

## The Fall 728

### Chapter 728: Dao Branch

The scorching sun blasted the badlands, and the lone Bodhi was still the only island of life in an ocean of death. The punishing rays had kept the vast desert in a deathly grip for an eternity, but the sanctified tree was not content with simply enduring. It was the agent of change, the key to life in this lifeless world. Year after year a golden haze would spread from its canopy, small seeds with the power of transformation.

Life was the breaker of barriers that pushed cultivators to pave the road toward Eternity. The Heavens had its designs; it was immutable and intractable, but it couldn't stop the innumerable beings of the cosmos from grasping for the great beyond. It staved off death as it filled the living with endless possibilities, allowing all manners of beings to spread across all space.

Eventually, a seed from the Bodhi would manage to take hold, and one tree would turn into two. Two would birth four, and eventually, the badlands would be a desolate desert no longer. A small seed could break the status quo that had gripped the world for a near-eternity, and when the winds of fate blew, anything could happen.

Zac had already incorporated his Dao with his Path, and most of the insights were already consolidated after the previous bout of meditation. There was now an added element to the Fragment of the Bodhi, just as with his path; fighting fate. If the death-aspected side of his cultivation represented finality and inexorability, then the life-aspected side represented endless possibilities.

The two concepts were opposing and irreconcilable, but Zac still felt it was the right way to go. Soon enough, the Fragment had taken the final step, and he had managed to push his final Dao Fragment to Peak Mastery. He opened his eyes and activated his Dao Screen, taking a gander at the results.

Fragment of the Bodhi (Peak): All attributes +40, Endurance +550, Vitality +1110, Intelligence +30, Wisdom +280, Effectiveness of Vitality +20%

The results were in line with his own expectations, with the only caveat that the evolution provided a bit more Wisdom and a bit less Endurance than expected. That was just fine with him, considering his physical durability was pretty disgusting already. There wasn't much else of interest that had changed, except his ladder position that had made another jump, though this time only by 300 places.

It wasn't too much, but Zac wasn't surprised. The evolution had pushed him just past 100,000 Contribution points, which meant he most likely was competing with those who had formed a Dao Branch by now. And who among those warriors hadn't managed to gather a bunch of Contribution Points through other means?

He would either need to form a Dao Branch or find something valuable to destroy like the mother tree to make another qualitative leap forward on the ladder. For now, he was more interested in what was going on with Ventus Kalavan. Zac's own breakthrough had consumed a decent chunk of the Dao-infused mists in the arena, but it was nothing compared to what was going on around the high elf who still had his eyes shut.

There was a storm brewing above him, to the point that space itself was affected by the outburst. It didn't crack and form spatial tears, but it was like the laws of nature changed within ten meters of the elf. It reminded Zac of how it felt when he stood in front of the trapped Dimensional Seed, where his very path was being questioned by the aura Ventus exuded.

It didn't take long for Zac to find his bearings though, and he looked on as a five-meter rune appeared above Ventus's head. It wasn't engraved or inscribed, but it was rather formed by what looked like shimmering stars. It looked a lot like the stones in the odd Spirit Tool, but these small stars were made by the Dao itself.

Unsurprisingly, the constellations they created felt far more tangible compared to the one in the spirit tool. Looking at the rune was like looking at the heavens themselves, and it was like Zac had been transported to that mysterious space where Yrial had performed his Dao Impartment to him.

Behind the motes of light was a vastness that Zac had never seen before. A bridge had been formed in the chamber, a bridge between their physical realm and the beyond.

It was a shame that Ventus' path was completely separate from his own. Looking at the process of forming a Dao Branch from first row gave him all kinds of insights, but it would have been far more beneficial if their Daos had been more aligned. As for what Dao Ventus was forming, Zac wasn't certain.

Zac believed it was technically possible to form a Branch of Numerology, just like it was possible to form Branches of Life or Death from Bodhi and Coffin. But you could form many different Dao Branches even if you walked a path of purity as Zac did. Even two concepts within the Dao of Order could form a unique Dao, and it seemed as though Ventus might have some relation to stars going by the Dao Apparition above his head.

The process continued for over an hour at which point the braziers were completely sucked dry. The elf was forced to take out three more Dao Treasures, each one better than anything Zac owned, to continue the job. But the elf was definitely making great progress. The celestial rune above his head kept growing more and more powerful and condensed.

The position of the stars kept making small adjustments, and Zac felt like it was approaching closer to perfection with each passing moment. It was almost like when he upgraded [Indomitability], but on a far grander scale. Zac looked at the apparition with awe, stunned by its complexity - it was rife with meaning.

