

The Fall 421

Chapter 421: True Strike

Zac was about to make up some story about why he was here, but he stopped himself as he realized the old demon was asking a rhetorical question.

"Your heart and mind are in conflict, and you do not trust one over the other," the demon said. "This is something a seasoned warrior can exploit."

Zac understood all too well what the demon was talking about, and it felt a bit embarrassing as this was exactly what he had chided Emily for doing back during their sparring sessions. He had been talking big about decisiveness, but yet he found himself crippled by indecision during the battle with this old demon.

"So what should I do?" Zac said, ignoring the wound on his side. It was nothing too serious that wouldn't heal up with a normal healing pill.

"A burning heart will stop a mind from being frozen with indecision. A calculative mind will help you distinguish between decisiveness and foolishness. But in my opinion, one must be the leader and the other follower. You might be able to find true balance in the future, but it is much too early. Perhaps when you can walk the sky like the celestials in legend."

"A leader and a follower?" Zac muttered.

"Are you a warrior of instinct, or a warrior of expertise?" the old man asked.

Zac first wanted to say expertise, but he stopped himself as he knew that wasn't the truth. He wasn't some adept weapon master who followed some great set of techniques, and he hadn't trained with a weapon since young like most cultivators in the multiverse.

He was more like a beast, fighting based on instinct and his superior constitution.

"It seems you understand," the old man smiled. "Again."

Zac was already moving the moment the demon disappeared, and he swung toward his right without thought or hesitation. A deep thud echoed across the summit as the demon appeared, his arm glowing with a golden sheen as he blocked Zac's punch.

"Good!" the demon laughed. "What's the use of calculating and thinking when you're an idiot?"

Zac's face scrunched up, but he had no time to refute the words as the old man launched another barrage of punches, kicks, and attempts to grapple him to the ground. He no longer tried to think or anticipate what the old man did, he only moved the way his instincts indicated him to move.

He was still somewhat of a punching bag, but it wasn't one-sided any longer. The old man had been a martial artist for hundreds of years, and trying to match him in skill had only made him weaker than he actually was. Now that he relied on instincts, he at least managed to get in a few good punches as well.

The old man suddenly jumped backward, looking a bit worse for the wear from the high-paced battle.

“Good!” the said while breathing a bit heavily. “You are passable. A rough gem that can be polished through thousands of battles. See if you can understand the essence of my skill, [True Strike]. If you can learn it you will even be able to use it with that axe of yours. Watch how I attack your left side.”

Zac breathed in relief that he had passed the test to at least get a chance of learning the skill. The ancient demon had already helped him out by pointing out his weakness, so he would feel a bit bad about defeating him just to pass the floor.

So Zac immediately got ready to defend while trying to understand the truth behind [True Strike]. He kept his eyes wide open as the old demon’s left hand essentially turned into a golden spear as he slowly walked toward him. It was the same skill as the one the demon used before when he confused Zac's senses.

The demon’s eyes were trained at a spot just beneath Zac’s ribcage on his left side, but Zac could oddly enough feel another spot on his body heat up. Zac tensed up as confusion filled his mind once again. His instincts told him that the demon would strike his right side, but he was obviously aiming for the left side.

At last minute he decided to follow his instincts to protect his right side, but he was shocked to see that the demon had attacked the spot he had looked at since the start.

“What the hell?” Zac muttered with confusion.

“Good instincts!” the demon laughed. “[True Strike] is a mental attack powered by battle intent. It confuses the instincts of the opponent, allowing you to forcibly create an opening. It is the fruition of 580 years of delving into the psyche of battle, and my grandest accomplishment. See if you can understand it now!”

A powerful golden aura congealed around the demon as he once again targeted the same left spot as before. Zac's instincts were still telling him that the demon was targeting another spot, this time his right leg. Zac quickly tried to take control of the conflicting emotions, but his brows suddenly frowned.

His left hand moved up to block his throat with shocking speed while his whole body got infused with Fragment of the Coffin. [Verun’s Bite] appeared in his right arm at the same time, and it swung down in a fierce overhead arc.

The old demon’s face scrunched up in anger when his sneak attack aimed at Zac’s throat failed, and he quickly jumped back as the razor-sharp claws he had suddenly grown retracted into his hand. The facade of a righteous old warrior was gone, and his ice-cold eyes were those of a ruthless killer.

After having spent so much time with Ogras, would Zac simply put down his guard due to a smiling face? The fact that the old demon had been willing to teach him from the beginning was suspicious in and of itself. There was no guarantee that the floor guardian would be a willing teacher just because the quest told him to learn a skill.

Besides, even if he couldn’t trust the instincts due to the demon's skill he could still trust the Danger Sense from having over 250 effective Luck. Such a cheat-like amount of Luck was pretty much the perfect counter of almost any illusionary skill like the one the Demon had just tried to use, and it screamed in no uncertain terms that a deadly attack was aimed at his throat.

“So you knew,” the ancient demon snorted. “That’s a shame.”

