

The Fall 819

Chapter 819: Bargain Hunting

As the dust settled, Zac was greeted by a deafening silence even after the isolating array had been deactivated. Traprandar was arduously getting back to his feet as his right hand hung limply to the side. A new wound, this one almost cutting the arm clean off, had been added to the other ones – the result of [Arcadia's Judgement] finding its target.

Between Traprandar's wounds, the pressure from the huge hand, and Zac's omniscience through [Ancestral Woods], the Hegemon had been unable to dodge the attack. As usual, the Arena Array sprung to action the moment Traprandar's wounds had passed a critical level, and Zac's skill was dispersed before the Hegemon died.

Suddenly, a raucous laugh broke the silence, and Zac looked over to see Olgoth laughing so hard tears were streaming down his face.

"They got you. They got you!" he howled with glee. "My loss was worth it. Definitely worth it."

Traprandar scowled at the Corpselord before turning his fiery gaze at Zac, who could only return a wry smile as he ate a healing pill and activated [Surging Vitality]. Part of him felt bad about scamming these two Hegemons out of their Purchase Points, which meant they would be less prepared for the next relegation. But Zac had already made sure they weren't some sort of saints. They weren't like Pavina or Kaldor who helped others in this prison or anything.

Then again, it ultimately didn't matter.

This was how the multiverse worked, where people fought tooth and nail for resources. So many had already died as a direct result of his pursuit of power, so what was some robbing? Resources would only grow scarcer as he continued down this path, where every single C-grade treasure would be hotly contested. A B-grade treasure was enough to start a war that would shock empires to their core. Getting weak-hearted meant death, and the end of his aspirations.

Still, that didn't do much to alleviate the mixed emotions Zac felt as he walked down from the arena and accepted his Purchase Points. He had sworn that he wouldn't lose his mortal heart after descending the Havenfort Chasm, but it was getting harder and harder to live up to that promise as time passed.

Was his pang of remorse proof he still had a conscience, or was it just him trying to convince himself he was the same person as the one before the integration?

"Little Pocket? No, ah, Zac Piker, was it?" a hesitant voice emerged from the path leading out of the arena.

It was Yurul, the gladiator he met the first time coming here. They had met a few times since she had almost been a fixture in this place over the past decade as she was trying to find some sort of answer through these duels. However, this time her demeanor was a bit different from normal, and she looked at him with a queer gaze.

"I am entering seclusion," Zac smiled. "I might not be back for a while."

"Oh, alright," Yurul nodded, before the tension in her face smoothed out.

It looked like she had decided to not inquire about his real situation. Still, she took out a token from her Cosmos Sack, something she had never done before. “I have a twin sister on the outside. She was a young acolyte of the Everseal Tribunal of the Yr’Koloq Sector bordering the frontier. If you ever get out... If possible... Could you tell her what happened to me?”

“If I ever get the chance,” Zac nodded with a smile as he took the token, donning a hood as he left the arena.

His display of power along with the rumors of his unique situation would probably start a wave of discussion, something he had no interest in dealing with. He had never heard of the Everseal Tribunal or the Yr’Koloq Sector, but if he stumbled upon the place in the future he’d do Yurul the small favor of sending her sister the token since Yurul was the one who taught him the method to seize Purchase Points in this place.

But he didn’t want to get bogged down with too many Karmic Links, so hurriedly left for Samsara’s Edge before anyone else caught up with him. He had accomplished the most important milestone before the duel with Kaldor, where he had properly entered the Integration Realm. Zac already knew he would be able to pass the fourth band with the strength and techniques he had accumulated, but there was still eight months before the deadline.

Part of him wanted to go through the duel as soon as possible so he could finally return to Earth, but he knew that he had to be careful. Even with his current level, the Izh’Rak Reaver said Zac only had a 50% chance of survival. That was definitely too low for comfort when fighting against a battle-crazed Peak Monarch who supposedly could confirm his Dao any time he wanted.

