

The Fall 440

Chapter 440: Fractured

Zac rapidly spun around to find himself face to face with an angelic girl who smiled in his direction. She had appeared out of nowhere, and Zac frowned as he swung his axe toward her neck without hesitation. His Danger Sense was quiet but his instincts screamed of danger, and Zac infused his body with the Fragment of the Coffin while the spiritual forest reappeared around him mid-swing.

But she only looked on with a smile, her eyes trained at his.

There was finally a response of danger in his mind, but it was though it was muffled, subdued to the point that he could barely feel it. That only made Zac even more certain that the girl was a real threat, and Zac strained for his swing to move even faster.

However, he suddenly noticed something was wrong. He felt as though he was moving extremely quickly, but his axe wasn't getting any closer to his target. Terror started to well up in his heart and he tried to flee, but it was futile as the whole world was suddenly gone, replaced with two enormous eyes, both of them only containing a blue vertical fracture that contained endless power.

Every fiber in Zac's body screamed for him to look away, but his body didn't listen to his commands as the eyes consumed his everything. A snap could be felt inside his mind as [Mental Fortress] crumbled like rotten wood, and then an all-consuming pain wracked his mind.

His very being was being eroded, and Zac knew he stood on the precipice of death. This wasn't a death his Specialty core could circumvent, as this was brought on by his soul crumbling, his mental force fracturing and falling apart.

He tried to move his hands toward the token attached to his side, as it wasn't worth dying just to get a better title. But any sense of his body was long gone, and his vision swam as he fell down on the ground. His mind was turning blurry, but he felt some relief when he sensed a small vibration from the token by his side.

A shocking burst of ferocity suddenly burst forward, ripping the two enormous eyes into shreds.

Boundless destruction rampaged across his mind, startling Zac's blurred consciousness awake again. It was the [Splinter of Oblivion] that had been freed from its cage and lashed out in fury. Dark and extremely potent energies ravaged across his mind. His soul was quickly becoming tainted, but the splinter at least seemed to temporarily hold his crumbling soul together.

Zac once again regained a semblance of control of his body, and he saw the mentalist standing just a meter away from him. She didn't move an inch, but rather stood in place as she violently convulsed. Her sapphire eyes were replaced by two ravaged sockets from where black blood poured down like waterfalls, staining her dress before it pooled at her feet.

Was the Splinter of Oblivion the cause of this? Was that the reason she still hadn't been teleported out? The backlash she had received seemed to have been just as serious as his own, and it seemed like a coinflip who would succumb to their mental wounds first.

It was an opportunity for him to escape from the Tower, but Zac was dismayed to find that his arm wouldn't move toward the token. The duplicity core had considered him on the verge of dying, and the slower automatic process of changing form had begun as miasma started to spread through his body. Worse yet, the Splinter's awakening seemed to have canceled the automatic transfer out of here and he was now stuck in place.

Zac would normally still be able to move in this state even if he was severely weakened, but with the shock to his soul he had turned completely immobile. He could only helplessly lie on the ground, praying that the Splinter would be able to keep his mind intact long enough for him to change form and do something about it.

He couldn't help but curse his bad luck being targeted by a mentalist, one of the rarest class types. Did he project the image of being a rube or something? First he was targeted by the neighbor, then this scary girl. Did she perhaps think he was an easy target since he was an axe wielder, a class choice that famously favored by meatheads?

If that was her reasoning, she was unfortunately spot-on. Zac was somewhat confident he'd survive at least one attack of that insanely powerful fire mage, but his mental defenses were completely inadequate to counter the strike of a mental user who was strong enough to reach the peak of the 7th floor.

Worse suddenly turned to worst as a massive lance of darkness pierced the chest of the mentalist, instantly killing her by the looks of it. It was some sort of masked assassin wielding a meter-long spike who had appeared out of nowhere, immediately reaping her life.

He had probably noticed that she was barely hanging on and realized it was an opportunity to reap some easy points. Worse yet, after he had killed the mentalist he turned his attentions toward Zac, who was still lying impotently on the ground. Perhaps he thought that Zac was faking it or simply immobilized since he hadn't been teleported out yet.

It looked like his avenger would immediately turn into his killer.

A blazing pain of getting his innards shredded joined the agony of having his soul tortured as the black pike stabbed into his chest. A burst of power ripped apart his left lung, and it took everything in his power to not even blink from the attack.

He was still completely immobile, and his only chance of survival was for the man to think he stabbed a corpse as death-attuned energies already spread through his body. However, he suddenly caught a lucky break as the assassin flashed away the next second, narrowly avoiding a massive arrow that caused cracks around its trajectory.

One of the spatial cracks swiped Zac's side, and he could only bear having yet another grisly wound opening on his already lacerated body.

A few seconds passed and Zac realized he had somehow made it. The mentalist was dead, the assassin occupied elsewhere, and the rest of the cultivators had no time to worry about a corpse lying on the ground.

Zac couldn't help but feel he was a bit lucky even though both his soul and body were wounded beyond their limits. His terrifying Endurance and death-attuned energy had allowed him to narrowly escape death, and giving him a small opportunity to survive.

Another relief was that the splinter was quickly being pushed back into its cage by the miasmic fractals, but Zac felt some helplessness when he noticed that yet another one of the fractals had been destroyed. That was two fractals gone from his visit to the Base Town, and he didn't know how many of them were required for the cage to maintain its efficacy.

There was also the issue of the large amounts of unfiltered energies the splinter had left all over his fractured soul. He had no idea what the long-term effect of such pollution would be.

