

The Fall 679

Chapter 679: Terror of the Twinruins

The whole stadium was silent for a few seconds before it erupted in raucous cheers.

Zac gazed at his Tool Spirit with rapt attention until the bloodstorm swallowed Verun whole. It was back in his axe a moment later, the first fractal on his handle dimmed down.

“Amazing! What a Tool Spirit! Even I am getting a bit tempted to get my hands on a beastcrafted axe. Who would have any regrets when walking into battle with a companion like that?!” the announcer screamed. “Of course, we know that any such tricks won’t work for the final round.”

Zac snorted, but he knew that what the announcer said was true, and he cracked his neck as he readied himself. This final stage was why the rewards for the Trial were so good, why it could provide both flat and increased attributes. Until now, the battles could only be considered a warmup. After all, the final battle had special rules, rules enforced by the System.

No consumable items, no skills.

Just your body, your weapon, and your Dao. It was a real test of one’s fighting capabilities, where external things were blocked. Every cultivator in the world could get skills for free from the System, but that didn’t make you a warrior. Talent and comprehension were both needed to become a true gladiator of the Big Axe Coliseum.

To get anywhere on the road of cultivation, really.

The minutes passed as Zac prepared himself. This would definitely be his hardest challenge so far. He didn’t fear death since the remnants were just like his Specialty Core, considered a part of his body. But he wasn’t sure that his actual skills were up to snuff. He had cultivated for less than five years, and his general fighting style had been to rely on his superior attribute pool.

He had chosen this test as a challenge for himself, an opportunity to hone his path and hopefully make a breakthrough in the heat of battle. A golden shimmer finally appeared in the arena, and Zac frowned when he saw a humanoid standing in front of him. The final challenger was actually a cultivator?

“It happened! The Heavens really brought out a [Twinruin Bloodstalker] from the depths! We only get to see these terrifying beasts when they leave their nests for their baptism of blood. This one is an adolescent, just shy of having formed its core! These beasts are the perfect killing machines, and even Monarchs would think twice before entering their nests!” the Announcer shouted, and the excitement in his voice didn’t seem feigned. “This is what we have been waiting for! The deathmatch of the year!”

Zac listened to the announcer with rapt attention. It was actually a beast? Humanoid beasts were extremely rare. They normally moved away from the heritage of the Beast Progenitor to instead become integrated as cultivators over the eons. In fact, the last humanoid beasts he had encountered were the imps back during the Demon Incursion.

Humanoid beasts often had superior affinities to most normal beasts since their bodies were made for cultivation. It was often a bestial bloodthirst that overpowered any burgeoning sapience that kept them as beasts though. From what Zac understood it was almost impossible for them to reach Atavism, the

process where high-grade beasts could keep their bestial path but also take humanoid form and embark on the path of cultivation.

But the few who did manage to transform were all terrifying powerhouses that small sectors like Zecia couldn't contain.

The [Twinruin Bloodstalker] was roughly the same height as Zac, and it looked a lot like a beastkin with fur covering its whole body. Its proportions were pretty similar to a lanky human's, except slightly longer arms and a sturdy tail that was reptilian rather than simian in shape. Its hands were larger than normal too, and it had long sharp claws whose sharpness Zac could feel even from a distance.

Its feet reminded Zac of the Torrid Demon's though its claws were longer and more distinct. Its face was the only part without any fur, and it looked pretty terrifying. Its skin was pitch-black like its fur, except two red orbs for eyes that screamed of malice. It had no nose, but a wide mouth full of sharp teeth.

The beast looked in Zac's direction and immediately released a roar as its aura started climbing. It was extremely condensed, and its killing intent even put Zac's own to shame, especially now that it had been weakened after three years of inactivity.

But that didn't mean Zac wasn't up to the challenge, and he rushed forward with his axe at the ready. The ground cracked beneath the bloodstalker's feet as its thin form turned into a blur, and it was upon Zac before he knew what happened.

Danger screamed as four sharp claws ripped through the air, aiming straight at Zac's throat. Zac narrowly dodged as he countered with a quick and furious swing with his axe, but he didn't even get the chance to land the hit before a thick tail slammed into his thigh with enough force to make him lose his balance. The bloodstalker used the counterforce of the collision to reverse its spinning momentum, and another swipe aimed for Zac's eyes just as he managed to stabilize his form.

Zac growled as he intercepted the swipe with his free hand. A burning pain erupted in his arm as two deep lacerations appeared, but he ignored the hurt as he thrust forward, aiming to push the beast off its balance to land a killing blow. However, the beast's tail actually slammed into the ground and acted like a pillar that kept the beast upright.

