

The Fall 853

Chapter 853: The Nature of Duality

As the world shattered upon Yrial forming his cyclic fiery ice, Zac once more found himself lying on a set of pillows inside the pergola, the tinkling chimes and rustling flowers welcoming him back to 'reality'. A quick mental check indicated that only a week had passed, even if it had felt like years.

It was no wonder that Brazla had been forced to gather energy for a couple of days. That kind of temporal dilation had to come at a steep price. Furthermore, it left Zac in a weird muddled state, so he closed his eyes and started meditating.

Having seen the struggles of a future Monarch first-hand had been eye-opening, completely different from hearing or reading about it. Yrial was an extreme narcissist, and a bit of a conman according to the visions, since Yana was only one of many marks Zac had seen. There had been men and women alike who had been conned out of their or their faction's treasures to feed Yrial's Path.

But no matter what flaws his personality had, Yrial's Dao Heart was immutable.

It was a stark difference between what he had seen and the people he usually met. Perhaps only Joanna amongst his followers had that kind of unbreakable desire to pursue the path of Cultivation. But most couldn't compare. They might struggle when pushed, but they didn't value their Dao over their life. For example, Catheya could be considered a talent even in a faction like the Undead Empire, but she didn't have Yrial's drive or conviction.

More importantly, Zac finally understood what Yrial had meant by blueprint before. The biggest struggle of his teacher wasn't actually forming the core – it was designing it. Two opposing forces needed to be merged into a stable unity, where each half empowered rather than suppressed the other. It was clearly an incomparably difficult task, taking even a supreme talent like Yrial years of meditation and risking his life to accomplish.

In return, Yrial got something extremely potent. Zac couldn't be certain since the vision ended before he got to that part, but he guessed that this kind of core would be a lot more powerful than an average one. It was a bit like Dao Braiding or Dao Arrays; the sum was greater than its parts.

Zac also better understood what Yrial meant before, when he didn't hold the energy Zac managed to form in high regard. His teacher was right. That third scar that had almost formed on the wheel was potent, but was it even something that could be turned into a Cultivator's Core? It seemed more fitting as a blueprint for his next tier of Dao Braids than a stable source of energy – a braid that incorporated all three of his Daos.

That kind of use didn't require the stability he had seen in the swirling ball of fiery ice. If the trinity-braid erupted after a few seconds when infusing an attack, all the better. It was only more damage to his enemies. But if that solution wasn't right, then what? Yrial's method was impossible for him. The Dao Control Yrial had exhibited when painting or forming that apparition was lightyears beyond what he could manage.

A full day passed as Zac organized the torrent of memories that had been crammed into his head, and he eventually opened his eyes with a sigh. He might not be any closer to finding a solution than before

the vision, but Zac was at least a lot more cognizant of the difficulties an Edgewalker would encounter when forming his core.

“How about it, isn’t your teacher dashing?” Yrial grinned as he flicked a lock of his long hair.

“It was eye-opening to see such an earnest pursuit of the Dao first-hand,” Zac nodded, not needing to lie to placate his master at all. “But what happened to Yana?”

“Her father was furious,” Yrial sighed. “She was trapped in an energy-starved dungeon for ten years, and the lack of energy harmed her foundations. Her chances at Hegemony weren’t great before, but she was doted on by her elders. But between harming the Spiritual Flame and the imprisonment, her path was cut off.”

“That’s...” Zac muttered with mixed emotions as he looked around at the pergola which was modeled after Yana’s backyard.

“Resources are limited in this world,” Yrial said with equanimity. “Every treasure you seize means dozens of others will go hungry, having lost the opportunity to progress. Your path is paved with the crushed dreams and bones of others. That is the weight we have to carry as cultivators, and you’ll have to find some way to keep moving forward while not being weighed down by the karmic debt you accrue.”

“In my case, I returned to make things right for that little flower a century later. Unfortunately, things took a bad turn. Yana was sacrificed in an attempt to enrage me and drag me out. But they had severely underestimated how much power I had gained since I stole the ember, and I exterminated her clan so that she wouldn’t be lonely in the afterlife. After that, I could only keep progressing, so that her sacrifice and the sacrifice of all the others wouldn’t be in vain.”

“That seems... A bit convenient,” Zac muttered as he looked down on his calloused hands, his thoughts turning to his own karmic debts.

“One can only do their best and follow their heart,” Yrial said. “The moment your path is poisoned with doubt and guilt, your momentum will falter. Sincerity for the Dao and unflinchingly moving forward is even more important than talent or opportunity. Lack of talent can be overcome, and opportunities can be forced, but a lacking heart will stop you in your tracks.

“Remember, until you reach the very peak, you are just a leaf struggling in the wind. You cannot bear the weight of the world. It’s not only bad for your cultivation, but it is foolish arrogance. Yana’s fate is pitiful, but I refuse to bear the full weight of her fate. Sometimes, things just fall apart.”

