegemony while I try to unravel the mess you have created.”

Zac was about to ask what he was talking about, but the next moment he found himself beset by a wave of vertigo. The world shattered as he fell onto the ground, but then it suddenly reformed again, and Zac got back on his feet with confusion. He thought Yrial had sent him on another quest, but the pergola and field of flowers were still there.

But why had a wall suddenly appeared? And were those flying treasures flying in the sky?