Thankfully, there were some things he could still do to better those odds. The most obvious step was to elevate his two Dao Fragments to branches. Even if he couldn’t enjoy the attribute boost in this place, the breakthroughs would lend greater strengths to both his stances and to his attacks. Kaldor had promised to keep his comprehension at the stage of Peak Fragments, so gaining another two Dao Branches would become a big advantage.

However, he needed some time to consolidate his gains before that. And just as it happened, Zac had a few more ideas on how to make the most of his next months. So, Zac didn’t immediately head toward his teachers or his cultivation caves, but rather toward the Contribution Store. Now that he was flush with cash, it was time to make some purchases.

The reason he took the risk and bet his whole fortune against the two Hegemons was that he didn’t want to leave the Orom World without picking up at least one of the unique treasures this huge bastard had snatched up over the eons. And there were a lot of them that collected dust in the Contribution Stores.

These were all items that would cause a storm on the outside world because of their unique benefits, but their cost-to-benefit ratio was too inefficient for most people in the Orom World. Some benefits and powerups didn’t provide Contribution points, making people unwilling to stomach the high price tag. Others might provide benefits, but they were slow to materialize, making them a viable option only if you were already safe from the relegation.

An example of the latter was affinity-boosting treasures. They were extremely costly on the outside, especially those useable in the D-grade. But they were not as useful in the Orom World where you needed quick gains to survive the continuous relegation. So what if the benefits of higher affinities would slowly accumulate over a lifetime? In the Orom World, you needed to get stronger right now.

“Welcome, young master,” the store clerk nodded as Zac entered the store.

Only one other disk was occupied, with the Orom World having completely returned to its usual pace after the excitement of the new arrivals had abated. Zac scanned the list of items, and he breathed out in relief that all of the items he had his eyes on were still available. Three particular items piqued Zac’s interest more than the others.

The first option item was an item the registry called the [Hollow Core]. It was a semi-natural treasure reportedly formed from the core of a unique being and then reforged through some unknown natural calamity. It had been turned into an extremely sturdy container, perfect for building one’s Cultivator’s Core.

The [Hollow Core] exuded some sort of pressure that would forcibly contain rampant energies as you built up the core, allowing pretty much anyone with the prerequisite Dao Stages to form at least a medium-quality Cultivator’s Core. Even a cultivator could make use of it to improve their chances of success, and the stability it provided might allow a cultivator to push their core to the next tier.

However, it had one big drawback in this place; using the treasure to form a Cultivator’s Core would drastically lessen the Contribution Points gained from the breakthrough.

When inquiring why that was, Zac found that the restrictive array of the [Hollow Core] was so unique that the prison brand didn’t manage to access the inspiration and insights from within. Certainly, if the Orom really wanted, it could probably improve the brand to gain access. But why bother exerting that kind of effort for some random unique item?

With a price tag of 32,000 Contribution Points, few E-grade cultivators could afford it. The few who could afford it probably didn’t need it. They were most likely great talents who would be able to form high-quality Cultivator’s Cores, and the additional benefits the [Hollow Core] provided couldn’t cover the cost of both the treasure and the loss of points from their breakthrough.

Still, it could potentially be a great asset to Zac who didn’t have the benefits of cultivation manuals or natural affinities, and who wasn’t planning on breaking through inside the Orom World in either case. He could use all the advantages he could get to form something that could withstand his path.

The second treasure was a single seed of something called the Heavenrender Vine. It was an item that he had been suggested by Heda to replace Vivi when she eventually passed on. Zac had long since overcome the unsettled feeling of socializing with someone whose soul was in constant jeopardy of being consumed, and Zac had visited the Arborist regularly over the past twenty months.

Not only did she possess a wealth of knowledge regarding the Path of Life, but dueling against her thousands of plant species was an immense assistance in integrating the vines into his fighting style. After all, he only had [Armament Mastery] on his undead side, and he sometimes hit roadblocks in translating the lessons.

Heda never held back when sharing her knowledge. She had treated him with utmost sincerity since day one, in contrast to Ubo who mostly seemed to have invited Zac out of boredom, and then after that because of Zac's connection to Three Virtues. Zac wanted to reciprocate the treatment, so he had surreptitiously asked about infusing the old vine with Creation Energy to restore her condition or forcibly allow her to breakthrough.

