

## The Fall 249

### Chapter 249: Creation and Oblivion

"The trial to reach D-Grade is to successfully form a Cultivator's Core, also called a Cosmic Core. This is not something that happens naturally. There are various methods to do this, but they all have high requirements, and just a minuscule fraction of all E-Grade warriors manage to take that final step," Anzonil said with longing.

"If you almost succeed in forming the core but fail at the last step you have two options. You can let the core shatter and try again at a later date, but doing this will leave you seriously wounded. Even worse, every following core-forming attempt will be even harder.

"The second option is to force your failed core to stay together, which stops the core from completely breaking apart. It will maintain a small part of its original function and you will see a slight boost to your longevity. But if you do that you are still not considered as D-Grade by the System, and you will cut off your path of advancement forever," Anzonil explained.

"I had already failed my evolution two times, and I knew the third try would be my last. Alas, I failed that time as well and took the second option to at least be able to protect my sect a bit longer," the old man sighed.

"In any case, there were far stronger forces all around us, and we constantly were under the threat to be swallowed whole. Luckily we suddenly saw an opportunity to rise. The son of the Sect Master was the greatest talent our sect had ever seen. He grasped not only our insights into the study of formations, but he was also an extremely adept warrior with deep insight into the Dao.

"I took him as my Terminal Disciple, pooling all my efforts into turning him into a powerful pillar of the sect. We had no doubt that he would become a true D-Grade warrior in the future, and help our small sect rise given enough time. But war came to the continent, and forces like were destroyed or swallowed up one by one."

"That's when that man arrived at our sect," Anzonil continued, for the first time showing smoldering anger in his eyes. "That accursed man. He appeared to be a rogue cultivator and a complete lunatic. He destroyed half our sect and caused so many deaths with his sinister spells."

Zac nodded and remembered the sword scars that covered some of the structures up on the surface.

"Through our arrays and great sacrifices, we finally managed to kill him. But that wasn't the end of it. Out of his body two crystals emerged, emitting boundless power. As you understand one of them was the one that I managed to move to the underground cavern, where it has rested since," the old man continued.

Zac had a pretty good idea what happened to the other one, and Anzonil soon confirmed his guess.

"The other one was taken by Raval, my disciple."

Zac's thoughts turned to the spectral cultivator who blocked his path right at the end, who asked him to apologize to his master.

"After seeing the crystal with your own eyes you must think my disciple to be a brash fool. But those were desperate times. The fate of our sect was already hanging in the balance even before the arrival of that man, and we had just lost a large number of our forces and hidden cards to kill him.

"The moment the surrounding sects learned what happened to us they would immediately launch a full assault. It wasn't greed or personal gain that drove Raval, it was his wish to protect the sect he loved. As expected the surrounding sects soon arrived with their armies, but Raval exploded with never seen before prowess. He single-handedly pushed all our enemies away, killing dozens of elders and other powerhouses.

"We were all elated, and I even thought of having someone else absorb the other crystal even though it emitted such ominous energies. After that battle, all the surrounding sects stayed away, but Raval started to change over the following years. He got aggressive, moody, and unstable," Anzonil said with a shake of his head.

"Finally I had to confront him, and that's when I learned what was truly going on. That's when he showed me the large square far beneath the surface and the massive tunnel-system he had created. In fact, those tunnels you walked were not made by me, but rather by Raval himself.

"He felt himself getting corrupted by the crystal, and he had no means to remove it. It had completely fused to his very being, and it didn't even let him kill himself. So he hatched a plan. He created an enormous circle that runs beneath the whole sect and turned that into an array whose purpose was to purify the crystal.

"He circulated the dark energies through this massive array in hopes to slowly grind out the sinister and corruptive elements of the Crystal. After I learned what was going on I spent years working with him to improve the array, and initially we thought we were on the right track. Unfortunately, the power of that cursed object was just too massive," Anzonil said. "I think you can imagine the rest."

"I was actually stopped by Raval in the last cavern," Zac said, making the old man's brows lift in surprise. "He asked me to relay that he was sorry."

"Sorry?" the man repeated with sadness in his eyes. "It is I who should be sorry. If I was stronger he wouldn't be forced to infuse himself with that cursed object to protect our sect."

The two stood in uncomfortable silence for a bit until Zac finally couldn't stop himself from trying to gather some more information about the thing in his mind.

"Did you ever learn what that crystal is?" Zac asked.

"Raval called it a piece of the [Heart of Oblivion], and after expending a large portion of my wealth I learned a few things," Anzonil nodded.

A sour feeling entered Zac's mouth after hearing that the old ghost had actually already spent most of his money, but at this moment the knowledge might be even more important now anyway.

"My research pointed me toward an extremely old scripture that described the source of Dao and the universe itself. Those things are highly debated topics, so I do not hold much faith that the old sage who wrote it got it exactly correct.

“But when it spoke of the creation of the multi-verse it touched upon a subject of interest for my research. It said that in the beginning there was only Chaos, but from Chaos both Creation and Oblivion were born, the two highest Daos apart from Chaos itself.

