

## The Fall 426

### Chapter 426: Talent

Branches and trees entwined to form expansive bleachers that were partitioned into mid-sized platforms that would be able to house between five and twenty people each. Even seats and tables sprouted up from the ground on the platforms.

Finally an inscribed disk was lifted out of the ground with the help of six gargantuan roots. The platform looked like an enormous coin, with a diameter of thirty meters or so. It would be impossible to have a proper battle on such a small surface, so it could only mean it was exclusively meant for the Dao Discourses.

The disk was almost ten meters high and its surface looked just like the forest floor. It was a bit uneven and covered in grass, with a few bushes growing as well. Two smaller platforms rose up next to the [Dao Discourse Array], one on each side of it. An altar holding a football-sized crystal was placed on each of them, no doubt the control crystals the competitors would use.

"The rules are simple," the matriarch said as she was lifted to one of the highest platforms by a root that looked like a massive snake. "If you wish to participate, simply take a number. To get the opportunity to bathe in the Pool of Tranquility you need to defeat two of my grandchildren. However, If you lose the first battle you are out."

"Why this rule?" the Matriarch smiled when she noticed some discontent among the guest. "It's to save their reserves. A Dao Discourse isn't as draining as a real battle, but there are dozens of you here. My grandchildren would turn into hollowed-out husks if they had to expend so much spiritual force."

Of course, there was also the not-so-hidden implication that they were favoring their own. Zac didn't feel there was anything wrong with that though. It was their pond after all, and they should be able to stack the odds in their favor a bit.

Zac and Thelim walked over and got their allotted numbers from one of the servants holding a crystal, and Zac was pretty happy with the result. He was placed at the 8th spot, whereas Thelim drew 2nd. It was perfect for Zac as it gave him some time to observe how the Discourse worked. It sounded pretty fantastical from Galau's explanations and he wanted to see some examples before he jumped into the fray himself.

The best would have been to play around with the array for a bit to test out its limits and various ideas, but there was no chance of that happening. The first person to challenge the Enlightened Three was one of the few wandering cultivators just like himself, and she didn't seem all too pleased at being the sacrificial lamb that had to sound out the three youths.

The woman still walked up to the large control crystal and it lit up with power the next moment. Zac looked on with interest as large swirls of mist rose out of the Discourse Array to quickly form the avatars the combatants would use, the wandering cultivator had chosen to form a dozen soldiers, each standing roughly one meter tall.

Their swords radiated a distinct sharpness that Zac was all too familiar with, and he knew that the girl had mastered the Seed of Sharpness, and it was at High Stage judging by its power.

The dryad rather summoned a field of flowers, and Zac couldn't place what Dao they were made from. When Zac looked at it with [Cosmic Gaze] he realized its true nature though. The flowers barely emitted any color to his adjusted spectrum, but there were actually vibrant roots running through the platform itself, snaking their way toward the soldiers that were targeting the flowers above.

The wandering cultivator didn't seem to sense anything amiss and she ordered the soldiers to approach the flowers, even sending a few of them forward to scout out the plants. One of the soldiers swept his sword in a wide arc, and a rippling wave of sharpness cut down a noticeable section of them.

There was no reaction from neither the flowers nor the young dryad who held his hand against the control crystal, and the guest immediately realized something was wrong even if she couldn't sense the roots digging ever closer. She hesitated for a fraction of a second before she grit her teeth and ordered her whole squad forward in an attempt to preempt whatever the Perenne scion had planned.

The soldiers only had time to take a few steps before spears made of wood struck out of the ground, piercing the chest of one soldier after another, ripping them apart in seconds. Each strike also seemed to hit the controller as well and she staggered away from the crystal as blood started running down her nose. She threw an unknown pill into her mouth and quickly scurried away after bowing toward the hosts.

The battle was over in an instant, and Zac didn't even get a chance to see the dryad use any hidden cards. He had heard that the three of them had represented the family a decade ago as well, and at that time all three had showcased peak Dao seeds. Some believed that the three had gained Dao Fragments by now while others thought they had rather worked on their supplementary Daos.

One thing that Zac could glean from the fight was that tactics were just as important as strength. The dryad hadn't even bothered using any fancy techniques such as fusing multiple Daos into one stronger projection, but he had rather won using wits.

The Dao that formed the spikes were related to nature as it felt a bit similar to his Seed of Trees, but there were also distinct differences. Zac guessed it might be the Seed of Root. He guessed such a seed could contain some piercing capabilities like those he saw just then. But most importantly, the seed that the youth had used was only at Middle Stage, yet it defeated the wandering cultivator in an instant.

"How skilled," Thelim murmured. "I only sensed the roots due to my natural affinity. I wouldn't have fared any better if I was a human in that fight."

"Good luck," Zac said to his temporary travel companion as the tree stood up with a grunt.

The one-sided battle seemed to have put a bit of a damper on Thelim's mood, but he still reluctantly stepped to the plate. His showing was a bit better where he summoned a massive tree that released a storm of leaves to cut his enemy.

The Enlightened Three had changed representative to let the dryads rest in between flights, and the next one conjured stone golems that withstood the barrage of leaves until they reached the tree. A few of them combined forces to forcibly rip apart the tree, at which point Thelim surrendered by unsummoning his avatar.

“Well, it was worth a try at least,” Thelim rumbled with a sigh as he returned to Zac’s side. “Those three siblings are truly fearsome. We both used High Stage seeds, but the amount of spirit he could instill into the avatars were night and day. He also controlled those golems so naturally, while I struggled to just send the leaves in the right direction. Both the strength of their souls and their control over their Daos is top tier.”

Zac slowly nodded, but he didn’t directly comment on the fight. The friendly ent was honestly fighting way above his weight class, and if this was a real fight the living tree would have been ripped to shreds in an instant.

