

## The Fall 815

### Chapter 815: Vivi

With the flaws in his training method corrected, Zac returned to the routine where he rotated between wanton slaughter in the Wilderness, duels in the arena, and short periods of secluded cultivation. Part of him wanted to rush toward the peak with the two E-grade mastery skills and conquer the third band, but he reined himself in.

The first month after his second duel with Pavina he made good progress as he gradually patched up the mistakes she had pointed out. This time, it took a bit more time, since he wasn't able to enter that marvelous state he had enjoyed after they met. However, problems arrived when he had completed the fixes and strove to move forward with the new teachings in the Middle Proficiency mastery skills.

Zac was continuously beset with the impression he was missing something, like something was holding him back. At first, the feeling was just a small annoyance, like a fly buzzing around his head. Zac figured it was because it simply was becoming harder and harder to incorporate the techniques.

After reaching Middle Mastery, the trajectories and strikes the skills showcased became even more sublime. They didn't only exact extreme requirements on force and momentum, but there was something ethereal about them, something that defied being grasped easily. It was like every swing contained thousands of variations, and every time he performed the attacks Zac sensed something different.

Sometimes, the sensation left him with more questions than answers, and he often found himself stuck at an impasse. However, while the difficulty was quickly ramping up, he did ultimately make steady progress. The feeling of mismatch, of his stance being incomplete, seemed to stem from something else.

Eventually, the feeling became so palpable that he chose to return to Pavina before evolving his mastery skills to late proficiency. This time, she didn't have any easy solutions, even after fighting for half an hour.

"How odd," Pavina muttered after they finished their sparring session. "I cannot discern what the source of your hesitation is. There are still weaknesses in your stance, but that is to be expected. I don't get the sense of lacking that you mention."

"So I should just ignore it?" Zac asked hesitantly. "Is it just in my head?"

"No," Pavina said. "You should trust your instincts in cases like this. Me not understanding the issue doesn't mean it's not there. I am just an outsider, and cultivation is ultimately a personal journey. You are still ahead of schedule. I suggest you slow down and search for answers before moving forward. You might have missed something."

"Alright," Zac slowly nodded.

He returned to the wilderness, trying to find the answer to his problems through battle, but the more he fought the more he found himself at an impasse. Had he reached the limits of his comprehension? No, Zac still felt there was room for improvement without infusing his Daos. Eventually, he chose to swap over to his human side and work on his Evolutionary Stance to clear his head for a few days.

Most of his training in the past two years had been related to foundational techniques rather than the deathly aspect of his other stance, and these teachings had to be integrated into his life-attuned stance sooner or later. Having already gone over everything once, Zac figured it would be even quicker the second time around. Besides, Zac figured it might spark some inspiration that would solve his predicament.

Zac decided to stop breaking through levels as well. He had found that the damage to his pathways, foundations, and soul after forcibly breaking open the nodes in his head was slowing the derivation of his techniques. Since he didn't need the Contribution Points from the levels, he stopped at level 139 just to make sure this wasn't the problem. It was just one level short of Yrial's requirement, and he still had over two years to spare.

By that time, he should be able to push a couple of levels with pills again.

Zac could only pray that these measures were enough. If this didn't work, would he have to cultivate his soul or something, in the hopes that greater mental prowess would help him deduce the stances quicker? After all, Zac felt he was improving a lot quicker since arriving at the Orom World compared to before. It might be the environment, but it might also be his soul evolution that had sped up his progress.

Or would he be forced to integrate his Daos on an imperfect foundation, just so that he would survive the duel? It should work, but Zac was reluctant to do so now that he finally had found the path.

He quickly got absorbed with the cultivation of the Evolutionary Stance, and days quickly turned to weeks. It was like Zac hoped. With already having gone through this once, he made rapid progress retooling his life-based technique. More importantly, as he stayed in his human form, the feeling of incompleteness grew fainter and fainter.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on by that point; it was the imbalance between stances that had caused trouble.

