

## The Fall 727

### Chapter 727: Order

The elf was clearly gearing up for a sparring session that would push them to reach a breakthrough. However, Zac had some reservations even if the opportunity seemed good.

“Why me?” Zac asked. “If you can’t give me a proper answer I’ll have to decline.”

That was the most burning question in Zac’s mind. If he was giving off clues about his situation to the young elites of the B-grade empires he needed to know immediately. Or if this elf had somehow found out about some of his most important secrets, the situation might turn into something bigger than a simple spar.

“Can you tell what path I follow?” Ventus asked as a Dao Field spread out from his body.

Zac’s thoughts whirled as he felt the ambient energy, and he looked at the elf with surprise. It was actually just a Dao Field from a Peak fragment as far as Zac could tell, which was decidedly lower than he had expected. However, the Dao Field was still far more intense than the fields of his own two peak fragments, almost a whole tier higher.

This Ventus must be right at the precipice of forming a Branch, and Zac also suspected he had an extremely powerful soul to push the Dao Field to this extent. As for the type of Dao, Zac actually didn’t have the slightest clue.

It didn’t really feel like a combat-oriented Dao; there was no bloodlust or sharpness to it. It was neither attuned to nature or the elements, and it didn’t feel like Adcarkas Dao of Space or Leviala’s Dao of Time. It did give off a mysterious and intangible feeling, but it wasn’t the Dao of Karma either.

For some reason, it made Zac think of an old academy with observatories and ancient books and scrolls filling tables.

“Books...?” Zac said from lack of better answers.

“Well, not quite,” Ventus smiled. “My path is within Dao of Numerology, one of the children of the Dao of Order.”

Zac’s brows rose a bit in surprise. The Dao of Order was a top-tier concept, proven by the simple fact that it had birthed a proper Apostate. As for the Dao of Numerology, Zac didn’t know a lot about it. He remembered Leviala mention it once, and he had read short descriptions in missives about Dao.

There was no proper faction in the Zecia sector following this Dao as far as Zac could tell, and it was apparently as hard to master as the Daos of Space, Time, and Karma.

These Daos put greater demands on affinity for some reason, and it was no wonder this guy managed to become a proper member of the Radiant Temple with this kind of accomplishment. It was probably even harder to form a Peak fragment subordinate to the Dao of Numerology compared to forming a Dao Branch of some weapon-based Dao.

That didn’t mean these Daos were more powerful, though the rarity of a Dao was an advantage of its own. Zac had fought against a lot of elementalists and weapon masters over the past years, and he

could trust his instincts against those kinds of warriors. But against the elf in front of him? He was still clueless on what to expect in a battle.

"Every day since entering, I have calculated the streams of fate of the Twilight Ascent, and the path gradually grew clearer. I chose this spot specifically to form a settlement, as it rests on a nexus on the way to the Twilight Chasm. A large number of those marked by fate will pass through these gates, and you are one of them," Ventus said with an intense look. "Even better, the presence of the Undead Empire and Havarok Empire in this area is extremely weak, with a low probability of me running into someone troublesome while collecting Twilight Fruits."

It was just like Leviala had said. If he was speaking the truth, then Ventus Kalavan was essentially like a supercomputer that gathered thousands of pieces of information, turning them into data that helped him predict the future and his optimal path. Abbot Everlasting Peace's Dao had been different, but the end result was similar.

He had known all sorts of things that had yet happened through his insights into Karma. For a peak E-grade cultivator from a B-grade faction to be able to do the same, it wasn't too surprising. Zac hesitated for a while, but he eventually nodded. His intuition told him that while the elf didn't necessarily explain the whole situation, he also wasn't lying.

"So, how does this work?" Zac asked.

"Come with me," Ventus smiled, and the two walked over to a tree that twisted to form a tunnel.

They eventually reached an underground chamber that had a ceiling height of over ten meters and a diameter of almost a hundred meters. Its walls were made from the densely packed canopy of the Greengroves, and hundreds of banners with inscriptions were hung from both ceiling and walls. Zac guessed they were purifying talismans since the Twilight Energy in the area was barely as dense here as at the starting continent.

