

The Fall 817

Chapter 817: Raising the Stakes

The three-year shuffle for new arrivals was quite straightforward. It worked just like the normal relegations, where Zac's prison brand had flashed a month before the deadline. In his case, it emitted a soothing blue glimmer, indicating he was above the cut-off. The less fortunate ones would instead be shown a glaring red, providing them with one final warning and opportunity.

The early warning was designed to squeeze out a burst of inspiration through desperation, and a sense of unease among those who were just scraping by. No one was allowed to relax. Only those such as Zac himself who had performed far beyond the average could ignore the pressure, though even Zac with his massive pool of Contribution Points had felt a bit unnerved.

He couldn't even imagine what was going through the minds of those who were barely hanging on.

When the relegation finally arrived, his prison brand flashed again, unsurprisingly the same color in Zac's case. However, a moment later, Zac felt vibrations from his Cosmos Sack. Twelve of Zac's collected tokens had suddenly been marked by a rune that looked like a broken ladder. The token belonging to Travo Raso, the Radiant Temple fixer, had been one of them.

Even to this day, the brands were visible on the tokens, their owners' failures acting as a warning to others. If the tokens cracked, it meant their owners had died in the hellish environment of the second-string cultivators.

Three had already cracked in the year since the relegation.

It was a stark reminder that this was not some cultivation haven, but a heartless cage. It made Zac even more desperate to get his hands on the remnants and leave this depressing place. This oversized fish was playing with people's lives and using them as Dao Batteries. If Zac could, he would rip open this false sky above his head, drowning it with the Dao of Chaos.

But before he could do that, some steps had to be completed. First of all, he needed to perfect his two stances. Four months ago, Zac finally reached peak proficiency of his two Mastery Skills. The skills hadn't provided any visions this time around, but rather taken his techniques even closer to the Dao, showing the way in a sense.

After another two months of work, he had finished incorporating the lessons into the Inexorable Stance. The process was quite smooth, considering he was inching toward the very same concepts and theories he had used to form the two stances in the first case. In a sense, he was returning to the origin, this time armed with a wealth of experience and a rebuilt foundation.

During a ferocious battle in the deeper parts of the fourth band, he had managed to take that final step, reintegrating the Daos of Coffin and War Axe into his Inexorable Stance. Reaching this point was both faster and slower than he had expected considering his initial burst of rapid progress. Slower in the sense that his two-year deadline had already been passed by three months by now. Faster in the sense that he had worked on both his stances, not just the one.

His Evolutionary Stance was still lacking something though, and even after two months of grinding, he hadn't managed to enter the Integration Stage. He had infused the Daos over and over, the concepts of a technique as everchanging as life itself. Of overcoming fate and breaking through all shackles.

But every time the result had felt off, like he hadn't completely grasped the essence.

The first step of the Integration Stage was the most important. It was the first building block of something greater. If he got it wrong, he would find himself in a similar situation in the future, where he would have to tear down his stance and rebuild it. But considering that his Daos and technique were so interconnected, that would probably mean his future Life-attuned Dao Branch would become crooked as well.

That was a problem that was far more difficult to allay, and something that could cause a tremendous headache when forming one's Cultivator's Core or Inner World.

Still, Zac knew he was right on the cusp of breaking through the thin film that was holding him back. So he had decided to alter his plans a bit, aiming for a breakthrough in the arena when pitted against a skillful enemy. After all, pitched battle was how a good half of his epiphanies were born, and it matched the fate-breaking aspect of his stance.

If he could make some Purchase Points at the same time, all the better.

Luckily, Zac had spent years on this particular money-making scheme. Zac's two personas were already the source of a lot of rumors and comparisons considering they were both E-grade and wielded axes. With Zac's human side suddenly copying the chains by adding Vivi to his repertoire, speculation had veritably exploded.

Unsurprisingly, there was a good chunk of people convinced Zac and 'Mr. Chains' were the same person, though Zac hadn't heard anyone use the term Edgewalker. They figured he was some sort of twinned being born through circumstance. For example, where the human side survived while his undead persona awakened. It sounded pretty unbelievable, but Zac had to admit the truth was even more far-fetched.

Another camp consisted of the people who believed the two youngsters were connected since before the Orom, and these were the rumors Zac had tried to encourage. Thanks to some 'accidentally leaked' snippets of information from Zac, his two identities were essentially rivals since birth through a grudge inherited from their masters.

Both walked similar paths, eager to prove their superiority.

Traprandar happened to be one of the people who leaned toward this theory, and this was part of Zac's calculations when targeting the man. First, he had played out a scenario where Mr. Chains, was slowly pulling ahead thanks to coming under the tutelage of Pavina, the Worldlock Monarch.

Zac's human side had displayed a series of desperate battles in the arena where he struggled to keep up, but he had been slowly been left in the dust over the past two years. In reality, this was a mix of Zac holding back his strength and the simple fact that the Evolutionary Stance had somewhat lagged behind.