Eventually, it seemed like everything clicked into place, and a mysterious pulse spread out from the rune, and Zac could feel it deep into his soul as it passed through him and continued out from the arena. The apparition quickly shrunk in size next before it entered Ventus through his glabella. Only ten minutes later did he open his eyes, and Zac saw pure elation on his face.

Zac could understand the feeling. Forming a Dao Branch was one of the biggest hurdles to forming a powerful Cosmic Core with some certainty. He was pretty certain that the elf already had one Dao Branch before, but one's main Dao was more critical to upgrading one's Core since it more represented one's path.

With Ventus having formed two Dao Branches, one of which was the extremely hard-to-train Dao of Numerology, reaching Hegemony was just a matter of time now. Without it, you needed some unique

opportunity or a good chunk of dumb luck to succeed. But those kinds of people would always be limited in their potential since the Dao was the foundation for all cultivation.

A Cultivator Core formed mostly with the help of an external treasure wouldn't be aligned with the Cultivator himself, and it would usually have very low potential. Most such Hegemons would never leave the initial stages of the D-grade, but that alone was enough to become an elder in a D-grade force and gain thousands of years of longevity.

It was the same for Zac. Finding proper information on Mortals forming their Cultivation Cores was pretty hard since it was so exceedingly rare. But the gist of it was that there was no real method to slowly form the foundation of the core like Cultivators did through their manuals.

You had to try to forge it in one go, where part of the process was fueled by Dao, and the other part of it was fueled by treasures. It was more than ten times harder than it was for cultivators since the Mortal had nothing to build upon. It put even higher requirements on one's Dao as well since it was a more integral part of the process without a Cultivation Manual to do some of the work.

That alone was what stopped almost all mortals from ever taking that step. Simply gaining a Dao Fragment in the E-grade was almost impossible with the extremely low affinities Mortals had for the Dao. How would they possibly manage to form a Dao Branch that could help stabilize the process?

That was why Galvarion's accomplishment was such a shock, to not only manage to make it into Hegemony but even past it into Monarchy. He must have been blessed by extraordinary luck to make up for his lacking affinities, finding one opportunity after another to push him along. Of course, it was also possible that he had already become a Cultivator by the time he was aiming to form his inner world through boosting his affinities, something that might not be possible for Zac.

"Congratulations," Zac eventually said as Ventus got to his feet. "I feel I gained a lot from seeing your breakthrough."

"Thank you," Ventus smiled. "I am happy that you could take a step forward as well. The fighting style you are forging for yourself – marvelous. I seldom see such integration between man and Dao even back at the temple."

Zac smiled, but he was actually a bit confused about that point. For example, while Catheya was extremely adept with her Daos and skills, he didn't feel much of a Path from her combat style. It was the same with most people he had encountered, with only two real exceptions. One was Adcarkas, who had perfectly harmonized with the Dao of Space. Even now, Zac felt he was barely beginning to catch up to the Dominator's mastery.

The other was Kenzie when she fought under the guidance of Jeeves.

Ventus was the third person Zac met who had reached that stage, and he was obviously a rare genius to form this kind of Dao Branch while still in the E-grade. Zac didn't really feel like he personally was some sort of genius when it came to these matters, and his affinities to the Daos were simply abysmal. Was his ability to so easily integrate his Dao a benefit of his constitution, or was it rather the result of his unique road to get where he currently stood?

"I have no idea why a monster like you remains unattached, but my calculations indicate you have some private issues weighing you down," Ventus continued. "But you know what, the Radiant Temple don't care about your past as long as you're not an unorthodox cultivator. If your grudge is with a local faction, why not just come to our place?"

"Your place?" Zac said skeptically. "You're inviting me to the Radiant Temple?"

"Well, not really," Ventus laughed as he threw Zac a token. "I'm just a little disciple myself, it's not like I can decide who can enter. Perhaps if it was some of those highbrow scions with powerful ancestors to rely on, but I'm an outsider myself."

Zac snatched the token and took a look at it. Its design was completely different from the one he got from Catheya, but it was clearly a cut above the other ones he still had in his Cosmos Sack. It was a proper cross-sector teleportation token and something that most people in the frontier dreamed of acquiring.

"Then what's this?" Zac asked.

"It's a token to the Lucent Mile Continent in the Yr'Vanium Sector. In case you don't know, Yr'Vanium is a Sector roughly ten times older than Zervereth, and you could say it's in the process of transforming into an established sector from a frontier sector," Ventus said.

"Yr'Vanium is firmly under the control of the Radiant Temple, and we regularly hold trials on the Lucent Mile Continent. With your strength, you will have no problems at all becoming an Outer Member, and becoming an Inner Disciple definitely is to be expected. You should only need to temper yourself and your combat style a bit more, and you might even become a core or personal disciple after being vetted for a few years."