The old man’s aura condensed the next moment, changing from vast but somewhat weak into something sharper and more sinister. That wasn’t all, his bent back started to straighten out while his features smoothed out as well. From looking like a decrepit old man with one foot in the grave he had transformed into a man that might be past his prime, but still full of vigor.

Zac had to say he was pretty impressed by the demon’s plan. Had he understood that Zac was a tough enemy from the start, and the whole charade with the demon teaching him his skill was simply an act to not only disarm his enemy but create an opening to kill him in one swift strike. Ogras would no doubt find a kindred spirit in the old demon if he encountered the same trial in his climb.

However, the subterfuge didn’t mean that what he had said was false. There was truth to the teachings he shared, and Zac felt he had gained some insight into the proper mentality of a warrior. One of his weaknesses truly was that he lacked guidance from experienced warriors, which made his understanding of battle techniques somewhat shallow.

Alyn and Ogras were both knowledgeable about various topics, but at the end of the day they were just juniors like himself. Yrial no doubt had a great understanding of these kinds of topics, but the time Zac could spend with his master was extremely limited.

“You’ve helped me understand a few things better,” Zac said as he ate one of his regular healing pills. “Hand over the Skill Crystal for [True Strike] and I’ll be on my way.”

The reason for Zac believing there to be a crystal was simple. The man never had any intention actually of teaching anyone his skill, so there must be another way for him to complete the quest. The most obvious solution was that he possessed a skill crystal.

“If I kill you like the others, what good is the crystal to you? If you manage to kill me, why should I share my knowledge?” the demon laughed. “I’ll take my insights with me to the grave, or bring them with me to the peak of cultivation.”

“... Fine,” Zac sighed as Cosmic Energy Flooded the fractal on his forearm. “No matter what, you did teach me some of your knowledge, so I will fight you with all I have.”

The wooden hand broke out of the air the next moment and it rose to the sky above the demon, immediately radiating an intractable power. It quickly formed the array as usual, and it covered the whole summit as it glowed with the emerald luster of nature.

“A hand?” the demon laughed as he saw [Nature’s Punishment] hovering above him. “That is just perfect.”

A red and golden brilliance rose to the sky as a clawed hand congealed above the demon. It was almost twice the size of Zac’s wooden hand, and it emitted an extremely acrid stench of blood. How many had that hand killed to gain such a sinister sanguine aura?

The large claw launched a swipe toward the emerald array, and four rivers of blood rose up to destroy Zac’s strike. But the array only wobbled a bit from the demon’s all-out strike, and a mountain tip started to emerge soon enough. A massive pressure started to spread across the summit, and the demon once again turned hunched-over from having to withstand the tremendous force.

A ruthless gleam emerged in his eyes as he gave up on destroying the descending mountain, instead opting to strike at Zac with the sanguine hand. But Zac was no longer playing along, and his full aura with its dense killing intent was released like a shockwave.

A massive fractal edge also appeared on his axe, emitting the undeniable power of a Dao Fragment. One swing was all it took to completely destroy the hand in the sky, leaving the erudite master completely exposed to the mountain above.

The demon obviously realized that he was outmatched, and he tried to find a method to flee. But [Nature's Punishment] was almost as effective a cage as [Profane Seal] by this point, and the pressure had almost completely locked down the demon's movement.

"Wait, I'll teach you!" the demon said, some fear finally evident on his face.

"Too late," Zac sighed as one peak slammed into another, causing a shockwave that even pushed away the clouds in the area.

The whole mountain shuddered as Zac witnessed the massive destruction from the distance. He had been forced to retreat to the very edge of the summit, but he had still been forced to dig his legs into the ground to not be thrown down to the foot of the mountain.

A surge of Cosmic Energy proved that his enemy was dead, and Zac quickly instructed the hand to lift the mountain again and place it to the side. The hand dissipated after letting the peak rest against a spot with a pretty low incline. Zac thought the scene would create an interesting mystery for any mortal geologist who passed by in the future. If this world was even real, that is.

The whole summit had been completely transformed by the all-out attack. The corpse erudite master was still somewhat whole in the bottom of the crater, but he was still as dead as can be. The pond was also utterly destroyed, and the water had seeped into cracks in the mountain.

The floor guardian had been dealt with, and Zac spotted the teleportation array not far in the distance. He did however not immediately head into it, and instead jumped down into the large hole. The skill was real if the System made it a quest to learn it, and he wasn't ready to give it up just yet.

An offensive mental skill that was based on battle intent rather than wisdom or intelligence sounded like a great addition to his current repertoire, and he immediately rushed over to the corpse. But no matter how many times he went through the demon's body he couldn't find a Spatial Tool.

Zac swore in annoyance, but he wasn't overly surprised. The demon had seemed pretty confident that Zac wouldn't learn the skill if he died, so it would be odd if he could loot it so easily from his body. However, Zac did have an interesting discovery as he looked around in the pit.

There was light coming from within one of the cracks leading into the heart of the mountain.