

The Fall 719

Chapter 719: Mixed Meanings

“Mixed Dao works, huh,” Zac muttered as he looked out across the valley.

His vision had been broadened quite a bit over the past 40-odd days he had been under the tutelage of Catheya. The focus had been on skills and necromancy, but everything was interconnected when it came to cultivation. Catheya simply had a much broader vantage coming from a powerful clan in a massive empire, in addition to having a Monarch to personally guide her. The basic understanding that formed the foundation of her lessons contained as much new information as the lessons themselves.

They had touched upon the system of Daos a bit as well when talking about upgrading skills. The last time he got some sort of rundown into how Daos were interrelated was all the way back when he met Anzonil during the hunt. He had gathered a few more missives since then, but they were just things that were publicly shared in a frontier sector. They were nothing compared to the information crystals Catheya got from her master.

The biggest shock was that Chaos actually wasn't the sole Supreme Dao.

That simple fact had completely thrown his worldview for a spin. As Zac understood it before, Creation and Oblivion were the peak Daos, with the unattainable Chaos on the top. This was the pure path he thought, with other all Daos subservient. The Dao of Chaos was definitely a top-tier Dao, but it was just one of many peaks. There were others just like it.

For example, the Dao of Axe was not part of either Life or Death it turned out. Zac had thought it a branch of Oblivion, but it was rather part of the “Truths of Conflict”-grouping along with other weapon Daos. Space and Time belonged to their own groupings as well, as did the elements.

Furthermore, his particular path leading toward Chaos wasn't part of the System's domain. Zac had already guessed as much from the Aetherlord's talk about broken peaks, that reaching the absolute peak of Creation and Oblivion wasn't possible within Heaven's Path. Zac previously thought this created some problems for the Undead Empire, which was so heavily steeped in Death while still being part of the System. After all, Death was a subordinate of Oblivion.

But it turned out that it wasn't as big a drawback as one could expect. For one, the elemental paths including the Dao of Ice were within Heaven's Path, and so were the other two great heritages of the Undead Empire. Furthermore, it was also possible to infuse concepts of one Dao Group into another, where you made one the leader.

These kinds of Daos were generally called mixed-meaning Daos, and they were different from the fusions that Zac had completed until now. First of all, Dao seeds weren't true Daos of any particular branch, but rather simple concepts that could be added into pretty much any Dao. A real mixed-meaning Dao would appear if he did something like fuse his Fragment of the Bodhi and Fragment of the Coffin into one Dao Branch.

Catheya didn't say it outright, but it sounded like this was the path she was walking down. She would take her Dao of Death and Dao of Ice, and fuse the two into the 'Branch of Deathly Ice' or something similar, where her ice insights were the primary. There was an endless number of possible combinations,

such as Branch of the Deathblade which was a common fusion of the Fragment of the Sword and various Death-attuned Daos.

For a while, Zac had been confused a bit about why people would “limit” themselves with these kinds of Daos rather than pursuing one or multiple pure paths such as himself. After all, there was a clear line from the lowest Dao Sead all the way to the Supreme Dao of Chaos when going down his path.

Certainly, reaching those heights was beyond difficult, but cultivators should have dreams, right?

But it turned out that walking a mixed-meaning path had one clear benefit. As long as one of the Dao components were covered by the System you'd be within the System's purview, which shielded you from the wrath of the original Heavens. Zac was currently walking away from Heaven's Path with his cultivation leading toward Chaos, which put him in the crosshairs for some nasty punishments. This would be a problem that haunted him through all his breakthroughs, unless he changed his plans for his path.

For example, he had found that he was currently at a crossroads with two of his Daos. He could take the Fragment of the Bodhi either toward the Branches of Life or the Branches of Nature as things stood. The Branches of Nature were within Heaven's Path, while Life was not. He could even change his path toward the Buddhist Sangha if he wanted.

The same was true with Coffin. He could either push it toward Death or Nature due to its features of rot and decay. There were no doubt other directions he could take the Dao Fragment as well, though he didn't have any clear path in mind at the moment. In either case, he wasn't technically on the Boundless Path just yet, which was why Triv was so confused as to why he had attracted tribulation while still early E-grade. It was the next step on his path that would properly place him onto the Boundless Path, for better or worse.

All this knowledge didn't really change Zac's plans since he still had the intention to move toward Oblivion and Creation, but it was important to remember how flexible the Grand Dao was. The Dao was not a series of narrow corridors leading toward the same exit, it was an endless sea of truth where you picked what resonated with you to form your path.