Next, Zac targeted Olgoth. He was an overbearing Corpse-lord who had a similar combat style as the Evolutionary Stance, though his technique obviously wasn't based on life. It did however contain the

elements of ferociously breaking the shackles of fate, in Olgoth's case his low birthright, and pushing forward, constantly changing and improving.

This served three purposes. First, the Corpselord was a perfect opponent to hone his path and shore up his foundation after reaching the Integration Stage with the Inexorable Stance. Zac's path was based on inevitability and restraints, so fighting someone like Olgoth was far more valuable than fighting almost any other type of warrior.

Secondly, Olgoth and Traprandar hated each other, and Traprandar had defeated Olgoth three times in a row over the past twenty years. It made the Corpselord irritable and easy to instigate into betting big against Mr. Chains who walked a similar path of restrictions as Traprandar. At the same time, it shouldn't make Traprandar too worried even if he started suspecting that Zac and Mr. Chains were one and the same.

Finally, together with the backgrounds that Zac had crafted for his two identities, it set the stage for entrapping Traprandar as well for one final payout. As long as Zac could play the part of someone who was in over his head and refused to give in to his nemesis who was getting ahead.

"Healthy competition is good in this place, but your actions are bordering obsession. Don't get lost in someone else's path," Traprandar snickered as he looked at the vines on Zac's body. "Little Chains' path is more suited for such a tool, and his skill in using them is ahead of yours."

"Will you accept or not?" Zac said, his face darkening.

"I might," the Traprandar smiled. "But you should understand my predicament. If I win, it's a matter of course. I am a late Hegemon and Bronze Attendant. Beating up a brat is more embarrassing than impressive. If I happen to lose, my reputation is ruined like a certain Corpselord's."

As Traprandar said the final sentence, he glanced in the direction of the stands with a taunting smile, where an absolutely infuriated Olgoth glared back.

"It's easy to talk big, bastard!" Olgoth roared. "You're just afraid you'll lose to the weaker of the two, proving I am superior."

Zac was flush with excitement when he saw Traprandar's expressions and heard the exchange. Clearly, Traprandar was interested, but he was trying to raise the stakes.

It was just what Zac had been praying for, but he maintained an annoyed demeanor as he waved his token. "That guy bet 10,000 Purchase Points. I'll bet 18,308 Points. When I defeat you, I'll have defeated that bastard by proxy as well."

"Look who's come up in the world. I remember when you only gave up 50 points in the beginning," Traprandar smiled, but Zac could feel the hesitation in his eyes.

Had Zac messed up, being too greedy with such a large bet?

The small bets Traprandar mentioned came from Zac's first year in the Orom World, before Pavina had righted the ship, so to speak. Zac had lost 58 consecutive fights between 8 visits to the arena back then, earning him the nickname 'Pocket Money' since he always bet a handful of Purchase Points to get someone to spar with him.

But that had eventually changed with him winning some duels in both his forms, though his Human form was still not at the level where he should have the guts to challenge Traprandar.

Zac knew that this was a critical moment, where Traprandar might smell something amiss. 18,000 Purchase Points wasn't anything to scoff at, even for a late Hegemon. The fact that Zac could put out such a sum might seem suspicious, even if it had been four years since he arrived.

"I guess I can teach you a trick or two for such a generous fee," Traprandar eventually said, having chosen greed over precaution.

Zac knew he had caught the fish, now he just needed to reel it in. He jumped down to the empty arena with a scowl and pressed his token against the Arena Array, depositing the 18,308 Purchase Points. A flash of hesitation and regret appeared on his face, but he quickly smoothed over the expression as though it was a mistake. In reality, Zac had practiced it for weeks since duplicity didn't come as naturally to him as for certain demons.

Still, part of the worry was real. The specific number 18,308, was meant to indicate it was Zac's total, and it wasn't that far from the truth. He had just over 21,000 points after betting 10,000 Purchase Points against Olgoth a few weeks back, a bet he only managed to put forward thanks to reaching the integration stage and saving for 20 months.

His plan hinged on Traprandar believing that Zac's actions were bluster from an inexperienced E-grade youth caught in a pissing contest with his rival. Years of small investments, all for one big payout. If he succeeded, he would suddenly have over 40,000 Purchase Points, allowing him to afford one of the top-tier treasures that had been out of his reach since arriving in this place.

Traprandar eventually jumped down from the waiting area and pressed his bronze token against the array as well, prompting the stands to explode with excitement. 18,000 Purchase Points was not too much for some of the spectators, but it was still an uncommonly large bet. Besides, they carried a unique implication since an E-grade cultivator had put forth the bet.

It should be Zac's entire savings, the resources meant to generate the Contribution Points needed to survive in this place. Lose them, and he might have sentenced himself to death. For Traprandar his reputation was at stake, something that was even more important than life and death in this place for some.