The two stances represented the two branches of his cultivation path, and they were ultimately part of one system. What Zac hadn't expected was that they were so interconnected that he became hard-pressed to progress one side if the other lagged behind. There was no logical reason behind it, as far as he could tell. Zac supposed it was either a mental block because his path required equilibrium, or there might be some other underlying theories that were beyond him.

Ultimately, the reason didn't matter. He had found the cause and the solution – he just needed to put in some effort on his human side as well. Another two weeks passed, and Zac had finished integrating the techniques equivalent to Peak F-grade of the mastery skills. However, when he started infusing [Armament Mastery] with the Fragment of the Bodhi, finally ran into some issues.

As expected, using [Coffinbox] felt extremely uncomfortable in his human form. It had already been a noticeable issue when he trained the unattuned techniques, but it became a lot worse after his attacks started containing a hint of life. The trajectories still appeared when activating the skill, but everything felt wrong.

Chains had become so indelibly interlinked with his concept of death, from the hanging coffin to [Love's Bond] and the restrictive nature of Inexorable Stance. Even worse, he believed the issue would only worsen when [Love's Bond] woke up, considering it was infused with Oblivion by now.

Soon enough, Zac found the experience unbearable, and he left the Wilderness to seek counsel. This time, he didn't head to Pavina though, but rather someone else.

"Don't you have the solution for this already?" Ubo asked with confusion when Zac visited the Elemental to confer with him.

It would be weird to ask Pavina about this issue, so he went to a life-based Monarch instead. Besides, Zac realized needed to send a message to Three Virtues that he was dealing with Kaldor and the splinter, to make sure the shifty monk didn't do something with the Shard of Creation.

"I do?" Zac said.

"Just go visit Heda. She has tens of thousands of different types of plants, and she's one of the five most skilled Arborists in the Orom World," Ubo said. "Among us who walk the path of Life, she is surpassed by none."

"Right," Zac slowly said, but his heart was full of reluctance.

"Are you worried about her condition?" Ubo laughed. "People have gone much further off the conventional path in search of power, both in the Orom World and outside. Her fusion is nothing special, and she is still firmly in control of her soul."

"Alright, I'll visit her," Zac agreed.

"No hurry," Ubo said as Zac got ready to leave. "Stay for a few days. I can sense you have worked too hard lately. You need to stop and unburden your mind. Incidentally, I wanted to test the efficacy of my latest restoration array on fleshy beings."

Zac was a bit reluctant, but he ultimately agreed to stay for a week inside Ubo's mountain. The elemental was a terrific host, and the array it had Zac sit inside was almost as powerful as the one he used to heal when he first arrived. The only issue was how talkative Ubo was. There didn't seem to be an end to the marvelous feats he had accomplished both before and after being caught by the Orom.

Zac even wondered if the elemental had him stay just so it had someone to brag to, with how he had become a captive audience inside the array. But the array did work wonders, so he let his drained body get restored as he 'ooh' and 'aah'-ed at the right places during Ubo's retelling of his heroic exploits.

A week later, Zac emerged, relaxed and exhausted at the same time. The Arborist's cultivation farm wasn't too far from where he first encountered her, but it was quite some distance from Ubo's mountain. It took him close to two weeks to reach her neck of the woods, and the life-attuned forest gradually transitioned from the individualistic chaos to vast fields covered in top-quality farming arrays.

While Ubo's cultivation cave was meticulously crafted, it completely lost to Heda's domain in acreage. From the looks of it, each field only grew one type of plant, but there were small differences between them all. Perhaps Heda was letting the Dao of Life coerce mutations of various species in the hopes of discovering something useful.

It took him over two hours walking through the enormous fields until he finally spotted a small farmhouse in the distance. Heda was already waiting outside, smiling at him with the fleshy half of her face as Zac got closer.

"I have waited a long time," Heda nodded as she looked at Zac. "I was about to go catch you."

"No need for any catching," Zac said. "I was caught up with my cultivation. My first relegation will take place in a few months."

"You will survive," Heda said without hesitation.

"I should be fine by now," Zac agreed. "I am here for something else."

"Oh?" Heda said curiously, and Zac shuddered inwardly as a few roots across her face pulsed.