“These two Daos created the multiverse, and all the lower Daos were birthed from them. I do not know if it is true since those kinds of Supreme Daos are far beyond my understanding or reach. But I managed to confirm that the Dao of Oblivion does exist, and that it is extremely powerful,” Anzonil said with a face conflicted between hate and longing.

“If what the sage said about the tiers of Daos was true, then one could say that Oblivion is the end-point of all destructive Daos. The rumors we found were that [Heart of Oblivion] was born from a splinter of that pure original Dao, which makes it impossibly valuable. However, it was somehow corrupted, which created the sinister energies that permeated it.

“Such power is not something that normal people can touch upon, much less control, which makes it a poison that drives men mad. That’s why great warriors sought to destroy the heart all those endless eons ago. But that thing is truly stubborn and survived, though it is now only a shadow of its former self. But just that shadow is enough to destroy all that it touches,” Anzonil sighed.

Zac thoughtfully looked inward at the trapped splinter in his mind, and a tumultuous whirlwind of emotions passed through his mind before he steadied himself. At first, he was elated that he had snatched a treasure that contained a trace of a Supreme Dao, and he couldn’t even imagine how valuable something like that was.

But that also showed just how big the trouble he was in. Raval seemed to have been in late E-Grade when he absorbed the splinter, but he went mad within a decade even though he did everything in his power to stop it. He even built an array that was as large as a country to stem the corruption, but even that only slowed down the process slightly.

If the miasma fractals in his mind broke, how long would he have until he became yet another wailing ghost himself? He would have to put his mind into figuring this out as quickly as possible, but after asking a bit more there was not much else the Array Spirit knew. It was only a shadow of its former self after all, and both its memories and knowledge were limited.

It also begged the question of just who that woman in the ocean of miasma was. Just how powerful must she be if she was able to seal such a monstrous item? And she also mentioned that she didn’t recognize his lineage, and he had no idea if that was a good or a bad thing. And just why did she help him? If there was something he knew it was that one couldn’t count on benevolence of others. That was how you ended up robbed and dead.

“By the way, you called my race royal, earlier. Could you explain that further?” Zac asked, trying to glean some more intelligence from the old Array Spirit.

“You don’t know?” Anzonil said with surprise.

“I have no connection with the Undead Empire, so my knowledge of my heritage is extremely lacking,” Zac explained.

Honestly, he hadn't even given the subject any thought before. Whether it said Draugr or Undead in his status screen didn't really make any difference for him, but after the vision and Anzonil's comment he felt that he needed to know more.

"Well, I do only retain a fraction of my memories in this form, so I do not remember all the details. But simply put you are a purebred undead, uniquely suited for miasmic cultivation," the old man explained.

"Almost all undead are turned species. For example, humans who have died and been infused with miasma. They are not pure undead since their original bodies were not meant for that sort of cultivation. Even their progeny who are born undead are afflicted with the same problem," Anzonil continued.

"Sorry, progeny? The undead can have children?" Zac asked with some surprise.

"Of course, but not until they reach late E-grade and have awakened their bodies," Anzonil nodded as matter of course, giving Zac another surprise.

During the past two weeks he had ample time to scour through his body, and he almost retained none of his bodily functions. His heart didn't beat, and the black ichor in his veins was simply sitting there.

He did breathe, but he wasn't sure if he was just going through the motions or if his body actually picked up oxygen somehow. But he did consume a small continuous amount of miasma to simply function which was different from how it was being in his human form.

"In any case, this mismatch with miasma slows down cultivation and makes it far harder to break through the bottlenecks. In return, the undead has generally higher attributes and they live longer before they turn insane. So if an undead manages to break through its shackles it will likely be stronger than a human on average," Anzonil explained.

"Then what about Draugr?" Zac probed.

"The Draugr is one of the five purebred undead races," Anzonil said. "Even though they look mostly human they are not. They have no living counterparts, the same as the other four pure races. Their origin is unknown, just like the true origin of the undead in general."

"And this makes cultivation easier for us?" Zac asked.

"As far as I've understood it. The five races have a natural connection with Miasma that other undead do not have, and their bloodlines are almost considered holy. If you walked into the capital of some planet in the Undead Empire many of the young lasses wouldn't hesitate to procreate with you," the old man added with a perverted grin.

Zac coughed in surprise since that change in demeanor from the old man was quite a shift from the image of kindly sage that he had mostly shown so far. Anzonil seemed to understand what Zac was thinking, and quickly continued with a cough.

"But I wouldn't recommend it. From what I've heard the elders of the five races aren't big fans of their genes being wantonly spread throughout the Empire. They rely on their superior lineages to that they can maintain their power. They have built up great advantages and heritages over millions of years with the help of their natural endowments, and don't want it spread into the public," he added.

Zac was generally happy to learn that he had actually dodged the problem of handling miasma, something he didn't even know existed. But it only made him more confused. These five races seemed like pretty lofty existences, they wouldn't likely deign to invade some newly integrated planet.

And why did he become a Draugr because he was stabbed by the Corpse Lord? He was pretty sure that man wasn't a Draugr. Mhal looked completely different from both himself and the woman in the vision, and he rather felt like something that was the result of Necromancy.

It almost felt like his confusion only increased the more answers he got.