

The Fall 818

Chapter 818: Transition

Space was rapidly freezing over, and Trapandar furiously swung his ring blades to keep Zac in place. The warrior was using his signature skill already; every time the two clashed, a band of light was added to Zac's body, hampering his movements. The chakram seemed simple at the surface, but in Trapandar's hand, they formed a never-ending dance that reminded Zac of the sun and the moon.

However, while Trapandar was continuously swinging them, it rather felt like Zac was the one being moved.

It was like Zac was a small planet stuck in the orbit of the Hegemon's sun, unable to break free of its pull. Together with the weird crystallization of Zac's surroundings, he knew something needed to change. He could imagine all too well what would happen if he got trapped inside a crystal when fighting a warrior who used light as a weapon.

Zac roared as his aura surged, and the skill fractal on his hand was flooded with Cosmic Energy. The next moment, the whole arena was drowned in a tempest of emerald leaves, and the crystalline cage broke apart before it had a chance to fully form. Zac had become the eye of the storm, and nothing could contain him as Zac activated the upgraded version of [Nature's Edge].

Reaching late mastery had added a unique, feature just like when [Chop] reached peak mastery. This time, it didn't add a persistent controllable blade though. It rather allowed Zac to unleash a torrent of destruction, hundreds of leaves, in every direction. Activated in the heart of an army it would cause untold bloodshed, but it could also be used to break out of a siege, like now.

Crackling sounds echoed out as Zac forcibly broke the shimmering restraints that had been left on his body. Meanwhile, the ring-wielding warrior was forced to back away from the onslaught of razor-sharp leaves. Still, he effortlessly avoided the avalanche of attacks, parrying the few which couldn't be dodged. But suddenly, through the storm, a vine hidden among the leaves flashed forward with extreme speed and seized Trapandar's ankle.

The Hegemon swore as one of the bladed wheels slammed down to cut it off, but another barbed vine shot straight toward his jugular at the same time. Trapandar's weapons could cut apart the vines in a swing or two, and he would quickly be able to get free. But the barbs were sharp enough to leave lethal wounds if left unattended, forcing Trapandar to target the one going in for the kill.

Thankfully, that small delay was all Zac needed.

He had broken or whittled down all the restraints by now, allowing him to catch up to his vines and Trapandar both. His axe drew a majestic upward arc as it slammed the second chakram out of the way before Trapandar could use it to free himself. The Hegemon was too powerful to be restrained by a vine attached to his leg, but it allowed Zac to stop his teleportation ability by invading him with his Dao.

Trapandar understood this conundrum perfectly well, and his efforts were targeted to remove this vine. The struggle over latched-on vine became a central aspect of the battle, while the two tried to find openings to land blows on each other. Trapandar used his restrictive abilities, while Zac relied on

technique and his vines, where Vivi's appendages were constantly forcing Traprandar to focus his attention elsewhere.

The techniques were similar to how Zac used the chains in his Inexorable Stance, but there was a difference in flavor. The chains restricted the enemy's options and movements by threatening damage, but less than ten percent of their moves actually clashed with the enemies by now. Instead, the chains constantly moved around them, putting the warriors under constant pressure.

The moment the enemy slipped up, the links would pounce, leaving festering wounds behind or sealing them long enough for Zac to go in for the kill.

The way Zac used Vivi's vines was more ferocious. The vines were constantly assaulting Traprandar. It wasn't a threat of damage if the enemy didn't take a step back or restrain themselves; Zac was doing everything in his power to make sure clashes took place. If the enemy backed away, the vines pursued. If the enemy countered, Zac aimed for maximum engagement to break open their defenses and whittle down the enemy. To make this possible, new vines were constantly growing out of the tube on his back to replace the ones that Traprandar ripped apart.

However, Traprandar was a late Hegemon who had survived innumerable struggles. He wasn't phased in the least by Zac's neverending offensive, and he slowly eked out enough of an advantage to let him activate a skill that conjured seven mirrors in the sky. Zac had seen this skill before, and he knew that he would have to watch out for deadly beams of light shooting out from these mobile turrets.