Losing against an E-grade warrior who arrived just a few years ago as a bronze attendant? A warrior who wasn't even the strongest in his cohort? It would be too embarrassing.

With Traprandar having infused the points as well, there was no turning back for either of them, and Zac immediately discarded his fake demeanor. He jumped up on the arena with a calm expression as a copy of [Verun's Bite] appeared in his hand, an axe Zac had commissioned when starting to work on his Evolutionary Stance in earnest.

Traprandar instantly noticed Zac's change and a flash of coldness appeared in his eyes. Zac wasn't bothered; it was intentional. He wasn't planning on using trickery in this fight. It needed to be a head-on melee where both fought with everything they had. That was how he would seize the opportunity for a breakthrough.

“So it was a ruse, after all,” Traprandar slowly said as his aura rose. “How? You and Little Chains worked together? Or are you really one? Is it truly possible?”

“Does it matter?” Zac said with a small smile as his own aura condensed beyond what he had ever displayed before. “Give it your all.”

“Hmph,” the man snorted as a second golden ring appeared in his other hand, the other half of his twinned weapon.

The arena’s barrier activated and enclosed the two, and both sprung to action at the same time. Zac rushed forward, utilizing [Earthstrider] to close the distance. But Traprandar chose to backpedal as one shining light after another emerged from his body, and the whole arena was drenched in a golden sheen as they rose toward the ceiling.

Traprandar wasn’t a pure Life Cultivator, but he rather focused on a mixed-meaning Dao based on Stars and Life, possibly with a hint of fire mixed within. He didn’t have any skills in numerology like the cultivators of the Radiant Temple as far as Zac could tell, but there was rather some sort of light-based concepts hidden in the Dao of Stars.

Zac didn’t immediately unleash his own domain to match the one his enemy was erecting, afraid that it would be destroyed before he could make full use of it. Thankfully, the arena was only so big, and Zac eventually caught up to the warrior who couldn’t use movement skills while releasing his domain.

Even then, Traprandar had already managed to unleash over two dozen lights already, and they formed an array that put Zac’s body under great strain while also containing a slightly hallucinogenic effect. The latter was thankfully mostly nullified through his powerful soul. Zac catching up meant no more stars could be released, stopping the domain from gaining any more power.

But even before Zac had the chance to unleash an attack of his own, the warrior disappeared in a blinding flash of light that made Zac’s eyes burn. A pang of danger warned him even before he could regain his vision, but he had already dug one of Vivi’s vines into the ground earlier, allowing him to instantly drag himself out of harm’s way.

Using a Living Weapon was surprisingly easy, it turned out. The vine gave Zac full control over her ‘limbs’ as his consciousness spread into hers, allowing him to use the vines just like he would the chains of [Chainbox].

The air screamed as the bladed ring ripped space asunder as it narrowly passed Zac by, leaving a wall of searing light in its wake. It would stay up for the duration of the fight, a part of Traprandar’s restrictive heritage. Zac tried to hit the spinning ring with a quick jab of his axe, but the weapon disappeared in a flash of light before he could connect, instantly returned to its owner.

Zac barely had time to adjust before a rain of golden drops shot his way. The four vines he used rapidly expanded and grew into a Bodhi-infused wall that blocked the attacks, but they were riddled with holes in an instant before falling apart. Zac didn’t care since they had served their purpose, and he emerged to their side and unleashed a series of bladed leaves in the direction of Traprandar with [Nature’s Edge].

Even if the vines were cut off a hundred times over, Vivi would just heal or grow new ones in an instant without feeling as much as a pinch.

It was one of the differences between chains and vines that had taken some getting used to, where the vines were to some extent used as discardable weapons. It allowed for some all-out attacks unheeding of taking damage yourself, which suited the offensive style of Zac's Evolutionary Stance. The downside was that the vines weren't as sturdy as the chains, making some maneuvers impossible.

A blinding flash of light forced Zac to close his eyes, but his powerful soul allowed him to know what was going on. Traprandar had appeared right in front of him as Zac focused on the bladed leaves flying toward the other side of the cage, one of the bladed rings already falling toward his neck.

The arena shuddered as axe and wheel met each other in the first true clash of the battle.

"You planned and schemed, but it won't matter. I will take those points of yours," Traprandar grinned as he unleashed a rapid series of swings that seemed to come from everywhere, giving Zac a suffocating feeling.

Meanwhile, Zac felt the light around him congeal, and he was surprised to find the air itself slowly turning into some sort of crystalline prison without as much as a ripple of energy as a clue. This wasn't a skill Zac had seen Traprandar use before, and moving was getting harder and harder.

Zac wasn't worried though – he was elated. The more restraints Traprandar had that Zac could break, the better. The moment he managed to break all the shackles Traprandar could erect, his Evolutionary Stance would take that next step.