He only had one seed just like the first cultivator, and it wasn’t even a fragment. To challenge the three dryads who had grown up with access to the Pond of Tranquility was to ask for a beating. But the young ent had already said he was mostly joining the fun to gain some experience, so he took the defeat in stride.

Only when the 5th warrior, a local scion of another powerful faction from the looks of it, stepped to the plate did Zac see Dao fusions come to play. Not only did the man, who seemed to be some sort of nymph, fuse two different Daos into a mighty beast that pounced on his enemies, but both seeds were Peak mastery.

The dryad wasn't to be outdone though, and he created an image of a hunter wielding a bow covered in leaves. The hunter deftly dodged the rabid assaults of the animal until it finally managed to land a lethal strike with an arrow that shone with the green light of some nature-related Dao.

It was an interesting display, but Zac felt it was a bit lackluster compared to a real fight that brought shockwaves and explosions that could be felt from hundreds of meters away. It almost looked a bit like level 20 warriors and beasts were fighting to the naked eye, though it looked a lot more spectacular when viewing it with [Cosmic Gaze].

Finally, it was Zac's turn to the plate, and he was eager to try out his might. He was pretty confident by this point as none of the fights had showcased any Dao Fragments, and he had two he could bring into play. He might not be able to fuse them, but summoning two Fragment Avatar should be able to handle any trouble that came his way.

Zac jumped up on the platform, and after a nod at his competitor he placed his hand on the control crystal and started to imbue it with his Dao. He felt a prickling sensation in his mind as he tried to conjure his avatars, like his brain had suddenly grown two sizes inside his skull.

He understood what he needed to do since connecting with the control crystal provided him with a burst of information, but there was an almost insurmountable resistance when forcing his Fragment of the Axe into the elusive mists hiding inside the platform. It felt like he was trying to grab the haze with his bare hands.

The only solution he could come up with was to steady himself and forcibly push even more of his spiritual energy inside the array, and it finally worked. Eight warriors emerged through the mist, each one of them radiating a palpable killing intent and a force that caused the ground around them to be cut.

However, there were no exclamations of excitement or envy coming from the audience, but rather confused murmurs and subdued snickers. And even if Zac didn't want to admit it, he could understand why. Things had seemed pretty smooth and simple from the stadium, but he had barely managed to create the avatars in line with his imagination. Anything more was beyond his ability.

The eight soldiers looked mighty, but they twitched and flailed about in an extremely uncoordinated manner. It looked like they were string puppets controlled by the world's worst puppeteer. Zac also knew it wasn't some trick by the array, but rather due to his limitations.

Just conjuring the eight warriors was even more taxing than when he infused the Skeletons of [Undying Legion], but Zac had never gone any further than that with the skill. The skeletons didn't require constant commands, though Zac could order them about with a few simple thoughts. But these avatars didn't listen to mental commands but were rather moved by manipulating them with his spirit.

This was just like when he tried to control his spiritual energy and have the two Daos fill the fractal for [Cyclic Strike]. The Daos turned into spaghetti in his hands and it all turned into a big mess.

The dryad cultivator had frozen in confusion for a second, but when she noticed that Zac's fumbling wasn't an act she sneered and pushed the small critters looking like walking radishes she had summoned forward. They didn't look as mighty as the hunter, but Zac could see that they were created with the help of two Peak Dao Seeds.

Zac tried to think of a solution to his embarrassing situation, and he could only come up with one course of action. If he couldn't control so many warriors, then he would just have to reduce the numbers. Seven of the axemen dissipated into smoke just before vines shot out by the radish soldiers struck them, but one soldier stayed behind and cut the attacking vines into shreds with one swipe.

Things became a bit easier with only one avatar to control, and the power forced into its diminutive size was far beyond anything that had been seen so far during the battles. The axe warrior roared as he stumbled forward, his axe madly flailing in the air. A wave of destruction rippled out in an instant, destroying most of the seed warriors who couldn't muster a working response to the random strikes.

Zac breathed in relief as he tried to cajole his avatar to move forward, but he stopped when he saw that the pale-faced dryad dissolved her remaining radish warriors. He first thought that he had won, but he quickly realized she was just changing tactics as a centaur wielding a simple spear appeared to replace the small vegetable avatars.

The centaur immediately galloped forward, and a wild exchange of strikes took place between the two solitary avatars. Truthfully it was mostly the axeman getting hit over and over and Zac infusing even more spiritual energy to keep it standing, while occasionally releasing a massive, but random, swing that either completely missed its mark or grievously wounded its target.

He also tried to incorporate the Dao of the Coffin into the mix, but the only solution he could find was to completely swap out the Dao in the avatar. It changed him from an axe-warrior into an axe-wielding skeleton climbing out of a coffin, and the stone box helped protect its sides from attacks.

It did help with the defenses a bit, but Zac eventually gave it up since swapping back and forth in some sort of pseudo-cycle only helped him drain his mental energy a lot faster. He had already landed a few

pretty nasty hits with the avatar powered by the Fragment of the Axe, and one more was likely all it would take to completely destroy it.

But the power of the spear-wielding centaur suddenly shot up by a noticeable degree, and its previously unattuned spear lit up with a color of attunement, this one looking a bit like steel. Not only that, one shape after another started to appear on the dryad's side of the arena, each one of them emitting a respectable amount of power.

It was a literal army of forest critters wielding various weaponry as they approached Zac's solitary avatar.

Zac couldn't help but look up from the crystal to see what the hell was going on. Had the Matriarch suddenly jumped into the mix, or did his opponent go easy on him before? But his eyes widened in realization when his gaze swept across the three youths standing on the platform on the opposite side.

The 'Enlightened Three' were actually cheating.