“I understand, I think,” Zac sighed.

Yrial was right. Even if there were things he regretted since the integration, both things he did and didn’t do, he couldn’t let himself get trapped in some sort of unwinnable argument of what-ifs. He knew he had done the best he could with the knowledge and options he was given at the time, but you can’t win them all.

“It’s good that you understand,” Yrial nodded as he looked at Zac, his lazy expression gaining a serious air for once. “Even someone as disgusting as you won’t get far without a strong Dao Heart and sincerity toward your path. Only by having those can you be considered qualified to grasp for eternity.”

"I'm trying, but I'm honestly more lost now than I was before," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I feel like I'm stuck at the starting line after seeing the process of you forming your core. I haven't even managed to create a flawed blueprint like those shattered shards of yours. But if I manage to take the first step, I might be able to keep working on it like you did. Can I ask how you arrived at that point?"

It was a shame, but the vision had not actually shown how Yrial first came to follow his Cyclic Path. He was already working on it when he tricked that young girl out of the Spiritual Flames, so his inspiration must have arrived even earlier. But how had he translated his path of fire and ice into a workable Cultivator's Core?

"Your path is far harder than mine," Yrial said as he leaned back into the mound of pillows. "Mine was a natural conclusion of Heaven and Earth."

"What?" Zac blurted. He knew the first statement was true, what with Chaos being a broken peak. But Zac had no idea what Yrial meant with the second half of his statement.

"Have you learned about the various groupings of the Dao? The peaks?"

"Somewhat," Zac nodded.

"You are pursuing the peak of Chaos," Yrial nodded. "Whereas I am an elemental cultivator. Do you know the terminus of my peak?"

"Not really," Zac said. Catheya had simply called it the peak of the elements and said that elemental cultivators followed their respective elements to their conclusion. "I guess it's the four elements? Or perhaps five?"

"No," Yrial said. "The name, and to some degree the nature, of the elemental peak is contended, with old teachings colliding with new. Those ugly monks call the peak Mahābhūta, the Great Element. It can both be seen as the basic building block of the universe, and it can also be the basis for inner enlightenment, the relinquishing of the material plane. It is the supreme combination of all Materia.

"This was the path that the Apostate of Mercy perfected, though her deductions differed from the Sangha's, much to their dismay," Yrial continued with some glee on his face. "Hers was the Dao of Heaven and Earth where the Heaven was the spiritual Ether of Enlightenment and the Earth was the Mundane World. To be clear, her Heaven is not the System or the Dao itself, but rather a form of unblemished spirituality.

"So, can you tell what defines this peak?"

Zac tried to guess what Yrial was digging at, but he eventually shook his head.

"It is a path of Duality," Yrial smiled. "Inner and outer world, Heavens and Earth, Yin and Yang. No matter what you want to call it, the peak has two facets."

"Isn't it the same with my peak?" Zac countered. "With Creation and Oblivion?"

"No, since they are true opposites, while the Elemental Daos are complementary opposites. It might seem similar, but it is very different. No peak is the same, which is why they are separated in the first place. Take the Peak of the Continuum. It is based on Time and Space, but those who follow both those paths are not Edgewalkers since Time and Space are not opposing concepts.

“What I am trying to say is that every peak has its own challenges and opportunities, and the duality of Edgewalkers is generally thought of as part of the peak of Heaven and Earth. In my case, I fused Yin Flames and Yang Water and thus joined Heaven and Earth,” Yrial explained. “It is still extremely difficult to accomplish, especially in the lower grades. That’s why almost every cultivator only focuses on either the Earth-aspect or the Heaven-aspect of the peak.

“Or if they focus on both expressions, it’s usually a holistic approach to one singular element,” Yrial added after some thought. “For example, fusing Heavenly Flames and Earthly Flames into True Flames.”

Zac slowly nodded. He didn’t know exactly what the separation of yin yang meant when it came to the elements, but he guessed it was another way to look at various facets of the Dao.

“But as I said, each peak is different. The past days I have tried to simulate a cycle based on my knowledge and the Daos you showcased,” Yrial said as the massive wheel appeared in the air behind the pergola, the massive disk still split in two. “But I am afraid simply cannot find a solution.”

“What do you mean?” Zac said with a sinking feeling. “So it’s impossible?”

“I didn’t say that,” Yrial immediately rejected. “Never let anyone limit your pursuit. I am saying that the techniques and methods I’ve learned might not be as useful as I’d initially hoped. However, this is simply a preliminary deduction from a soul wisp, and my understanding of your Daos is obviously lesser than your own.”

“Then what should I do?” Zac frowned.

“The methods I have might still provide you with some inspiration, just like how [Cyclic Strike] showcased your limitations,” Yrial said. “Otherwise, the easiest solution would be to find a Chaos-based Heritage. That kind of heritage should contain some blueprints and techniques you can use as a basis for your own attempt at Hegemony. But such a thing should be extremely rare. I heard some rumors that there were ancient cultivators who had delved into that Dao, but I never met or even heard of any Chaos Cultivator during my lifetime.”