Zac looked at the token with interest, and he eventually put it in his Cosmos Sack.

"Are there any requirements on age or grade to join?" Zac hesitantly asked. "I can't say I'm not tempted, but I have some stuff I need to deal with. I might even be a Hegemon before I'm ready to look for a faction."

"Pretty confident," Ventus grinned. "But I think you have the qualifications to be. There are no strict requirements, but the Temple obviously prefers younger cultivators. Most outsiders who join are between late E-grade and early Hegemons, and the E-grade cultivators are generally around 30 to 50 years old. Those at the precipice of forming their core might be a few decades older, but I honestly doubt the Temple would accept an E-grade cultivator over 100 years unless they have some unique skillset or special circumstance. For example, they might have extreme potential but have been stuck and wasting away on a trash world for too long."

"Are you sure you want to give me this? I might not even be able to go," Zac asked curiously, knowing his identity as a mortal might waste this token. He couldn't say that part out loud though, as his power was just too ridiculous for being a Mortal.

"Well, I do get Temple Points for every member I manage to recruit for the sect, so I hope you use the opportunity. But I can always get more contribution points through scamming some young scions," Ventus grinned. "I hear a disciple brother of mine got blasted by some crazy Draugr not far from here,

he is as smooth as a baby and as red as a lobster right now. I can probably provide a fake divination in return for a good chunk of contribution."

Zac couldn't help but feel sorry for Auride Serveris. He still didn't actually know if the guy was hostile toward Arcaz Black when they ran into each other the other day, and now he was also about to get scammed by his fellow disciple.

"Is there tension between outside members and those who are grandfathered in?" Zac asked to change the subject away from his other persona.

He was honestly contemplating giving it a go in the future if he felt he could enter a place like that without exposing his secrets. Even an outer member would gain access to a lot of knowledge that would benefit most cultivators. He had seen just the kind of heritage a fragmented group like the Big Axe Coliseum possessed, and that was nothing compared to what a proper B-grade force like the Radiant Temple would have.

But Zac was a bit hesitant to go if the Radiant Temple was the kind of place where the old families within the faction had all the power, turning the whole Sect into a pseudo-clan where the outside recruits were barely considered members.

"Well, yeah. Nepotism is a reality in any faction. Otherwise, the old goats at the top wouldn't work as hard. But it's not too bad," Ventus shrugged. "The young lords have better resources, but us outsiders generally have greater talents. It's the young lords with good talents you have to watch out for."

"Are any people like that here?" Zac asked curiously.

Ventus didn't immediately answer, but he eventually shrugged like he didn't care. "Kataron Rissit is one of ours. The Rissit Family's supreme elder is one of the twelve Grand Deacons of the Temple, and Kataron himself is probably their most talented clan member in 100 generations. He's not a bad guy, but he's a bit singletrack when he's on a mission. Better stay away from him."

Zac recognized the name immediately since it belonged to the current 4th place ranker on the ladder. Kataron Rissit had started at the 5th spot, barely suppressing the 6th. But every time the ladder had appeared, he had made great strides forward. He had surpassed the 4th place holder, Dravzur Kuldass after a month, and he was currently just a hairbreadth away from claiming the third position.

There was still a pretty decent chasm between him and Ykrodas Havarok or Uona Noz'Valadir, but he clearly stood out from the other Rankers.

"Right," Zac nodded. "Thank you, I-"

He didn't get any further as a tremendous shockwave threw him off his feet, and he felt powerful auras fluctuate from the surface. Another shockwave erupted, and Zac could suddenly hear a bunch of screams and screeching sounds of beasts. There was one clear suspect of the chaos, and Zac grimaced when he realized that the Raksha Shrimp King probably had come knocking.

He had a sneaking suspicion that it was because of the ripple that Ventus' breakthrough released, and he looked at the elf who responded with a helpless smile.

"What now?" Zac sighed, knowing there were probably tens of thousands of shrimps waiting right beneath the canopy he stood inside.

"Well, you can't subvert fate every time," Ventus sighed as he threw an odd array disk to Zac. "Best of luck to you, I hope we'll meet again. This is the key. Help the others, will you?"

"Ah?" Zac blurted, getting a foreboding sense of déjà vu.

His suspicion was immediately confirmed when the Radiant Temple disciple simply disappeared in a flash of starlight, very similar to how Ogras got swallowed by shadows just after getting Zac to throw out that poison kettle so long ago. Zac laughed at the similarities, but he choked on his laughter when he realized that the escape talisman he had taken wouldn't activate.

Space was sealed.