

The Fall 852

Chapter 852: Determination

There were dozens of small vessels whizzing through the air, most of them taking the shape of gondolas that left plumes of glittering clouds in their wake, a feature clearly added not for function but aesthetics. Zac also spotted the occasional warrior flying on his own, with the vessels giving the Hegemons wide berth.

“Young master Lau’Sai, I’m sorry for intruding,” a shaky voice said, prompting Zac to look over with confusion.

A young woman emitting an aura of Middle E-grade stood at the edge of the pergola, her hands fidgeting as she looked past Zac.

“Yana, I told you to never apologies for visiting,” a euphonious voice answered, prompting Zac to once more turn around.

There he was, a young scion wearing the very same robes Zac had used the past decade, standing at the edge of the small pergola with a paintbrush in his right hand. Next to him was an easel with a semi-finished abstract painting, whose circular motif made Zac think of a shattered plate.

The painting felt lacking somehow, and it wasn’t for lack of proper supplies. Neither the canvas nor the brush were common goods; the bristles were actually on fire. However, as the young man finished a stroke, a fiery ochre was left behind on the canvas rather than a scorch mark.

The young man was naturally Yrial donning a gentle smile, exhibiting a refined, albeit slightly sickly appearance. In this vision, his hair was tied up with some sort of ornamental clip, and he wore a ferrennière with a small gem that emitted a soothing aura similar to Zac’s [Mind’s Eye Agate]. This Yrial only looked slightly younger than the soul whisp Zac knew, but Zac could sense that he was just at Peak E-grade. Not only that, but he guessed that Yrial’s pale complexion was not natural, with his aura being slightly unstable as well.

Was he perhaps wounded?

More importantly, what was going on? This was different from the quest he got during his last visit. Back then, he had essentially taken the place of Yrial in one of his memories, but now his teacher was standing right in front of him. Zac tried opening his Status screen, and while it worked, there was no quest waiting for him.

Looking down at his hands, Zac could see himself just fine, but the other two in the pergola seemed oblivious to his presence.

“Uh, hello?” Zac called out just to make sure, but they ignored him.

Zac knew it wasn’t the young couple slighting him, but rather that they really couldn’t see him. The whole situation was reminiscent of his Heart Tribulation where he had presumably been dragged into an erased memory from his past. Of course, it wasn’t his own memory he visited this time, but rather Yrial’s.

His teacher had told him to witness the ‘realities of pursuing Hegemony’ just before sending him here, so Zac guessed this memory was from around the time Yrial made that step. The young girl Yrial called Yana flushed a bit upon seeing Yrial’s gentle smile, and Zac inwardly cursed his master to grow a couple of pimples for exposing him to this overly ambiguous scene.

Turning his gaze away from the love-struck youngsters, he instead took a proper look at the surroundings. It quickly dawned on him what was going on, and why there were so many vessels in the air. The field of flowers was just part of a large walled-in courtyard.

Behind the young girl, Zac could spot a small but beautiful mansion almost hidden among several willow trees, and occasional buildings were poking over the walls. However, a weak shimmer around the courtyard indicated that this place was shrouded by some sort of privacy array.

It looked like Yrial had taken the beautiful garden and removed the rest when forming the world in his inheritance. As to why, Zac had no idea. Perhaps this place and this young girl held a special meaning to him. The girl in question had become extremely flustered, perhaps by Yrial’s admittedly singular appearance, or perhaps by his familiar tone, and it almost looked like she was about to flee out of embarrassment.

“You are always a welcome guest,” Yrial smiled as he stowed away his brush. “Seeing your smile always illuminates my soul.”

“I.. Ah... How are young master’s wounds?” Yana asked as she took a hesitant step into the pergola.

“Thanks to your help, I feel much better already,” Yrial said as he looked deep into Yana’s eyes.

“Perhaps, my dream of Hegemony isn’t dead just yet. If not for young miss finding me wounded in the forest... It’s a gratitude this one will carry for the rest of his life.”

“Ah, no, it was just something I should do,” Yana hurriedly said.

“I still worry,” Yrial said, his eyes so wet he looked like he was about to cry. “I’m afraid I will inconvenience you by living in your townhouse like this. It could tarnish your reputation.”

“Don’t be silly,” Yana huffed. “Who’d dare talk about the mayor’s daughter like that? Besides, if we...”

She didn’t finish the sentence, but the blush on her cheeks spoke volumes. Was this what dating was like on easy mode?

“One day I’ll become someone worthy for you,” Yrial sighed. “But now, I’m...”

“I brought something,” Yana said with a low voice as she surreptitiously looked around. “You mentioned your Spiritual Flame had been extinguished, right? Luckily, my grandpa found a very rare Spiritual Flame in a Mystic Realm a few hundred years ago. I brought one of its embers.”

The next moment, she took out an inscribed box from the bag on her side.

“I cannot accept this!” Yrial said with wide eyes as he took a step back. “It’s too precious. There is no way your family agreed to this. I cannot let you do this for me.”