Zac nodded with a grimace, perhaps knowing even better than Yrial just how difficult that would be. A Chaos-based Heritage? If Qi’Sar’s words were to be believed, those things all stemmed from the previous Era. In other words, the only place you’d find them was inside an Eternal Heritage. Gaining access to such a place was even harder than meeting a Supremacy, so going looking for one was out of the question.

Certainly, with Chaos being a broken peak with essentially no one cultivating it, these methods might not be very valuable. They might have been sold and disseminated from the peak factions controlling Chaos-based Eternal Heritages long ago. Unfortunately, that didn’t mean they would reach the Frontier. If he wanted a shot at getting his hands on such a thing, he would probably have to visit the central regions of the Multiverse.

But if it was so easy to reach that place, everyone would have done so already.

His Perennial Vastness Token was currently his only link to a higher-grade environment, but now that he had a better understanding of the situation, he didn’t dare use it before he had at least a decent backup

plan to forming his Cultivator's Core. Catheya might have said that anyone would leave that place with a Core, but she didn't know the specifics of that place nor the difficulties Zac faced.

If he just went there blind with his unique situation, he might ruin his one shot at Hegemony.

"Any other ideas?" Zac asked.

"Nope," Yrial grinned. "Figure it out yourself."

"Some teacher you are," Zac muttered.

"Now, don't pout," Yrial laughed, the peeling sound almost making Zac question some fundamental aspects of his being. "Since I don't know, it's better for me to stay quiet on the matter. What kind of teacher would I be if I sent you down the wrong path or limited your scope? Ultimately, it's you who have set out on this unusual path, so you will have to look inward in search of answers."

"My only advice is to not get too attached to anything. If your first idea fails, just drop it and start looking for other solutions. A few years lost are not wasted as long as you keep moving forward. Even if it doesn't feel like it, you will be gradually getting closer to an answer, even if it's just through a process of elimination," Yrial said. "Even paths can be adjusted until you confirm them with an Arcane Class or through confirming your Dao."

"Alright, then," Zac sighed.

It was a disappointment that Yrial didn't have any solutions for him. It looked like he would have to figure things out on his own. Thankfully, he was nearing the peak of the E-grade, and his Soul Strengthening wasn't that urgent. After he and his followers had set out into the Million Gates Territory, he would have time to fully turn his focus on researching stable life-death cores while his people steered the vessel.

Yrial's final advice was also a valuable reminder. His path was unique, and he felt it had amazing potential as long as he could work out the kinks. Those motes of Chaos seemed to hold all the answers he looked for, the hidden truths of the Multiverse. But ultimately, was this path more important than his goals? To save Kenzie?

No.

If his path wouldn't allow him to accomplish his goals, then it was the path that needed to be changed, not the goals. Life was Life, and Death was Death. That was what he had proclaimed in his heart when his path collided with Alvod's. However, if it was to protect those around him, Life didn't need to be Life – it would be whatever he needed to be.

But Zac soon shook his head. There was no point in giving up before you had even started. The sector-wide war hadn't even started, and with how slowly things moved in the Multiverse, he would have years before he would need to come to a decision. Only when he had truly exhausted his options would he start looking for alternatives.

"So, do I as a disciple get double credits this time around as well?" Zac asked, focusing on the most important thing right now; the loot.

"Of course," Yrial nodded. "Same rules as last time. I start with 10,000 Credits which are doubled for being my disciple. After deductions, you are left with 16,000."

"You've already deducted points?" Zac scowled. "Why?"

"With your display before, how could I not remove some points?" Yrial said with a scathing look before glancing at the broken wheel that still hovered behind him. "That kind of barbarism is an affront to my Path of Cyclic Supremacy. Besides, the issue of your face remains."

"I'll give you the former, but my features have definitely improved since I upgraded my Races to D-grade," Zac countered, though he felt his voice lacking conviction.

"How is going from a wretch to a cretin over a whole grade an improvement?" Yrial countered with a scrunched-up nose. "I will only deduct two thousand credits for your face this time, but you better figure something out for the next grade or I will not be so lenient. Hegemony can be considered the true start of cultivation, so my expectations on your performance will grow more stringent."

"And by performance, you mean appearance?" Zac sighed.

"If not, then what else?" Yrial shrugged. "You've already abandoned my Cyclic Path. As your master, I have to teach you something, even if it's just to not look like a Grao Howler while carrying the title of my disciple. Any problem?"

Zac had no idea what a Grao Howler was, but he could only assume it was some beast with an unflattering appearance. Even then, he could only grit his teeth and smile to avoid getting any more points deducted. "Sounds fair enough."

"I thought so," Yrial smiled as a shimmering information crystal appeared. "Let me know what you decide to get. If you have any questions, I might answer if I'm in a good mood."

"Here we go again", Zac sighed, his voice barely audible.