It was simply that some parts of the oceans were uncharted territory, whereas others had already been secured by those that came before. Part of the Dao had been integrated into the System from day one, fueled by the understanding of Emperor Limitless and his followers. Actually, this all tied back to the Apostates as well.

It was widely believed that each of the Apostates had mastered a Supreme Dao and brought it into the System's purview. The Apostate of Order had obviously mastered the Dao of Order, but the others weren't as obvious. The Beast Progenitor was believed to have added the Dao of Nature, which covered everything from beasts to plants to the seasons themselves.

The Apostate of Mercy was actually the one who perfected the Elemental Daos. Before then the Daos had still been part of the System, but it had been an incomplete heritage. The Apostate of Greed was surprisingly the one who finally brought the Dao of Space into the fold, which made the Mercantile System possible, while also letting the System perform the randomizations and perfected teleportations.

The only question mark was the First Defier. It was unclear which Dao he helped perfect, if any. His appearance was ultimately so long ago that it was impossible to really confirm anything, especially considering his reign had been extremely short-lived by all accounts. Some said ten thousand years, others a millennium. A few even claimed he reached the peak within a century.

Catheya had no idea which was the truth, but she was ultimately just a member of the young generation. There were tons of things that she didn't know. For example, some still held to the belief that Chaos was the Original Dao, which was why it was impossible to master. Only by placing all the other peaks under the control of the System would there be a chance at grasping it without being reduced to nothingness.

Not that things like that mattered. He hadn't even pushed all his Fragments to the Peak yet, though this excursion would hopefully remedy that.

"So these things are actually plants?" Zac asked skeptically as he looked at the large oyster fifty meters away from them.

"It's a bit of a hybrid, I think," Catheya shrugged. "The lines are a bit blurred on some beings. Just look at the treants. In either case, observe."

She threw out a supreme Miasma Crystal the next moment, and then an icicle that cracked it. A large haze of Miasma spread out, and the oyster started to shake a bit as it started to rise from the ground. Only then did Zac realize that it was actually attached to a thick thorned stem, and it was this stem that was rising from the ground to get closer to the dense deathly energies.

Catheya shot a blade of ice toward the Life-Death plant the moment it had stopped moving upward, which caused the area to explode with activity. A dozen blade-like stalks sprung up from the ground as the 'oyster' started to descend toward the ground. However, Catheya was too quick, and with a flash of ice she had passed the sharp stalks and appeared right next to the plant, and it was cut off in one swift swipe.

The sharp stalks started to flail about erratically, exhibiting power strong enough to take out middle E-grade cultivators with their thrashing. A series of ice barriers sprung up with Catheya as the core, and she ignored the stalks as she placed her hands on the severed stem holding the oyster. A storm of deathly energies burrowed into the plant next as she infused it with her Deathly Dao.

"Help me deal with the stalks, please?" Catheya asked, and Zac started to sever them while Qirai gripped them and ripped them apart.

Soon enough the two stood in front of Catheya who kept infusing the oyster with her Dao. By this point, the oyster had actually started to absorb large amounts of Twilight Energy from the surroundings, which Zac guessed was the cue that the process of forming the pearl had begun.

"So that's it?" Zac asked as he looked at the oyster.

"That's it," Catheya smiled. "The process will take a few hours, and you can't stop feeding it your Dao during that time. Harvesting is simple enough. When the pearl has formed, just crack it open and place the pearl in a sealed box."

“There’s only three of us here,” Zac said as he looked around. “How about we split up to speed things up?”

Qirai’s brows slightly furrowed since that differed from the original plan, but Catheya nodded in agreement. “Remember, we are gathering for four though, so everyone will have to chip in a bit.”

“That’s fine,” Zac nodded.

A quick scan had indicated that the valley held over a hundred oysters, which was better than the average trial. There were more pearls than he would be able to use even if the group consisted of seven members. Now that just four members were remaining, he would probably have to discard most of them in either case. Might as well feed some to Varo, so that he might gain something even while in a coma.

The trio soon spread out, and Zac walked toward a random Life-Death Plant some ways away from the other two. Zac didn’t bother with coming up with some new method, and he simply threw out a crystal as well before cracking it with a pebble. He activated his movement skill as the oyster rose toward the energy, and the world suddenly stopped. A moment later he appeared right before the stem.