There were also eight braziers standing by the wall equidistant from each other. Zac's eyes roved across the engravings and braziers, looking for any hint of something amiss. But neither his Danger Sense nor his skills found anything wrong with the setup, and his instincts told him that this was the kind of preparation you'd see in a cultivation cave.

In fact, there were already Dao Treasures loaded in each of the braziers, and the moment that Ventus closed the door, small fires ignited beneath the fruits. An alluring scent spread through the whole place, and the area soon felt a weakened version of the Dao chamber where they cracked open the Dao Funnel. Part of him wanted to simply sit down and gobble everything up, but he knew that doing so would just harm himself.

He was still lacking that final inspiration of what direction to take his Fragment of the Bodhi. If he just let himself get swept up by the mysterious smoke, he might end up with an imperfect Dao that didn't quite match with his path. Zac turned toward Ventus, but he hesitated when he saw the smiling elf just standing there with the large wooden frame in his left hand.

"What's wrong?" Ventus eventually said with a raised brow. "It's not cheap to run this thing, you know."

"Uh, are you going to fight with that thing?" Zac asked hesitantly as he looked at the wooden frame and the floating stones within.

"You'll understand soon enough. Don't worry, just fight freely," he laughed. "No skills though. They are just conduits to the Dao rather than its base, and it might attract the big guy below us."

"Alright," Zac said. "You better not regret it."

It looked ludicrous that the elf wanted to defend against [Verun's Bite] with stone beads and a wooden frame, but Zac guessed his reservations were simply him being a country bumpkin. Not wasting any time, Zac shot forward as Ventus flashed to the middle of the chamber with a graceful leap.

Zac launched a probing strike aimed at the elf's chest, but he effortlessly avoided it by shifting his weight with expert precision. At the same time, the elf flicked one of the stones on his Spirit Tool, and Zac felt the universe somehow tilt when hearing the clicking sounds of gems colliding.

It wasn't really a spiritual attack, at least not a type he was familiar with. It rather reminded him a bit of when he fought the Karmic Cultivator in the Tower of Eternity, where the man tried to impact his fate. He didn't actually feel those kinds of karmic restraints, but he still felt like a beast trapped in a cage for some reason.

Zac swung his axe once again to break out from the mental shackles by putting out some pressure of his own, and he also tried to stomp down on the elf's foot to lock him in place. However, he was surprised to find it was rather his own foot that had been restrained, with Ventus immobilizing him with a force that belied his thin frame.

Something suddenly changed in the weird weapon as the hovering stone inside the wooden frame suddenly lit up like stars, and some of them rearranged themselves into a constellation resembling an intricately decorated shield. Zac didn't know why he thought so since a few dozen motes of light couldn't depict an image with such clarity. But that was what he saw.

In either case, there was no time for Zac to ponder on the implication of the rearrangement since the elf actually moved the abacus to counter Zac's own attack. Such a collision would normally result in a broken wooden frame and Zac's enemy thrown across the room or cut apart entirely, but it was like the weird Spirit Tool nullified force.

The collision didn't quite halt Zac's strike, but Ventus had somehow managed to exert very little power to diffuse most of Zac's momentum, and Zac suddenly found himself getting his forehead flicked before the elf distanced himself in a flash.

"You better get serious," Ventus laughed. "You're no good to either of us like this."

"Right," Zac muttered as he prepared himself.

The most recent exchange had been a bit embarrassing, but now he at least knew that the man could take the heat. He shot forward once more, like a beast pouncing on another powerful predator encroaching on his domain. His axe cut a ruthless upward arc aimed at maiming rather than killing, but he once more heard the beads colliding, somehow restraining him.

Thankfully, the heart of the Evolutionary Stance was change and freedom. Life always finds a way; if one path closed, there would still be innumerable other paths to success. Zac fluidly changed his upward swing into a tackle, and Ventus quickly took a few shuffling steps to avoid getting thrown onto the ground.