"I heard from Obo you are skilled with living weapons? Like vines?" Zac ventured.

"Of course," Heda nodded, and Zac's eyes widened in alarm as he saw a thick purple vine suddenly emerge from her neck before retreating into her body. "There are many cultivators who use plant-based lifeforms in battle, but most cultivate Nature. Do you want to implant yourself? I have a few promising experi-

"No!" Zac hurriedly said as he took a step back. "Just something I can carry with me."

"Oh," Heda said, the disappointment evident on her face. "Well, come in."

The two entered her farmstead, which was surprisingly small. Heda was carrying out a huge number of experiments judging by the fields, so he would have expected some laboratories or factories to process all those plants. But there was only a simple cottage surrounded by a beautiful garden.

"My laboratories are underground," Heda explained, seemingly understanding what Zac was thinking as he looked around. "I'm sorry I cannot offer a tour. The saplings down there can be altered by the slightest change in aura, making the data unreliable."

"Some other time, then," Zac smiled.

The two sat down at an unadorned wooden table overlooking the garden outside, and Zac explained his predicament. He also showed her [Chainbox] to give her a better notion of what kind of plant he was looking for.

"There are an endless number of plants like that," Heda shrugged. "Show me your dance again."

Zac eagerly got back on his feet and started swinging, using the Evolutionary Stance against an imagined foe.

"Lifeless, but better," Heda nodded. "More boring than your old dance, but probably the right solution."

"I'm shoring up my foundations before reintegrating life into the equation," Zac smiled.

Heda was obviously not cultivating technique like he or Pavina. The Arborist had rather been interested in his display of Life manifested as the Bodhi Tree, by the looks of it.

"I cannot think of any plant in my garden that perfectly suits your path," Heda said after some thought. "But that is usually the case. Living Weapons are best nurtured from a seedling, doused in your Dao from birth to maturity. That way, it will be perfectly in tune with you."

"Oh, alright," Zac said with disappointment.

"But I have something that might work for now?" Heda said as a half-smile spread across her face.

"I cannot have anything growing inside me," Zac resolutely said.

He definitely refused to have a parasite in his body like Heda. He didn't want to continuously fight for his soul like the arborist, or like Ogras for that matter. But there was also a practical reason for his resistance. Would a parasite plant even survive when he swapped into his Draugr race and flooded his body with Miasma?

"No, something else," Heda said before flashing away.

Two minutes later she returned with a metal tube in her hand. Attached to it was some sort of cling vine roughly half a meter tall. There were small thorns hidden amongst its heart-shaped leaves, and it had a purple flower at its crown. It looked harmless enough, making Zac wonder if it was really a living weapon.

More importantly, it looked like it was dying. Its leaves were shriveled and more than half were brown instead of green, and its stem was wrinkly like it was dried out.

"This is Vivi," Heda explained as she caressed one of the flowers. "She was one of my earliest experiments since being trapped in this world. She was both a great success and a great failure."

"She seems a bit sick?" Zac said, still a bit confused.

"Not sick. Dying," Heda sighed. "My skills were lacking at the time, and I was unable to overcome the limits of her origin. Thus, Vivi never managed to become a Plant Queen. Today, I would have managed to do it. But it is much too late, the window has passed. Now, she only has a century or two left to live. But she does enjoy eating corpses, so why don't you take her out for some bloodshed in her final days?"

"Uh," Zac hesitated as he looked at the wilting vine.

"Before you say no, you should know that she is as powerful as a Late-Stage High-quality E-grade Spirit Tool even in this weakened state. If you feed her well and regularly infuse her with some Mental Energy, she can match Peak Tools for a while," Heda said. "She will not slow you down."

Looked at the plant with a new sense of appreciation. Even weakened, the diminutive plant was so powerful? Just how dangerous had it been at its prime? No wonder Heda called it a great success.

"How would it work?" Zac asked. "I don't have any plant-based or pet-based skills."