The stars above, the floating mirrors, the chakrams that performed their stellar transformations, and Traprandar's ability to constrain and whittle down. It formed a nigh-perfect cage, but Zac's goal had always been to force Traprandar to take the match seriously rather than to end things quickly. This was an opportunity that the creatures in the Wilderness couldn't provide.

Zac pushed his technique to the limit as he strove to keep the warrior in a pitched melee. The swirling storm of leaves was still filling the arena, actually providing a layer of protection in addition to being sharp enough to cut through steel. They flickered about in a seemingly random pattern, but Zac knew their movements weren't random.

They were instilled with the Fragment of Bodhi, and they created everchanging formations based on his Evolutionary Stance that both targeted the mirrors while also blocking the blasts they released. The scene was reminiscent of [Nature's Protection], the defensive skill that had gone into the fusion of [Nature's Edge].

Zac hadn't expected the skill to gain this ability at late mastery since he had essentially sacrificed the defensive skill in order to upgrade the otherwise un-upgradeable [Chop]. But it was definitely a welcome addition where it shored up the weak defenses of the class. Together with the added sturdiness stemming from [Adamance of Eoz], the leaves were extremely hard to damage, let alone destroy.

Besides, the skill had only reached late mastery so far. Zac couldn't wait to see what the System would add when he managed to evolve the skill to the peak. As long as [Empyrean Aegis] was as impressive as it sounded, the defenses on his human side might even match that of his Draugr form.

Traprandar, in turn, was constantly trying to push Zac off-balance by constantly showing new tricks and changing up the tempo. The bronze attendant hadn't taken his techniques to the Integration Stage, but

that didn't mean he was at a disadvantage in direct conflict. He still had millennia of experience and higher-stage Daos compared to Zac.

Besides, his abilities were easier to use while in a pitched battle. The air sizzled as Zac narrowly dodged another beam that ripped through the air, leaving a depression in space where his left leg was just a moment ago. Even with their impressive durability, the leaves were slowly being whittled down.

Zac guessed that the mirrors were a continuously running skill like his [Deathmark], while the storm of leaves was a single-summon-ability that Zac was unable to replenish. The cooldown was quite short before he could resummon another storm, but he would still be exposed to attacks for an extended duration if nothing changed.

A deep thud like the knell of a bronze bell echoed through the arena as Zac furiously punched one of the bladed rings with his free hand, pushing it and its wielder back for a moment. He felt the weight of the restrictive band tightening around him, but he ignored it and the burning gash that was opened up from another blast as he unleashed a series of swings so quick that his arm turned to a blur.

Almost twenty blades shot out in quick succession before Zac once more lunged at Traprandar, but the moment he was about to reach the man the Hegemon exploded, throwing Zac tens of meters away. Some minor burns covered his face and body, but he felt a wave of blinding light passing straight through his body to enter his mind.

It was actually a soul attack.

Luckily, Traprandar had severely underestimated his mental defenses, which would stand its own even against an elite mentalist by now. Zac still knew he was in a precarious situation, and he furiously swung his axe in an upward arc, cutting a beam of light apart before intercepting a downward swing of a bladed ring.

Zac was thrown back into the ground with a groan, his vines had already repositioned themselves, lifting him back to his feet as he desperately fought to regain his momentum. Unfortunately, a small error could have devastating consequences, and Traprandar had completely seized the advantage of his surprise skill. Thankfully, his gambit had destroyed most of the mirrors in the sky, drastically lessening the pressure from above.

Even with five of Traprandar's mirrors being destroyed, Zac found himself at a hopeless disadvantage. He tried everything he had learned over the past years, unleashing one ruthless and unpredictable swing after another while the vines kept an unrelenting tempo. But Traprandar was like an iron tower who refused to give up his control of the momentum.

It felt like the Hegemon was everywhere at once. Two wheels he used were in his hands one second, only to suddenly soar through the arena, taking unpredictable turns before striking at Zac out of nowhere. The starlight shone from above, and Zac saw that small crystals had started to grow across the floor. Sooner or later, they would become a problem as they started to refract light.