A high knee appeared out of nowhere before Zac had a chance to react, and Zac realized that it actually used its tail as only support while spinning mid-air. The beast tried to keep him in place with a vise-like grip, but Zac forcibly lifted his right arm with a roar. A painful attack slammed into his shoulder, where his head had been half a second ago.

It hurt like hell, but Zac knew he had finally found an opportunity as the beast was mid-air while he was primed to attack.

A murderous edge infused with the Fragment of the Axe cut down, aiming to disembowel the beast in one quick go. The beast screeched and a dangerous aura started to leak from its body. It was definitely some sort of murder-related Dao at a level that matched Zac's own, but Zac wouldn't stop from something like that.

Axe met flesh and the ground shook an instant later as the bloodstalker was slammed into the ground.

Normally that would be the end of the battle, but Zac frowned when he saw that the beast was pretty much fine. It had managed to block Zac's swing with its forearm and almost looked like it bounced off from the ground as it backed away a few steps. It looked like a thick metallic bone hid right beneath its furred skin, and it had to be extremely durable to block out Zac's attack like that.

The beast's hand shook a bit from the impact, but it mostly seemed infuriated rather than hurt from the counter. Zac sighed, but he had known that the final challenge wouldn't be so easily overcome. He knew he'd be able to end everything with an Annihilation-sphere, but that wasn't why he was here. This was a real challenge where he would be pushed to the limits.

The wound hadn't weakened the bloodstalker at all. It rather looked like it possessed some sort of inherent berserking bloodline where the wound had turned its killing intent and aura even more congealed. It shot forward, its claws aiming to rip Zac's midsection open and Zac answered with a cruel strike of with his own.

Just activating his Dao was not enough against this target. Zac did not only continuously activate Fragment of the Bodhi to allow his body to endure the extremely forceful strikes, but every single swing was imbued with the Fragment of the Axe. But the beast was just too nimble. It almost felt like it reacted before Zac's attacks even begun, like they were following some sort of choreographed dance without Zac knowing.

Zac fought with everything he had, and his aura slowly transformed as he followed his instincts to incorporate his Dao Insights into his combat style once more. However, even as he desperately fought for his life his mind kept turning back to the brutal melee between Verun and the [Twinruin Tyrant]. That battle between two apex predators wouldn't have been out of place out in the forests of the Bloodwind Planet, or anywhere else in the desolate wilderness.

Wasn't nature ultimately the source of the most ruthless wars of all?

Endless living creatures fought not only with each other for survival, but also against the elements themselves. Any weakness would be destroyed and discarded, replaced by something new. As the seasons passed those suited for survival would thrive, while everything full of imperfections would be left by the wayside.

This was the fusion he was looking for, the fusion between nature and war.

Zac moved as though he was possessed as one inspiration after another washed over him, and he found that his fighting style slowly transform. His swings had previously contained the desperate echoes of a war between armies, but now it started to become reminiscent of another battle. The battle of the seasons, of evolution, of survival in the wild.

Weaknesses and imperfections were slowly cut away, replaced by swings and strikes that better took advantage of his attribute pool. The dinosaurs might have been the largest and most powerful beasts that walked Earth before the integration, but they definitely weren't the most perfect. They had all fallen while other animals flourished.

It was the same with his brutish fighting style. His wide swings full of killing intent might contain a world-ending force, but what good were they when they couldn't even strike the bloodstalker? His attacks got

more and more in tune with his envisioned path. Imperfections were discarded without a second thought as Zac kept trying new approaches.

Sometimes it worked and the bloodstalker received a new wound, other times it failed and Zac was wounded instead. His fighting style was like the everchanging seasons, but with every revolution, the overall number of weaknesses shrunk, and his attacks started to change as well.

His swings got quicker, more ruthless. If there were no openings to vital organs, then he'd attack something else. Anything that could push the fight in his favor. There was no such thing as honor in the wild, and neither was there any in the way Zac fought. This wasn't a boxing match, this was life and death.

His path was gradually fusing with his body, and the bloodstalker started to lose ground. All the small improvements stacked on top of each other until disadvantage was transformed into a small advantage for Zac. The bloodstalker was desperately fighting back, the large number of shallow wounds doing nothing to slow it down.

But while it had amazing instincts and attributes that were a match to Zac, it didn't show any indication of making any improvements throughout the battle.

Blood and tufts of fur soon covered the ground as the wounds accumulated across the beast's body. The same was true for Zac, but he was willing to take a few hits if he could deliver in kind. He had always been ruthless to himself, and this wasn't any different.