Unfortunately, Heda said it was no use.

No matter if you talked about plants of cultivators, all were born with the shackles of mortality, including cultivators. Certainly, some were less restrained than others, but everyone had a natural limit to their accomplishments. Less than one in ten thousand E-grade cultivators possessed the prerequisites to step into Hegemony naturally, and even fewer succeeded.

There was a small window of opportunity where you could break these shackles, using a mixture of momentum and opportunity to subvert your destiny. But if you missed that chance, you were essentially locked in. Not only would your body resist the evolution, but even the very core of your being resisted going any further.

Vivi had lived a long life even for a Spirit Plant, and to forcibly prolong her life would bring more suffering than happiness, and neither Zac nor Heda wanted that. This was something all powerhouses of the Multiverse had to come to terms with sooner or later. There was only so much you could do even with all your strength and fortune. Not even Autarchs could subvert the basic law of aging.

That was why elders seldom got attached to the younger generations of their clans. Thousands of generations would rise and fall during their lifetime, and getting too invested would only lead to heartbreak, sometimes even Heart Demons hampering their own pursuit of the Dao.

Besides, Zac figured that his Creation Energy was more likely to drain what little lifespan the vine had remaining than recoup it. While Heda clearly had a special attachment to this vine, even she said that Zac was better off focusing on a successor. To spend a century or two on purifying a high-potential seed with his Dao.

The Heavenrender Vine was a terrifying plant species that was almost unstoppable when it had grown. Its name came from the fact that it was extremely aggressive, and that it seemingly had no limits on how big it could grow. Some vines had conquered whole planets, forming vast single-organism forests on its surface where all living things were prey.

The item in the store was classified as a Supreme Quality D-grade item, but it only cost 43,000 Contribution Points. The reason was simple; it didn't really serve any purpose inside the Orom World. Nurturing and raising a Heavenrender Vine could bankrupt a Hegemon, and doing so wouldn't award any Contribution Points.

In fact, the listing specifically said that Heavenrender Vines were a banned species that you weren't allowed to grow in the Orom World. You were only allowed to buy the seed for study. For Zac, it could become a great asset down the road, and the Vine would naturally enter the C-grade as long as Zac could afford to nurture it.

Heda even said there were B-grade vines out in the Multiverse, but anything beyond early C-grade would require unique fortuitous encounters.

The biggest risk with this purchase was that there was no guarantee he'd always use vines as he had over the past years. He had discussed his use of Armaments at length with Pavina over the past years, and Zac had realized that his attitude to his skills and tools was a bit rigid.

"Nothing is constant," the Revenant had said one day when Zac voiced his concerns. "Things change as the seasons pass. Not everything needs to be carried to the end. Being sentimental can be useful when braving the eons of lonesome struggle that is the road of cultivation. It reminds you why you are fighting, why you refuse to give in.

"But do not let the things you carry become things that chain you down. It is a given that you will not use all the skills you acquire for all eternity. That does not mean they are useless now or that it is a waste of time learning them. They helped you during a period of your life, allowing you to reach the next stage of your path.

"One day you might realize that the chains are no longer needed for you to accomplish your goals. Will you still carry them because of a decision you made as a child?"

It was a worthwhile reminder. Zac had unintentionally reached a point where his Spirit Tools had become his companions and where he was absolutely unwilling to give them up. He hadn't even considered swapping out [Verun's Bite] to some axe with greater potential. Zac would rather search for the fortuitous encounters required for Verun to accompany him to the end.

There wasn't anything wrong with this mindset. The longer you nurtured a weapon, the more in tune with you and your path the weapon would become. Someone who constantly swapped out their weapons would be hard-pressed to reach that kind of natural cooperation as Zac had with his axe. But while this was true for his axe, it didn't need to be the same with everything else.