Even then, Zac didn't activate [Arcadian Crusade], even if it would give him the power to recapture the pace. He fought on in an out assault, taking three hits for every strike he managed to land on Traprandar. Unfortunately, the Hegemon's defensive abilities didn't only rely on his restrictive fighting style, but he also had the ability to form circular runes of light with only a thought.

They weren't too durable, but every time Zac hit one, it released a blinding flash and a shockwave that pushed back his weapon. By the time Zac gathered his strength again, Traprandar had already moved out of harm's way. One minute after another passed, and Zac was turning into a gory mess. He had a decent chunk of Cosmic Energy remaining at least, but that was mostly because he didn't get many opportunities to use it.

Traprandar was only sporting a few shallow wounds by this point, and he was still in prime fighting condition by the looks of it. He had used up a lot of Cosmic Energy to maintain this advantage though. His overbearing fighting style was effective, but it did rely on multiple skills to work. Tiring him out wasn't an option though.

First of all, it wasn't Zac's goal with this fight. Secondly, while Traprandar was restricted down to the same attribute pool when fighting with a normal citizen, he still had a Cultivator's Core. He probably had ten times the amount of Cosmic Energy as Zac even in his downgraded state. But Zac still fought on without as much as a thought of surrender. He could feel how he was getting closer, how the answers hid here in the midst of desperate struggle.

Unknowingly, Zac's perception started to change as he ferociously threw himself against Traprandar's techniques to break out from the siege. Each bleeding gash was a lesson, each blistering welt was a burst of inspiration. His swings no longer adhered to a fluid and ever-changing technique aimed at unrelenting offense. They gradually morphed into strikes from a primordial beast that fought for supremacy.

Every swing was a life, a death, and a reincarnation.

An endless cycle of rebirth Zac pushed forward. There was no such thing as defeat, there was only an endless series of new beginnings. His vines were no longer a supportive Armament aimed at forcing openings and pressure through constant harassment. They were his pack, nibbling at the flanks of their enemy. If they survived, they would feast. If they lost, they would die. Such was the law of the jungle. Such was the law of the Heavens.

The golden bands restraining his body shattered quicker and quicker, and the intricate cage of lines left in the wake of the flying chakrams were destroyed faster than they were created. How could light possibly hamper the endless pursuit of evolution when the nurturing rays of the sun were part of life? It was bound to be taken, extracted, and used for his own gain as Zac reinvented himself.

The beams of destruction descending from the sky no longer seemed threatening. Such was life. Heavenly calamities came and went, and what emerged from the ashes would be stronger than what came before. Even those who fell would only be gone for a moment. Through the cycle of Evolution, they would be reborn to fight again.

Forever.

Zac felt his aura soar as an intangible ripple spread out from his body, a ripple denoting that Man and Dao had become one.

"You too? It's not possible!" Traprandar roared as he redoubled his efforts, worry evident in his eyes.

Cracks appeared across the Hegemon's skin, allowing a golden sheen to escape through his body. His aura soared, most likely from having activated some sort of berserking skill. A new set of mirrors appeared in the sky, these ones covered in golden sigils that thrummed with power. However, they didn't point toward Zac, but rather each other as they formed a circle.

Zac woke up from his magical state, and a rush of elation filled him as he realized he had done it. This time, there was no sense of imperfection as he returned his Evolutionary Stance to its original glory. Or rather, a far superior version compared to the old. However, now was not the time to inspect his gains.

Traprandar was going all-out to protect his reputation and his points.

A set of white and golden fractals covered Zac's skin as he activated [Arcadian Crusade], almost mirroring the shining cracks now marring Traprandar's face. A ferocious momentum built up inside him, and his mind was awash with bloodlust. But Zac wouldn't start flailing his weapons like a madman just from the mental manipulations of a berserking skill any longer.

