

## The Fall 428

### Chapter 428: Pool of Tranquility

“My friend, that was truly a... unique Discourse,” the ent coughed when Zac jumped up to the platform they shared. “I have never heard of such a, uh, masculine, manner of handling the Dao. And those insights... Scary, too scary. You are a walking paradox, both a child and a nemesis of the forest.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Zac snorted as he sat down.

“And congratulations on receiving the opportunity to bask in the Pool of Tranquility,” the ent said, patting Zac’s shoulder.

Zac initially only nodded in response, but he got confused when he noted that Thelim had surreptitiously dropped a small acorn that rolled into his lap. Believing it wasn’t a without reason Zac immediately looked at it with his Attuned Sight, and he saw that it contained some nature-attuned energies.

Curious, Zac instilled a minute amount of Cosmic Energy into it, and he suddenly received a short message in his mind, just like with the communications crystal he had gotten from Ogras before. There were only two words recorded, but it was enough to give Zac pause.

Be careful.

It was obviously a warning that things weren’t as simple as they seemed, and Zac wasn’t surprised. For one, the teleporter hadn’t appeared even after the matriarch conceded. That meant that the System still didn’t consider the quest finished. Hidden danger still lurked nearby. He was more surprised that the ent had gone out of his way to warn him at the risk of straining the relationship between his family and the Perenne Clan.

Zac still gave a slight nod in thanks to the ent before turning back toward the stadium. The Pool would only be opened at sunset, so he would have to wait for a few more hours while the battles continued below.

Due to Zac’s performance there were cracks all over the array, and it would take over an hour before it regained full functionality. Zac tried to figure out his next course of action while they waited, but he couldn’t do a lot apart from restoring his mental reserves.

Some trap was no doubt waiting for him in the Pool of Tranquility, but he couldn’t figure out exactly what it was. Openly attacking the winners was unlikely, since such an action would no doubt spread and sully their reputation. It would also become impossible for them to attract any more guardians from the wandering cultivators.

Thankfully he hadn’t shown any of his actual strength, so the dryads were still completely clueless about his massive pool of attributes. They only knew that he was someone with two early-stage Dao Fragments but also someone who had atrocious control over them. Perhaps they even thought he had fallen into some amazing fortuitous encounter that imbued him with the two fragments without having any skills in the subject.

Zac instead started to go over the insights into his path of cultivation gained during the Dao Discourse. He had arrived at the conclusions while pissed off about the cheating, but he still felt that they held true after having calmed down.

He would put his attempts at learning [Cyclic Strike] on hold for now, unless it somehow proved extremely easy to master after having gained a life-attuned Dao Fragment. But Zac felt the odds of that was pretty slim. It hadn't worked at all while he had possessed two Peak Dao Seeds, so using the stronger Dao Fragment should only be more complicated.

There was also a need to formalize a new direction. Focusing on force rather than technique was good an all, but he needed to find a 'creation' based on force and his Dao Paths. The chaotic thundercloud created from Axe and Coffin was extremely lethal, but he was only able to summon that thing because of the [Dao Discourse Array].

He also needed to figure out a way to bring his future Dao Fragment into the mix. Right now he had unleashed a storm of Axe and Coffin, and this wasn't the fusion of Life and Death he had envisioned. There were a lot of things to consider, and it was a bit hard to theorize what was possible and what was impractical, especially since he was still lacking one of the fragments.

There was also the issue of those flashes of light that had the color of illuminated bronze. They only appeared for a fraction of a second before disintegrating, but the destruction they caused had been far greater than either of his two Fragments. But even though the force was massive he had been completely unable to sense anything from them.

He had a connection to the thundercloud even if he barely could control it, but the same couldn't be said about those lights. They suddenly appeared, and disappeared just as quickly before he had any chance to form any mental connections to them.

"Hey, what feeling did you get from the bronze-colored flashes of light from within the cloud I summoned?" Zac asked as he turned to the ent, curious what the woodland being was able to feel.

"Flashes of light?" Thelim said with confusion. "I did not see any? I only sensed a mix of two Daos, the first one sharp and forceful, perhaps the Dao of the Greatsword? The other one was cold and death-attuned."

"Oh?" Zac said with surprise. "Nevermind then."

Had those bronze lights not been visible to the normal spectrum? He had been using Cosmic Gaze the whole time, and he thought that the flashes were seen by everyone. But perhaps the bronze was just the color of the attunement, while the effect was indiscernible to the naked eye.

The most pressing question was what the light represented. Zac felt those sparks might be the clue to a way for him to increase his power, as there were only two reasonable explanations behind the sparks as he saw it.

The first possibility was that the flashes were related to the Splinter of Oblivion. It was a creation based on the Dao of Oblivion, which felt a bit similar to how the sparks simply disintegrated anything they touched. However, the only energy that Zac received from the Splinter was purified to pure spiritual energy by the miasmic fractals.

Another possibility, and the one that Zac felt was most likely, was that the sparks were the result of chance fusions between his two Dao Fragments. The two concepts had combined due to friction or something else, like a nuclear fusion reaction of the Dao.

This fusion in turn created a short-lived spark of some greater concept. If not oblivion, then perhaps something related of a lower tier. He really wanted to experiment based on this idea, because if that was that was going on then he'd have a terrifying ace on his hands. He could only imagine the power of [Deforestation] with the additional effect of that mysterious bronze Dao.

But he could only wait for the tournament to end to get his prize and then experiment with his insights on the next level. The hours went by excruciatingly slow, but it gave Zac time to mostly restore his frayed mind. His soul thankfully wasn't hurt, but it would probably have been if he had fought another battle. It was still overtaxed though and his head was pounding.