“It’s nothing,” Yana said with an embarrassed smile. “The main flame was only slightly weakened – it will recover in a few hundred years, and I’ll just face some light punishment. Please, take it. It’s would be an

injustice to the heavens if someone with your talents would have your foundations damaged before you've reached your potential."

"Then... I'll accept it," Yrial said with some hesitation. "Once again, you have saved me. I can only hope I'll live up to your expectations one day."

"Just be careful so you don't open up your wounds," Yana smiled before she looked around. "I need to go back now before I'm discovered. Try to absorb it quickly. That way they can't make you spit it out."

Yrial stood with the box in hand and a gentle smile on his face as he watched Yana leave, bowing in her direction as she glanced back one final time. As she left through a gate, his smile slowly transformed, turning into an impish grin.

"I'm sorry little flower," Yrial mumbled as his erratic aura stabilized. "Times are tough even for handsome people. If fate permits, I will make it up to you."

Zac's eyes widened at the scene immediately putting two and two together. Yrial mentioned he had been 'saved' by that girl in some forest. Had he simply pretended to be hurt to get closer to her, or rather the Spiritual Flame her family controlled? Zac was filled with a new level of 'respect' upon seeing the avaricious gleam in Yrial's eyes as he opened the box.

This was the tribulations of Hegemony? Scamming naive girls out of their family's treasures with the help of silky skin and smooth words?

Then again, Zac wasn't one to judge. This could be considered mild compared to his own *modus operandi* where seas of blood were left in his wake. This way, only someone's coffer took a hit, and the girls' family could probably afford the loss even if the box looked extraordinary.

Inside the chest was a small vial containing a small blue flame. The moment Yrial opened the box, a cold snap spread across the area, causing a layer of frost to cover the pillows and nearby flowers. No wonder Yrial wanted this thing; it was extremely similar to the fiery ice he often formed.

Yrial hurriedly closed the box before taking out a series of containers from his spatial ring. From there, Zac looked on with interest as Yrial transferred the ember of blue flames into another vial while the original box and vial were placed on a small array. A whole ritual then commenced, involving karma-breaking dust, various liquids, and Yrial painting some sort of array on his face.

Ten minutes later it finished with the box simply disappearing as space distorted inside the array. The whole process was so fluid that it couldn't possibly be the first time his teacher had done this, and Zac guessed any clues that could lead Yana's elders to Yrial were gone. Zac had performed similar procedures quite a few times himself, but Zac had to admit he was lacking in this regard.

From there, Yrial took out a pre-written letter, though one intentionally written to look like it was hastily scribbled, sprinkled some perfume on it before placing it on the table in the pergola. Zac didn't have time to read the whole thing before Yrial folded it, but it said something along the lines of old enemies having found out Yrial survived, and not wanting to implicate the young miss, he had been forced to flee. Something about how she should forget him if he hadn't returned in a year.

Ten minutes later Yrial had left the city through a teleporter, disguised as a Daoist nun. Zac was somehow dragged along for the ride as though he was attached to Yrial through an elastic cord, even

through the teleporter. Half a day passed this way as Yrial rotated between touring shops and teleporting to a new town, each time using a different, but always beautiful, identity.

It looked like Yrial's transformation techniques were of a higher grade than his own, though his androgynous appearance probably helped him smoothly switch between genders without any hint of something being amiss.

Finally, Yrial appeared in a sprawling town in a forest of towering trees that reached thousands of meters into the sky. Only the slums were located on the ground, while grand manors resided in the tree crowns. Yrial took out a floating leaf and flew between the trees for half an hour until he reached a secluded manor on a mid-sized branch. Where the building was carved into the bark of the massive tree.

It looked like it was owned by Yrial since he used a token to pass through some barriers, though it might have belonged to yet another one of his acquaintances. By this point, Zac had started to wonder just how long this vision would last. Hours had passed since Yrial tricked that Spiritual Flame out of that poor girl's hands, and Zac had simply assumed his teacher wanted to use the icy flames as a catalyst to break through.

And finally, it looked like something was about to happen.

Zac walked over with anticipation as Yrial started setting up a complex cultivation array in the middle of a cultivation chamber inside the tree. Zac had never seen anything like it before, though there were some parts he recognized. It sort of appeared to be a mix between a Body Tempering Manual and a Beast Training Technique.

He knew that some cultivators, especially those training in elemental Daos, chose to infuse things like Spiritual Flames or Divine Woods into their bodies to strengthen themselves and their connection to their Dao. However, this was the first time Zac saw it in person, and he looked on with interest as Yrial extracted one wisp after another from the sealed ember and infused it into his body.

The process looked extremely painful, with Yrial's skin both freezing over and getting scorched at the same time. But he pressed on until he had absorbed five wisps in total, at which point he collapsed on the ground unconscious. Time twisted and hours passed in an instant until Yrial finally woke up with a cough.

He crawled to a sitting position and threw a healing pill into his mouth between ragged breaths. A few minutes later he closed his eyes before forming a bowl with his hands. Zac felt some sort of energy turn inside Yrial's body, and eventually, a small apparition appeared in his hands. Zac immediately recognized it – it looked a lot like Yrial's painting from before.