He had integrated the Dao itself into his Evolutionary Stance, which wasn't just something akin to learning a new skill. It was understanding of the Heavenly Truths and letting them permeate the core of his very being. Skills like [Arcadian Crusade] reduced the weak-willed into berserking madmen who only followed their instincts to fight, but those instincts had already been elevated into pure technique in Zac's case.

With an unprecedented surge of momentum, Zac pounced like a pack of wolves closing in on its prey. Traprandar was trying to fight back best as he could, but his berserking skill proved utterly insufficient. His defenses crumbled and his restraints broke as Traprandar found himself submerged in the sea of Zac's violence. A series of wounds to match Zac's own covered his body in an instant.

Yet Traprandar didn't give in, clearly preparing something since the energy in his body had been churning like crazy for a while. The light in the sky was growing stronger, as though a sun was being born in the center of the mirrors. Suddenly, reality inverted as the space between the mirrors became the mirror, while the mirrors became anchoring runes.

From the other side of the crystal pane, a terrifying entity gazed down upon Zac. It looked like an eye surrounded by a churning swirl of mysterious runes and golden hoops, almost reminiscent of a biblical seraph as comprehended by the mortal gaze. Zac had just turned the tide, but he was still beset by a sense of primal dread as he looked up at that creature.

There was no path but forward, and Zac continued to suppress Traprandar even as he felt something terrifying brewing above his head. Traprandar was trying to delay and entrap him, but he was finally forced to teleport away with a nasty wound that ran all the way from his shoulder down to his gut. If it had been just an inch deeper, the arrays of the arena would have kicked in and ended the match.

Still, managing to push the Hegemon into an unmitigated retreat was exactly what Zac needed at the moment. Eight thick streams of Mental Energy twinned into a sturdy rope before he infused them with four streams of Bodhi and four streams of Coffin. The summoned entity was already emerging from the mirror by that point, but two celestial domains rose to meet its descent.

Zac initially hadn't wanted to use [Rapturous Divide] in the arena, fearing it would fan the rumor mill seeing a fusion of life and death like that. But the thing in the sky put him under too much pressure, and

he saw no alternative but to go all out. There was [Arcadia's Judgement] as well, but he wouldn't be able to launch it in time without using Void Energy to fuel the skill, which wasn't something he could display in an arena battle like this.

The hymns of Arcadia clashed with the deafening silence of the Abyss. The unpassable chasm between the two formed, and it was just in time. Five massive halos had appeared behind the summoned creature, and they condensed into a terrifying beam aimed straight at Zac. The two forces clashed, and even the barriers that sealed the arena shuddered from the all-out attacks as Zac was pushed to his knees.

Space cried and twisted as the all-out attacks of two forces tried to consume each other, but Zac immediately got a sinking feeling and made his preparations. The creature was too powerful. Even with [Adamance of Eoz] and his robust infusion of a Dao Braid, the temple of Arcadia was fast crumbling under the pressure. The Abyssal chasm wasn't much better off, and it looked like it was collapsing unto itself.

The stalemate lasted for another two seconds, but Zac suddenly spat out a mouthful of blood as his attack failed, while the terrifying being still hovered in the sky. Its eye had lost its glimmer, seemingly unable to unleash another scorching ray like the one that took out his attack. But it still had over half of its golden hoops intact, and they were now falling toward Zac like a heavenly judgment.

However, they didn't get too far before space cracked again as a runic wooden hand emerged, holding an axe that exuded unquestionable might. The creature had already exerted all of its power, and it was effortlessly split in two before the axe continued its descent.

Toward a shocked Traprandar, who had collapsed on the other side of the arena while waiting for his ultimate attack to finish Zac off.

Zac was drenched in blood, his mind a bit woozy. But he still smiled even though the golden hoops filled with deadly power were falling much faster than the axe of his ultimate strike. A forest sprung up around him the next moment, and he melded into the tree just before thousands of shimmering lights ripped his surroundings to shreds. A moment later, a gong echoed out as a protective bubble enclosed him – just in time to block out a massive shockwave that rocked the whole arena.

He had won.