The elf regained his tempo almost immediately though, and he launched an offense of his own. Zac was already pushing forward to force the fight into the tempo of his stance, but he almost felt like he had been gored on a lance when he found a palm slamming into his chest seemingly out of nowhere. The elf looked weak and refined, but he was really packing a punch.

Zac estimated Ventus' effective attributes to be around his own, and it was even possible that was because he was restraining himself to match Zac's power. However, Zac's gut told him that they were simply closely matched, which probably meant that Ventus possessed a Dao Branch he currently wasn't utilizing. There was no other way that he would be able to match Zac's attributes as far as Zac was concerned.

Attributes weren't the only source of the effectiveness of the elf's strike though. It was like Ventus had found the absolutely optimal moment to strike. It hit Zac straight in his solar plexus, and the strike even took advantage of Zac's own momentum. Zac almost felt like a dumb boar running straight into the raised spear of a hunter, impaling himself on the weapon.

A small setback like that wouldn't stop a beast in the wild though, and the gleaming edge of [Verun's Bite] ripped through the air in an attempt to cut off the offending hand. Unfortunately, it was like Ventus knew his actions even before Zac did so himself. Zac was following his instincts, and the elf was somehow calculating what Zac's instincts would say in real-time, continuously adjusting his response.

The two exchanged a dozen strikes in an instant, where all of Zac's attempts to forcing open Ventus' nigh-perfect defense were rebuffed, with Zac getting punched by one painful counter after another. He was quickly coming to understand the power of the elf's path; it was using precise calculations and predictions to find the optimal ways to strike. Meanwhile, the odd Spirit Tool was not only a defensive treasure, but it also looked like it helped Ventus make those precise calculations.

Zac couldn't think of any direct solution that didn't involve 'cheating' with his skills or bloodline, so he could only redouble his efforts. There should be a limit to either Ventus' calculative abilities, or his ability to respond to Zac's unfettered assault. In fact, Zac felt that his Inexorable Stance would be pretty effective against this kind of combatant.

So what if you could predict fate if fate was inexorable and unavoidable?

However, Zac's purpose wasn't to win but to find inspiration. A minute passed, and the speed the two exchanged strikes kept increasing. They had turned into a blur as they flickered across the Dao chamber, each strike empowered not by Dao but their Path and their convictions. Zac was quickly becoming engrossed by the battle, partly because of the environment and partly because Ventus was an excellent sparring partner.

It felt like he was fighting fate itself with his Evolutionary Stance. Zac's technique was everchanging and ever-improving, but Ventus was already prepared no matter what he tried. In fact, the elf's methods were evolving as well as Zac's movements became more and more unpredictable. He wasn't just

anticipating Zac and countering after a while, but he rather started pushing the direction of the fight in inscrutable ways.

Everything from a small shuffling step to moving the stars in the abacus was filled with meaning, meant to change the way Zac reacted. It was extremely powerful on its own, but especially so against someone like Zac who used an instinctual type of fighting. It was almost like Zac couldn't trust his instincts, as his own Path was being affected by Ventus'.

That didn't dampen Zac's enthusiasm though, rather the opposite. Every moment his technique improved, becoming more and more complete. He also felt a burgeoning wave of inspiration wash over him. He was literally fighting inside a tree canopy, hidden inside a small sanctuary in a dangerous zone.

He was standing inside his own Dao, gradually perfecting his path.

Evolution was endless, everchanging. If his Inexorable Stance represented the ultimate fate of all living things, then the Evolutionary Stance represented the ability to break those chains of fate and the laws of nature themselves.

The smoking haze from the braziers started to transform, turning into two forces in a struggle for supremacy. One was overbearing, like the Heavens themselves as it towered above all creation. The other was much smaller, but it frantically fought against the larger one, constantly eluding being locked down.