Just like Pavina said; if the vines didn't work out, he could always stop using them. Pavina could accomplish more with a single finger than he could with all the tools in his repertoire. He didn't need to be worried that he wouldn't be able to display all the facets of his stances with his axe alone in the future.

Besides, he still hadn't forgotten his longstanding promise to Alea. The goal was still to resurrect her, which carried a decent risk of destroying [Love's Bond]. Even if the weapon survived, Zac knew he wouldn't have the same attachment to it afterward.

But even if he got the Heavenrender Vine and it turned out to be superfluous in the future, he could still have great use for it. As long as he managed to elevate it to middle C-grade, it would become an existence that few in Zecia would dare mess with. It had the potential to become Earth's ultimate guardian in case Zac needed to leave home for prolonged durations when searching for his sister.

Finally, there was a treasure called the [Stone of Celestial Void]. From the looks of it, it was some sort of unique treasure born in the Void itself. It contained almost an incomprehensible amount of energy, enough to outright kill over a hundred Hegemons. Furthermore, it was said to hold some mysterious insights that were impossible to identify.

This was something that he was eyeing for his bloodline. The amount of energy his Void Emperor-bloodline had required to reach E-grade was almost unreal. Considering the biggest divide between E-

and D-grades was the immense energy reserves of Hegemons, Zac didn't even dare to think of how many resources it would cost to push his bloodline to the next stage.

The [Stone of Celestial Void] had the potential to be the spark that allowed him to ignite his bloodline and begin the breakthrough, like when he somehow siphoned all the valuables in the depths of the Twilight Chasm.

The stone cost 56,000 Purchase Points, which was slightly above the 49,699 he currently possessed between winning the duel and getting almost 9,000 contribution points for reaching the Integration Stage. But as long as he formed his next two branches, he would most likely be able to afford it.

Apart from that, there were dozens of items of similar quality. While those didn't seem as useful for his own cultivation, some were definitely more valuable on the outside. There was always the option of taking the most valuable item and exchanging it for something even better than these three things on the outside.

Zac stood frozen in hesitation for almost twenty minutes, but he eventually emerged completely broke from the store, now with a small wooden band on his finger. Inside, a small seed hovered above a vast field of spiritual soil, the space spanning a couple of square miles. The Contribution Store was pretty generous, throwing in a miniature realm where he could nurture plants.

He had ultimately chosen the seed since it felt like the Heavenrender Vine was the option with the best odds of paying great dividends.

The [Hollow Core] seemed pretty amazing, but he wasn't certain it would work together with his Specialty Core that already formed a shell around the spot where his future Cultivator's Core would be. Besides, he had the Perennial Vastness Token. He had asked around, and while he couldn't find anyone who had been there, he had managed to pick up a few rumors.

From what he could gather, the method used in the Perennial Vastness Realm was unique, and it mainly relied on items gathered inside that unique realm. He had even sacrificed a Spatial Ring to confirm this by visiting Three Virtues. While the details were unclear, it was a trial and an opportunity wrapped into one, and the better you performed the better your core would become.

Zac couldn't be certain, but there was a decent chance of outside tools like the [Hollow Core] would prove useless, or at least inferior to native alternatives, in that place. The re-sell value of the [Hollow Core] was probably the lowest out of all the items as well, as it wasn't that impressive to guarantee an ascent into D-grade. Those stuck at the bottleneck would surely pay anything for such an item, but E-grade cultivators didn't have nearly enough money.

As for the use of [Stone of Celestial Void], it was just too big a risk. The Contribution Shop refused to take it out for him to inspect, so he couldn't confirm it was useful for his bloodline. Besides, it was simply too expensive, and choosing the stone wouldn't allow him to complete the next part of his plan.

Forming Dao Branches meant a powerup, but it also meant something else in his case – he was about to get zapped Tribulation Lightning. Twice. While it was deadly, it was also an opportunity on its own. Last time, it had purified his body, ridding him of impurities, some of them so stubborn that [Purity of the Void] couldn't get the job done. After these tribulations and the one when reaching D-grade, it might be centuries before he was presented with this opportunity again.

It was time to gunk up his body.