Finally the tournament was over and all the spots were allocated. Three went to the dryads who had been fighting all day, whereas the last two each went to one wandering cultivator and one young man who looked like an elf. He had barely won the first battle, but during the second he had suddenly burst out with a Dao Fragment, destroying the opposition with a skillful push before the dryad had a chance to adapt.

The guests left the arena to continue the festivities while the six were led by the Perenne Matriarch toward a primordial forest full of gargantuan trees. Zac only nodded in thanks to the ent before he followed in tow, wondering if he would ever get a chance to repay Thelim for his help.

The group stopped after having walked for just ten minutes, but when the matriarch waved her hand the surroundings changed. Initially there had only been an empty spot in the forest as the distance between the trees was pretty big, but it was now replaced with the stump of a massive tree.

This tree must have been the king of the forest when it lived, its size forming a landmark seen hundreds of miles away. The stump was even larger than the platform the Dao Discourse had taken place on, and its size dwarfed even the trees in the redwood forest he had visited with Ogras.

The group jumped onto the stump after marveling at the specimen for a few seconds, and he was surprised to see six small ponds. The Pool of Tranquility was actually on top of the tree itself.

"So what do we do?" the elf asked, and Zac looked over at the matriarch with interest as well.

"The moment the daylight ends there will be a change in the pools. At that moment you simply need to choose one of the pools and submerge yourself. Open your mind to absorb the energies that will be released from the dew," the matriarch explained. "I will take my leave as to not affect your opportunity. We have also prepared 6 isolation arrays to make sure no sudden sounds will impact your cultivation."

Zac cracked his neck and looked back and forth. The three dryads pointedly ignored him as though he wasn't there, while the second wandering cultivator kept to himself. Only the young elf tried to make some small conversation where he not-so-subtly tried to understand Zac's origin and whether he was affiliated with any local force.

But the young elf was soon enough subdued by the atmosphere and he simply walked over to the nearest pool, claiming it for himself. Thirty minutes later the sun finally went down beneath the tree crowns, shrouding the area in darkness.

It was like the stump had awoken the moment it no longer basked in sunlight, and it started to radiate an ancient energy as the six pools lit up with a soothing green luster that rose a few meters into the air. Zac's headache got a lot better from just standing near them, a clear sign that the pools truly worked wonders on the soul.

The wandering cultivator and the elf immediately jumped into their respective pools, but the splash didn't make a sound due to the arrays. Zac glanced at the three dryads who stared right back before jumping into one of the free ponds himself. He saw the three dryads jumping in as well, at which point he slightly relaxed and focused on the energies in the water.

It suddenly felt like he was one with the world as he took one deep breath after another, and his pores opened wide to drink in the energies of the miraculous dew. His headache was gone in seconds, and he quickly closed his eyes and sunk down so that even his head dipped beneath the surface.

He was cautious about letting down his guard while being mesmerized by the opportunity, but his danger sense was completely silent. Zac finally opted to relax his guard a bit to absorb as much of the lights in the water as possible. The effect was immediate and it felt extraordinarily good. It was like his mind was a parched desert and the motes of light were long-awaited raindrops.

The process was akin to stepping into the shower when caked in mud, feeling the dirt sloughing off from his body. His soul was giving the same effect, and he actually felt it shrinking as some discordant energies seeped out him. But Zac felt that the effect wasn't something detrimental, as the remaining spiritual energy got stronger, more condensed.

Zac had no idea that his soul had contained so many impurities, but perhaps everyone started out that way, especially mortals. Mortals didn't have any connection with the Dao, and the soul probably played a big part in that. Zac knew that the pool didn't improve affinities though, but rather cleansed some impurities and helped strengthen it.

A sudden roar in Zac's mind gave him a start and ripped him out of his reverie as his heart started beating with joy. Verun had finally awoken after having slept for two full floors. But Zac barely had time to greet the Tool Spirit before he sensed an overwhelming thirst coming from the axe even while it was still in his spatial ring.

It was just like when the mysterious stone had appeared during the new world government auction, and the target was clear. It wanted the mysterious liquid in the pond.

Zac didn't have any compunctions about having Verun snatch a part of the Pool of Tranquility. The dryads had tried cheating during the match, so what if he exacted some interest in return? But he didn't even have time to take out his axe when he sensed a startling issue with his mind.

There was something else there, something foreign. It was extremely well hidden, and he hadn't noticed it at all while he enjoyed the process of his mind getting purified, even if he had never completely relaxed his vigil. It was as if the shadow of a whisper that had snuck into his mind along with the energy from the pond. It only took him a second to realize what was going on.

How could Zac not recognize the feeling of having his mind manipulated after having fought against the far more insidious manipulation from the Splinter of Oblivion? He suddenly remembered the dozen powerful cultivators who had stoically walked behind the Perenne Matriarch. Perhaps their choice to stay behind wasn't completely voluntary.

He, unfortunately, didn't have any great solutions to getting rid of the intruder in his mind as it had already snuck past the defenses of [Mental Fortress]. Only after discharging a massive amount of mental energy by unleashing his Dao Fragments did the invading energy get ripped to shreds.

Zac still felt some cold sweat running down his back though. That had been way too close. Even if the effects of the dew were amazing he had kept a constant watch against any plot of the Perenne Matriarch, but her ploy had passed by his defenses completely unnoticed. If Verun hadn't shaken him awake he might have fallen further and further into some mental vise he couldn't get out of.

Zac immediately rose from the pool, jumping onto the stump with wild eyes. The first thing he noticed was a teleportation array that would take him to the next floor, but Zac didn't even give it a second glance as his eyes turned to three specific pools. Zac refused to leave as things stood.

He wasn't done with the Perenne Family just yet.