Ventus was aiming at becoming the arbiter of fate, an apostle of Order. His actions would be Heavenly Law, dictating providence and the tides of battle. Meanwhile, Zac birthed and discarded one move after another in an endless cycle, each attack a life going from birth to death in the span of a breath. Each one was unique and unpredictable.

He was becoming an agent of Chaos, infecting fate with an unerasable tinge of uncertainty.

And the motor of it all was Life. Life was the source that kept filling Zac with inspiration, while his weapon was the delivery method. Axe and abacus clashed over and over as neither Ventus nor Zac was ready to give an inch as the fight represented their paths. It was even becoming unclear whether they were really just sparring fighting for real as time marched on.

Fists met flesh, the collisions echoing with the truths they both searched for in the heat of battle. However, as the two were getting more and more caught up in the ripples of inspiration, the fight started to transform once more. An outsider would probably get confused if he spectated the fight since the strikes gradually became slower rather than faster. It must have looked like they both were running out of steam, but the truth wasn't that simple.

For every move that Zac executed, there were ten that were discarded. They both were continuously adjusting from the slightest change in the battlefield, like they were playing chess thinking dozens of moves ahead. The bringer of this change was largely Zac, as he started to come to a realization.

Life was full of endless possibilities and unpredictable, but it was also extremely efficient. Excess was a luxury of humans rather than a truth of life. The wolf wouldn't go on a mad slaughter and kill more than it could eat. It would be a waste of energy. Plants and beasts wouldn't evolve features that served no purpose, since every morsel of energy was needed to survive in the wilds.

Just like how life was efficient, so did Zac need to become more discerning in his combat style. His combat style would still be marked by randomness and unpredictability, but he would need to be in the driver's seat. This would create a targeted evolution rather than series of random events that might or might not end well.

It was important to distinguish between concept and application. In true evolution, most mutations failed and 99% of all species perished sooner or later. But that outcome was obviously not acceptable when he was fighting. He couldn't let himself get maimed or even killed just because randomness dictated it.

And as he controlled evolution, he was controlling fate. If fate wanted him to perish, he would break through fate and find a way. Zac's attacks gradually became more and more forceful, no longer trying to trick or subvert Ventus' combat style. His instincts told him to break right through it.

He was already a Mortal on the path of cultivation, so what did he fear fighting directly against predestination?

The elf frowned as he suddenly found himself pushed harder and harder, and the storms of Dao around him became more and more overbearing. But it was to no avail as Zac fought like a man possessed, pushing forward with wild abandon. Zac was accumulating one wound after another, but rips and tears started to appear on Ventus' robes as Zac pushed on.

The elf was unwilling to be pushed around, and the abacus swung toward [Verun's Bite] in an effort to steal his momentum once more. But Zac's knee rose with enough force to make the air fracture, and it hit the bottom of the wooden frame with overwhelming might just before the two weapons clashed.

Zac felt a strong resistance for an instant before the abacus flew out of the elf's grasp and into the air. His whole being surged with momentum, and Zac barely remembered to stop his edge before it sunk into the chest of Ventus.

"It's my vict-" Zac said with burgeoning pride, but his proclamation got cut short as a hard object suddenly slammed into his head.

It was the abacus he had forced out of Ventus' hand. It had flown up a couple of meters into the air, but the trajectory made it fall back right on top of him. The collision had caught him completely unaware, and Zac stumbled a few steps back as his vision turned white for a second. He shook his head to clear his mind, but he saw that the elf thankfully had no intention of following up on his lucky break.

"Relinquish fate to seize the future," Ventus muttered, his eyes burning with conviction as he stood rooted in place.

It looked like the elf had found a path of his own, and he quickly scurried to the other side of the chamber and sat down.

Zac was covered in painful bruises, but he was still elated as he walked over to the opposite side and sat down as well. His body was full of the mystical energy of the Dao Treasures already, and it all shot toward the celestial Bodhi in his mind. He had found it, the direction he wanted to take the Fragment of the Bodhi. And now he simply needed to form it with the fuel that Ventus had provided.