The weird creature didn’t even have a chance to react before [Verun’s Bite] had ripped right through the stem. The ground heaved a bit as the root system below started to rampage from having its head cut off, but the plant never had the chance to extend its weapon-like stalks this time around. Just three of them managed to emerge from the ground, but they were effortlessly cut apart as Zac started to infuse the head with the Fragment of the Coffin.

The dying Life-Death Plant greedily absorbed the energies Zac provided, and Twilight Energy started to surge toward the oyster as well. The swirl of energy was more condensed in his case though, and Zac guessed it was because his Dao Fragment was higher compared to Catheya’s. Zac wasn’t certain, but he guessed that her Ice-attuned Dao was either High or Peak mastery, while her Death-attuned Dao was at the middle stages.

The process continued for two more hours, at which point a ripple spread out from the oyster. The ripple was rife with meaning, and Zac knew the pearl had been born. The extremely enticing Dao Fluctuation made Zac’s thoughts turn to dozens of avenues for his cultivation, but he pushed down the burgeoning bout of inspiration as he hurried over and urgently ripped apart the shells.

Inside was a shimmering dark-green pearl no larger than the pearls that you’d find on a necklace back on Earth. He looked at it with greed, and he was a bit surprised to find he wasn’t the only one. The coffin on his back shuddered a bit, and he felt an intangible nudge of hunger in his mind, even stronger compared to when [Love’s Bond] indicated its desire for Twilight Fruits.

“So you want these things as well?” Zac muttered. “Well, wait until we have finished gathering them.”

That Alea wanted these pearls wasn’t too surprising after her interest in the Twilight Fruits, and Zac was more than happy to provide. There were more than enough pearls to go around, so it was with gusto Zac stowed the pearl into a jade box he had prepared. The ripples disappeared just a few seconds after the lid was sealed, and Zac found his mind clear once more.

Zac wanted to immediately harvest another pearl, but he first rested for half an hour as he absorbed two Soul Crystals. The process wasn't as taxing as an all-out fight, but it was more taxing than running the purification array. Half an hour of rest was enough, and Zac soon shot toward the next oyster.

Half a minute later, Zac was already infusing the next oyster with his Dao. However, this time infused the fallen plant with the Fragment of the bodhi, though he first made sure that he was performing his experiment out of sight of the other two. Catheya had said that the inspiration came from the plant itself, but he figured his Dao might influence the pearls at least to some extent considering the amount he poured into the thing.

Two hours later a second pearl was formed, and Zac curiously opened the oyster. A small smile spread across his face as he saw that this particular pearl indeed veered a bit more toward a golden hue compared to the darker pearl he harvested before. It also emanated ripples that were slightly more in tune with life than death, which was exactly what he was looking for. Any little advantage was needed with his weird constitution.

The days passed, and the trio worked without rest as one oyster after another was harvested. Thanks to splitting up it took them just above five days to pick the place clean.

"You were quite the farmer," Catheya laughed as the three gathered. "It almost felt like your eyes were shining when you harvested these things. How many did you manage to harvest?"

"Fifty-four," Zac smiled. "What about you two?"

"As I expected," Catheya nodded. "I got 36, Qirai actually got 34. Altogether it's 124, and 31 pearls each according to our agreement."

"I have a proposition," Zac said, drawing an interested glance from Catheya. "I am willing to buy every pearl you don't need. Ten D-grade Nexus Coin each."

"Are you planning on selling them?" Catheya asked with a raised brow. "They'll only last a month or so, even when sealed."

"I have other uses for them," Zac shrugged.

Qirai clearly looked interested in making the deal, almost to the point of salivating, and Catheya slowly nodded as well. "How about we keep 15 pearls each, and sell the rest to you? That way we have a few extra in case we absorb them quicker than expected. How does that sound?"

"Perfect," Zac said and transferred 480 D-Grade Nexus Coins.

"Your means once again leave me in both awe and despair," Catheya smiled. "Well, things turned out a bit hectic than I anticipated, but overall the mission was a success. What are your plans now?"

"I'll find someplace to seclude myself for a while," Zac said. "This trial is a bit more dangerous than I expected, so I'll need to make some breakthroughs before continuing alone."

He had wanted to do this for a while now, and not only for the pearls he had finally got his hands on. The small hidden wounds in his body from his first node-breaking rally were pretty much fixed after these three long months, which meant he would be able to complete his second round of node-

breaking. Zac didn't know how long he had before his immunity or accumulated toxicity became a problem, but he felt he should be able to gain at least a handful of levels in this round.

So between a few levels and potential Dao Breakthroughs, the power boost he stood to gain was tremendous. And that was something he desperately needed considering where he was heading next.