However, that problem was nothing compared to the fact that his soul was once again falling apart now that it didn't have the splinter to keep the pieces together. He did have a solution, but it was just that the price was one he really didn't want to pay. His heart was full of reluctance, but he knew he didn't have a choice. His body would slowly mend, but his soul was another matter.

He arduously managed to move his hand toward his mouth, praying that no one was watching the supposed corpses. When it was finally right in front of his mouth a small intricate box appeared from his Spatial Ring.

The [Prajñā Cherry] was the only thing in his possession that could mend a soul as damaged as his currently was. He felt extremely apologetic to Alea, but he wouldn't do her any good if his own soul broke apart before he even got back to Earth.

A swift motion propped open the lid and Zac immediately shoved the cherry into his mouth, stem and all, before he put the box back into his spatial ring. A warmth spread through Zac's mouth, but abyssal darkness was spreading through his mind even faster, making Zac lose any sense of self.

A sharp pain suddenly flared up in his leg as a large piece of rubble from a broken platform slammed into it, probably the result of a frantic battle nearby. The pain shocked Zac awake long enough to roughly chew a few times and swallow the cherry.

Zac's mind slowly descended into the darkness once more, but suddenly there was a burst of warmth, like his soul was caressed in a hug. He still didn't regain any feeling in his body though, and the clamor of battle turned into a distant susurrus.

Was this death?

A deep bell echoed in the darkness, and the bottomless abyss was replaced with a boundless sky with splashes of clouds colored pink by a sunset. The slight rustle of leaves was the only thing interrupting the tranquility of the evening. Zac realized he was on a solitary peak surrounded by arid badlands.

The rustling came from a small tree with purple leaves, and by the looks of things the tree was the only growth for miles in each direction. Sharp cliffs devoid of any growth surrounded him, leading down toward a canyon far below. Similar rocky pillars could be seen far in the distance, though none of them seemed to have any vegetation growing.

It was only then that Zac realized his vantage was that of the tree itself, which would explain why he was incapable of movement. Was this the origin of the cherry that he had just eaten?

“Amitabha,” a gentle but decidedly masculine voice drifted out from beneath his vantage point, and Zac noticed a large figure sitting right next to the tree.

Shockingly enough he seemed to notice Zac as well, as he looked up in his direction with a smile on his face. The old man reminded Zac of Abbot Everlasting Peace from his mannerisms, though this monk was anything but human.

Zac had no idea what race the thing beneath him was. It was a generally humanoid, though extremely rotund. It almost looked like a large ball with a smaller ball on top for a head. It didn't look like obesity though, but rather a natural feature of his species. From his massive torso two surprisingly long and slender arms extended downward, and his hands were placed in his lap.

If one could call it that since the monk didn't actually have any legs.

It instead had two massive wings lying across the ground like a cape, and when their feathers rustled it sounded like divine bells while shimmering lights danced about. The being looked odd but it was definitely a Buddhist cultivator rather than a beast, as he was dressed in a Kasaya while wearing a large bead necklace.

He had a generally humanoid face, with a set of large golden eyes that radiated wisdom, a small mouth, and a normal nose. There also seemed to be a third eye in his forehead, like that of Anzonil, though it was closed at the moment. Finally, a long mane of long gray feathers ran down his head and back, held together with a string like a ponytail.

Even if the being looked a bit odd there was no doubt in Zac's mind he was a powerful warrior. His aura was subdued, but the power in his gaze was undeniable. Besides, looking at the mysterious lights that naturally radiated from his wings almost felt as beneficial for his Dao as witnessing a Tower Apparition.

“Little cherry tree, how can you suddenly carry such fate?” the winged being mumbled, before his eyes slowly lit up with comprehension. “I see... You taught this poor monk something today. Benevolence must be reciprocated, thus completing the cycle and severing karma.”

Zac tried to ask what the old monk meant, but he was unable to speak or even move. He could only watch as the monk slapped his two hands together in prayer, and the sound of his hands clapping was like divine thunder that echoed through the cosmos.

Zac's mind was filled with a shocking force in an instant, and he felt a connection to the universe he had never sensed before. All living things were part of a greater whole, all connected by karma and Heaven's Will. Was this the grand truth of the universe, or was it the cultivation path of the winged monk sitting under the cherry tree?

The feeling only lasted for a second, and when he looked around he had returned to the solitary mountain peak, while the monk was nowhere to be seen.

Zac could sense that he, or rather the cherry tree, had transformed somehow from what the monk did. It still looked the same from the outside as far as Zac could see, but there was a tremendous power hiding within.

A massive halo that looked like a setting sun suddenly exploded out from the tree as its branches started to violently shake. Buddhist hymns sang across the badlands as the tree kept growing and transforming. It had just been a bit over five meters before, but it grew over a hundred meters in an instant.

Its appearance had also taken a drastic turn, as its purple leaves were suddenly covered in golden fractals while its trunk turned almost black with similar engravings. Its canopy stretched hundreds of meters in each direction, sheltering the area from the sweltering sun.

The changes weren't over though as the roots kept growing downward along the hoodoo, their exuberant vitality transforming the arid rock as they descended toward the parched ground. First, it was simply moss that covered the sheer rock, but soon enough even small trees and flowers forced their ways through the cracks, turning the rocky pillar into a living monument.

The edges of the branches started to droop as they kept growing, and soon they had formed a dome with the pillar as a center. Outside was still the sandblasted wastelands, but the area within the canopy was quickly turning into a pocket-sized paradise.