

The Fall 429

Chapter 429: Reciprocity

The fact that the teleporter had appeared was a relief since that meant that he had passed the trial. The System had attached a hidden requirement to the quest where he not only needed to stand victorious in the Dao Discourse, but also survive the aftermath.

The moment he noticed and dispelled the threat of being possessed he had conquered the 6th floor and could move on to reap his rewards. But he wasn't ready to let bygones be bygones, and a wave of smoldering anger burned in his chest. If he shrugged off the attempt on his life he would no doubt have this nagging feeling for the rest of his life, a seed of karma that was impossible to resolve.

Part of him just wanted to go on a mindless slaughter, dragging up the whole clan by the roots while leveling half the forest to the ground. But Zac knew that was just the Splinter urging him on. It seemed like the invasion of his mind hadn't just agitated Zac, but also the Splinter itself. Maybe it didn't like the competition.

He knew he couldn't do so though. Not only was it unconscionable, but would also open a can of worms. Who knew what would happen if he started rampaging? Perhaps there were some hidden guardians of the forest keeping watch. Besides, cheating to protect their own resources wasn't really that big a deal, and the Enlightened Three didn't deserve death for their actions.

But the mind invasion was essentially an attempt on his life, and he had no compunctions with exacting at least some sort of revenge. His aura exploded in an instant, causing cascading waves to splash all around him as his massive Dao Field drowned out the primordial energies of the tree stump. The isolation arrays cracked in an instant, exposing the five pools.

Zac didn't waste a second and leaped toward the closest pool that housed one of the three young dryads, but the man had obviously noticed the disturbance already and prepared himself. Dozens of razor-sharp roots shot toward from within the pool before the dryad's head even breached the surface.

But the Enlightened Three weren't the floor guardians. They were simply three peak F-Grade warriors with unusually high accomplishments in the Dao, who also possessed the ability to fuse their spiritual energies together. They had been a threat to Zac before he found his path, but that threat only existed within the confines of the duel.

This was a true battlefield.

A massive fractal edge infused with the Fragment of the Axe tore the roots into shreds even if they were infused with a Peak Dao seed themselves. All five winners had risen out of their pools by this point, most of them staring at Zac with shock. The only exception was the wandering cultivator who gazed around with a glassy-eyed demeanor, which only strengthened Zac's conviction.

A storm of leaves reminiscent of his own [Nature's Barrier] started to swirl around the dryad as he looked at Zac with horror, but a swing infused with the Fragment of the Coffin turned them into rotten scraps as Zac barged his way through. His free hand shot forward to grab the shocked dryad by his neck, yanking him up into the air with a tug.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING!" a scream echoed across the area, and a dozen green blades of grass shot toward Zac with such power that the air around them exploded.

The blades contained enough momentum to pierce through steel, and they seemed to be infused by a Dao Fragment as well. Zac scrambled out of the way, thankful he had grabbed one of the youths in time. The Perenne Matriarch's power had somewhat superseded his expectations, but she had obviously only aimed for spots on his body far from her grandchild.

Things weren't to the point that Zac felt any fear though, and one tree after another appeared around the area and even on top of the stump as Zac activated [Hatchetman's Spirit]. The improved vision brought from the skill immediately exposed the Perenne Matriarch hiding not far away within an array. She sat together with two loose cultivators, and between them was an array with an odd plant placed on it, recently ripped from the ground judging by the soil stuck to its roots.

The blades of grass that had attacked Zac was her hair extending from within the array, and more and more stalks flew out from her head to join the battle. The blades of grass were quick, but Zac was almost impossible to catch now that he had summoned his own forest. He even felt that the effect from the skill had been boosted due to the Pool of Tranquility, and he had completely merged with the forest at this point.

The Matriarch got more and more frenzied though, and the two guardians also started moving toward him. The air even shuddered above the matriarch as a massive head made from tens of thousand blades of grass appeared. A storm of leaves started to shoot toward him as it opened its mouth, and even Zac felt some pressure from the power it contained.