Hundreds of small shards together formed something akin to a circle, half of them made from orange flames and the other half from milky-white ice. The flames looked exactly like the ones on Yrial's paintbrush, but Zac noticed there were small flakes of chilly blue on the embers, no doubt a result of Yrial absorbing some of the Spiritual Flame. The two elements started to spin, but it only took a few seconds before the apparition collapsed.

Ice extinguished flames and flames melted ice, only a few of the shards managed to fuse into something similar to Yrial's fiery ice, but these shards weren't enough to save the cycle. Yrial eventually opened his

eyes, disappointment evident in his eyes. But his downcast state only lasted for a few moments before he took out a massive map coving half the floor.

If Zac read this thing right, the world Yrial lived in was simply massive, where Earth would only take up a small corner of the map. And it wasn't a complete map either. The edges simply blurred out, with the occasional note of what kind of environment resided beyond. Zac had a decent guess of what was going on – Yrial lived on one of the mythical C-grade continents that Zac had yet to visit.

Those physics-defying stretches of land defied space, taking up mind-bogglingly large areas. A world so large that a Peak E-grade cultivator would die of old age before having the opportunity to visit even a fraction of the countries, factions, and danger zones it housed. This kind of environment produced an endless number of opportunities thanks to its dense energies, and it was the kind of place most cultivators the Zecia sector could only dream of visiting.

But where there are opportunities, there are also dangers. A lot of sections of these kinds of continents were extremely dangerous, with no lack of Beast Kings or even Beast Emperors staking their claim in the wilderness. One false move and you'd find yourself stuck in a death trap. But most dangerous were the other cultivators competing for the abundant resources.

The surroundings shifted, and Zac suddenly found himself deep in the forest with Yrial desperately fighting a fifty-meter snake. It was either a Half-step Beast King or a newly evolved one, and Yrial was pushed to his limits as he unleashed one wave of blistering flames or frigid blizzards after another. It was the first time Zac saw Yrial fight, and it looked like he was a hybrid between a controller and a mage.

Yrial's weapon of choice was a large bladed wheel that flew around him like a satellite, but over half his attacks were pure elemental skills of either fire or ice. At some point, Yrial would become the Lord of Cycles, but he had clearly not reached that point in this memory. There was a mysterious tempo to how his teacher swapped between using his two elements, and the Snake had a hard time dealing with the constant rotation between scorching and freezing attacks.

Eventually, the beast succumbed to Yrial's unrelenting offensive, but Yrial was poisoned in return, with green splotches appearing on his face. Still, it was with a wide smile he formed a blade of crystalline ice and started to dig into the beast's head.

The world shifted again, and Yrial was now sitting at a cliff of a snowcovered mountain, the harsh winds containing terrifying amounts of cold. Yrial's body was shaking so bad he could barely control his limbs, but his eyes never left the small flame in his hand. It flickered precariously, but it never went out. It even looked like it was somehow absorbing the cold from the surroundings.

Like this, one scene replaced another in a constant stream of memories as hours turned to days, weeks, and eventually months. Desperate fights, journeys to desolate regions in search of answers, Yrial pursuing his path through meditation and painting. Progress was slow and Yrial was met with one setback after another. Grievous wounds, dead ends of the Dao, hundreds of failed paintings. Falling victim to the capricious elements during his journeys, fleeing from pursuers – Zac even saw Yrial standing over a few newly-dug graves with hollow eyes, his hands covered in dirt and blood.

But he never wavered.

Yrial pressed on no matter the challenges, and any time he was pushed down he dragged himself back to his feet. Years passed in this way as Yrial searched for opportunities and inspiration on the vast continent he lived on, where Zac got dragged between pivotal moments in time.

No matter if it was wild regions teeming with beasts or sprawling cities with ancient masters who could extinguish his life with a wave of their hands, he kept giving it all for a chance to form his cycle. It was eye-opening to see how hard he had pushed himself on his journey. It was an important lesson – no one would accomplish anything without working hard. Talent was just an advantage, but you still needed to seize your future yourself.

Gradually, Yrial's control of the elements went from impressive to sublime, the flames on his brush grew colder, and the paintings he created were ever getting closer to whatever he was searching for. Hundreds of shards in the apparition were reduced to fifty, and Zac saw the wheel starting to turn in Yrial's hand. A year later, fifty had become twenty.

Zac had long lost track of time as he had become engrossed with what he witnessed, his whole being consumed by the spiral Yrial risked everything for. His adventures might not have had the same kind of stakes as Zac's own – there were no Autarchs or peak Monarchs messing with his path.

But that didn't mean there was no danger. If anything, Yrial had been forced to undergo far more deadly trials than Zac had to seize the opportunities and treasures he needed to progress. One day, in a particularly desperate battle against a sword-wielding Hegemon, something finally coalesced – fire turned into ice, and ice turned into fire.

Thus, the Lord of Cycles was born and the world crumbled.