The bloodstalker suddenly twisted as it once more tried to lash Zac with a tail full of momentum. But Zac moved as though by instinct, narrowly ducking while stomping down at the foot that the beast used to pivot. His leg was infused with the Fragment of the Bodhi, and it was like a huge tree slammed down on the bloodstalker's ankle. A loud crack was quickly followed by a huge bang as cracks spread on the ground.

The beast's foot was broken, and the pain seemed to have cut through the bloodlust as it shuddered in agony. There was no mercy in the wild, and Zac immediately pounced. His whole being felt aligned with his path, and [Verun's Bite] started radiating a supreme might of the untamed wilds as it ripped through the air. The bloodstalker sensed the danger and tried to dodge while countering with a kick, but the axe was upon it before it had a chance to move out of the way.

Bone was split and dark blood flowed like a fountain as protective bone and arm were cleanly cut off, and the gleaming axehead continued into the torso of the beast. The whole arena echoed with the deep thud, and a massive explosion erupted as a twenty-meter deep scar cut into the ground behind the bloodstalker.

The beast fell onto the ground, completely unmoving.

A storm of Cosmic Energy entered his body, but Zac stood unmoving as he imprinted his current feeling into his body. Mind, body, Dao. It had all converged into a singular entity, and two streams had been braided into a strike of unmatched might. It was the first time he had managed to infuse an attack with his reverse Dao-braid. He had succeeded in forming the twinned energy before while practicing, but never quickly enough for it to be usable in battle.

But now it had all crystallized somehow, though Zac honestly wasn't sure whether he'd be able to replicate the deed unless he was pushed like he was in this fight. In either case, he had confirmed that his theories were correct and that this was a viable way to cultivate. His braid was as crude as they came, but it did work.

It might display less than half of the boost compared to the intricate braids Kenzie managed to create with her own Dao Fragments, but Zac was just on his first Reincarnation. He would probably be able to create proper braids by the time he evolved his soul the next time, and even Dao Arrays wasn't an impossible goal.

He heard roars from the arena, and the announcer kept harping on something, but Zac was occupied by the experiences of the battle. He had long managed to incorporate some of the insights from the Fragment of the Axe into his fighting style, but this was the first time he was touching upon a true fusion of concepts.

It was still rudimentary, and he felt that his Axe-insights still stood for over 90% of his actions, but it was definitely a move in the right direction. He had set the foundations, now he just needed to polish his techniques through battle.

He stood completely transfixed, and he only opened his eyes after feeling his body being teleported. He had been sent back to the same waiting room as before. His items were waiting right next to him, and he picked them up before leaving. Outside the room, another devilish axe cultivator waited, and Zac felt he should either be an early hegemon or a strong peak E-grade cultivator.

"Congratulations," the three-meter tall devilkin said with an appreciative nod. "I saw your battles, you're a tough one. Your early fight was kind of shitty, but you were impressive by the end. Are you self-taught?"

"Uh, thanks I guess," Zac wryly smiled. "Yeah, I just kept swinging until I got to this point. I am trying to refine my technique."

"Haha! A lot of us are wandering cultivators like yourself. But you know what? Those prudes over at the sword palace look down their noses at us, but we still win over 60% of the battles in the coliseum," the man guffawed. "Technique isn't everything."

Zac nodded with a grin, agreeing to a certain degree. He had gotten quite far with just grit and pure force, though he knew that he had to refine his battle style if he wanted to reach further heights.

The Sword Palace the devil mentioned was another of the factions on the Bloodwind Planet. He didn't know a lot about them, except that this world was just one of their training grounds. Those in their sect who favored flying swords often came here to temper their mental strength.

"Here, your token," the devil said and threw over a bronze token and an information crystal. "We have five levels of membership. Outer members can reach the third level at most, with the final two levels reserved for inner members. You completed the whole trial, so you can reach the second level as soon as you pass a trial period and generate enough contribution."

"How is that different from others?" Zac asked with confusion.

"There are various ways to gain contribution. You can essentially buy the points if you have access to enough sought-after treasures and materials," the devil shrugged. "Normal outer members will also have to complete actual tasks for the Coliseum to elevate their status. You can just buy your way there. You're a true gladiator, you've already proven yourself."

"What's the difference between the levels?" Zac asked.

"The second level gives access to better things to trade for, like some decent information heritages. Third level members can even have the elders give one-on-one pointers once every century, along with an even better selection of items to buy," the gruff attendant explained.

"Alright, thank you," Zac nodded.

"Oh, I guess you impressed some big shot in the Coliseum with your fight against the bloodstalker. You have been given two weeks with Big Boss's Big Wall."