But Zac had one more ace up his sleeve, and he suddenly moved his captive in front of him, aiming to use the dryad as a shield against the leaves.

"You!" the Matriarch screamed in rage as she quickly stopped the massive avatar above her. "You outsiders are all the same!"

Zac ignored the comment as he flashed forward once more, this time targeting the Elyss, the dryad he had knocked unconscious during the Dao Discourse. She had jumped down from the stump just like the others, but she was clearly unaccustomed to life and death battles since she still stood way too close.

The moment she saw Zac rapidly approaching with [Loamwalker] she realized her mistake. She didn't even try to put up a fight as she activated an escape skill while erecting a line of defenses. But Zac was in full rampage mode by this point and the dryad's restrictive vines were destroyed in an instant as he appeared before her.

A well-aimed kick shot the girl into the side of the trunk with a loud thud, but the ancient wood didn't even lose a splinter. It was rather the dryad who was hurt and fell down on the ground with a groan. She tried to get back to her feet, but Zac was already upon her again as he swung [Verun's Bite] to rip apart the stalks of grass that had aimed to save her.

"Stay down," Zac growled as he slammed [Verun's Bite] into the stump next to her while still holding onto the other dryad in a tight grip.

A massive shudder ran through the stump out as Zac's axe bit into the wood, and the primordial energies surged for a second before they calmed down again.

"The ancestor!" Elyss cried in dismay, but she still didn't dare to move a single finger.

"One more move and I'll crack his neck and cut the girl in two," Zac said with a ruthless glimmer as he grabbed the second dryad and jumped on top of the stump again.

"You've hidden your power well," the elder dryad said as she joined him on top of the ancient stump. "Are you not afraid the heavens will turn against you for returning our hospitality with such enmity?"

"Hospitality?" Zac snorted as he ripped verun out of the tree and stood up straight. "I didn't care that these three cheated during the discourse, but since you wanted to take control of my mind I'll have to act."

"We would never do something like that!" the male dryad exclaimed with fury, indignation apparent on his face. "We're not an unorthodox force! You're just here to cause trouble! Are you working for the invaders?!"

Things such as mind control and turning cultivators were considered as unorthodox path as it clearly went outside what the Apostate of Order had envisioned when he set up the various contracts of the System. Zac personally felt it was a pretty weird distinction to make since so many forces allowed slavery, but it had something to do with the will of the System.

Zac ignored the young dryad, though he was pretty surprised to see that he seemed genuinely repulsed by the idea. He instead turned to the young elf who was watching the proceedings perched atop a tree far in the distance.

"Could you take that guy back to the party? Perhaps his mind can still be salvaged," Zac said as he nodded at the wandering cultivator who had fallen down from the stump due to the shockwaves of battle.

"It looks like I wasn't really fated with the Pool of Tranquility. No matter, most of the benefit comes from the initial cleansing," the elf said with a sardonic shrug.

But he still didn't move, instead opted to turn his eyes to the Perenne Matriarch who tried to kill Zac with her glare.

"Go," she simply said without her eyes leaving Zac's.

The elf bowed and prepared to leave, but he first ran forward and grabbed the shoulder of the wandering cultivator after a brief hesitation. The next moment he disappeared in a puff of leaves that scattered all around before dissipating.

"What do you want?" the Perenne Matriarch said.

"I want this pond," Zac said. "It's a small price for trying to possess me."

"Impossible," the old dryad said without hesitation. "It's not possible even if I wanted to. It's a natural formation created by the ancestor of the forest and thousands of years of accumulation. The dew will turn useless if you bring it away."

"Then release the people you've captured," Zac said after mulling it over.

"It's also impossible. The seed has been planted, the effect is irreversible. They will be guarding the forest until they die," the old dryad said with a staid expression.

"Grandma! You didn't!" Elyss exclaimed with horror.

"Every day new outsiders enter the forest to partake in its riches. But do they pay nature back for providing them with wealth and power? No. They return to their cities on the outside and use their newfound strength to attack us, to join the invaders in their assault. Their greed is endless, their hunger insatiable.