"Since you don't want to swallow her core, you will have to imprint her," Heda said. "Thankfully, she is just an E-grade plant, so her consciousness is hazy. And with her advanced age, she is quite docile. Buy [Link of Demeter] from the Contribution Store. If that slot is taken, you can also use [Nature's bond] or [Herbal Harmonization]. They will work as well, but they are nature aspected rather than life-aspected."

“How much would this plant cost?” Zac hesitated, knowing that the Orom wouldn’t allow her to give it away.

“Between the spatial tube and Vivi herself,” Heda slowly said before she closed her eyes. “2,500 Purchase Points. That’s the lowest price I am allowed to set.”

Zac wasn’t too flush with Purchase Points, but 2,500 was a steal for a weapon at the equivalent of a late E-Grade Spirit Tool. Heda was giving him a deep, deep discount here, even if you factored in the plant’s short remaining lifespan.

“I’ll take her,” Zac said. “But what did you mean by spatial tube?”

“Vivi does not have spatial skills of her own, and her real body is over five hundred meters long,” Heda smiled as she stroked the leaves of the vine, prompting it to completely retreat into the tube. “Most of her body is hidden inside the tube. Her maximum reach with her vines is three kilometers, but they will gradually lose force after five hundred meters. Of course, don’t worry if they are damaged. As long as you feed her Cosmic Energy, they’ll regrow very quickly.”

To showcase what she was talking about, she had two vines suddenly shoot out through the window, and they ripped through the air until Zac could barely see their ends. A moment later they were retracted again, leaving turbulent winds in their wake. The vines had been as thick as ropes, and they didn’t have any hint of decay or weakness.

Even Zac had felt a bit pressured by the aura they exuded.

“Amazing,” Zac whispered, knowing living weapon would fill the role of [Chainbox] without missing a step. If anything, Vivi was far superior.

“Do you know why I wanted to meet you?” Heda asked as she handed him the tube.

“Because of my usage of the Dao of Life?” Zac hesitated.

“No. That was not very impressive,” Heda said, making Zac grimace with embarrassment. “I wanted you to come because you are rootless in this world. You do not belong, and I don’t believe you will be here in a decade or two.”

“That’s”, Zac hesitated. “Why do you say that?”

“It’s hard to explain. It’s a gift of my cohabitant,” Heda shrugged as she took out a small glass container. “I have a request.”

“What’s that?” Zac asked.

“When you leave the Orom, please break this glass and throw it away,” Heda smiled.

Zac took the small glass container, and he saw that a shimmering seed was hidden inside.

“That’s it?” Zac asked. “Just throw it anywhere, even the Void?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Heda smiled.

Zac looked at the seed curiously, wondering if it was some escape measure of the Arborist. He considered the risks of doing as she asked, but he felt it wouldn't be too risky to just throw it out before teleporting away. She had no reason to hurt him, and his reservations about her were mostly related to her grim appearance.

"I'll do it, if I ever manage to leave this place," Zac eventually agreed.

"Good enough," Heda nodded.

With the help of the Arborist, Zac fashioned the pole into a back protector that ran along his spine. According to Heda, not even a Middle Hegemon would be able to break it with a full-powered swing. Even if it broke, it simply meant that the true body of Vivi would be released. If that happened, he would have to get a new spatial container that could nurture life.

Even better, he could store the spatial tube in a Spatial Ring, as long as Vivi was completely retracted. The only caveat was that he had to take her out at least once a month though to feed her Cosmic Energy and some corpses.

"When her time is up and she can fight no longer, plant her somewhere nice, please," Heda said as Zac tried moving around with the pipe along his back. "I have placed a seal on her that will last a month. Imprint her before that."

The tube fit perfectly, and he didn't even notice it was there. It did look a bit odd though, since the purple flower stuck out from the top of the tube, making it look like he was carrying a very thin vase rather than a sheath. He thanked Heda again before leaving, eager to get the taming method before the critter broke free and went on a rampage.

With this, the final roadblock to the Integration Stage and forming last two Dao Branches had been dealt with, and Zac couldn't wait to return to the wilderness. He had run into some speedbumps, but his goal was still the same.

Within a year and a half, he wanted to gain the power required to duel the Izh'Rak Reaver.