"So what if I control them? These people would be nothing without the forest, so the least they can do is stay behind and defend it," the Matriarch said with fury in her eyes, the words turning louder and louder as she spoke.

"Grandma..." Elyss said from the ground, her eyes wide with shock.

The other dryad looked shocked as well, and it was all too apparent they hadn't been aware of their grandmother's actions. Zac sighed when he heard her words, a wave of exhaustion sweeping through his body. He couldn't condone her actions, but he could understand her motivations. How far would he go to save the people of Earth? Of Port Atwood?

But that still didn't change things, and Zac threw [Verun's Bite] into the closest pool as he took out his spare axe, a High E-Grade battleaxe. Verun keened in delight as it entered the pond, and the whole stump started to shake the next moment as the energies in the area ran amok.

"What are you doing?!" the matriarch exclaimed, her killing intent rising once more.

"My weapon could benefit from the dew, so he'll drink a bit since I can't take the pond with me," Zac explained.

Verun was like a black hole as it absorbed the dew, and Zac had already witnessed its seemingly endless thirst from having drained hundreds of beasts of their blood. The stump kept shaking as the water levels of the six ponds kept decreasing, until just about half remained. Only then did Verun stop, seemingly satisfied with its haul.

"Don't move," Zac reminded the matriarch as he jumped down.

"So, will you release my grandchild now?" she spat when Zac emerged.

"I need to do one more thing. Stay here. You should know what I'll do if you're not here when I return. I have the eggs, but I still want the hen," Zac reminded as he flashed away once more.

He couldn't take the dew, and he couldn't save those poor souls. But there was one more item that had sparked Zac's interest, and he quickly moved through the forest toward the arena. Zac used his movement skill the whole way back, and he appeared on top of the [Dao Discourse Array] in less than a minute.

A few quick swings were all it took to separate the platform from the massive roots that had dragged it above ground, but Zac frowned in annoyance when he wasn't able to put it inside his Cosmos Sack.

"This thing can't be carried away, young man," an aged voice said, prompting Zac to turn around.

It was a kind-looking old elf who was accompanied by the same youth who had just left the Pool of Tranquility.

"If it could be stashed away in a Pouch of Holding, Little Glamira wouldn't have been forced to hide it below ground all this time," the old man said with a smile. "The child my grandson brought will be fine, and I guarantee his safe return in front of all these people. In return, could you leave this array intact? The Perenne Family are not the only ones benefitting from it."

Zac slowly nodded, though not without some unwillingness. The [Dao Discourse Array] had been his best bet at studying the mysterious Bronze Dao he had somehow conjured. But not even he could carry a 30-meter wide pillar around on his back, so he could only give up on it. He instead turned toward Thelim who looked at the proceedings with confusion written all over his face.

"I don't know if you or even this world is real, but I hope I'll be able to see you again. This treasure might be of use to you," Zac said as he threw the elf a wooden box.

Thelim curiously opened it to see an eggwhite leaf that radiated an intense amount of life-attuned force.

"This!" Thelim exclaimed as he hurriedly closed the box as to not let the aura leak. "This is too precious, I cannot accept it!"

The leaf was a treasure that Zac snatched on the fifth floor. He still had no idea what it was, but it contained almost as much energies as the Fruit of Ascension. Zac didn't dare to eat it though since the leaf didn't cause any cravings in his body like most beneficial treasures did, and he couldn't figure out any other uses for it either.

It was only collecting dust in his Spatial Ring and would probably disappear when he left the tower anyways, so he chose to gift it to Thelim instead to reciprocate his goodwill.

"If you don't want it, then throw it away," Zac smiled.

He threw one last look at the [Dao Discourse Array] before he left with a shake of his head. Some things weren't fated. He soon arrived back at the stump, and finally released the poor dryad who had been dragged back and forth like a ragdoll for the past minutes.

He had nothing to say to the four dryads who gazed at him as though he was a walking calamity as he stepped onto the teleporter, leaving the forest behind.