

The Fall 446

Chapter 446: The Hayner Clan

The mental defense skills available to either of his classes were of no help against the Splinter. For example, [Indomitable] formed a formidable wall around Zac's soul, but it didn't help when the threat was already a part of him. The [Nine Reincarnations Manual] might help, but he still hadn't found anyone who could create the second Array Disk required to practice it. Having just one of the arrays was useless, and he couldn't even begin to practice the first reincarnation.

The Fragment of the Bodhi did seem to be able to stabilize the situation somewhat at least, just like his Seed of Trees had constrained the Draugr-bloodline that had been implanted in him. It was a losing battle though, and it was probably only a matter of time before something went wrong.

The only solution that Zac could think of for the moment was to keep the energies in check best he could, and hopefully he'd find something to use during the last day that had been allocated for the Base Town. Or perhaps he was worrying over nothing and his soul would slowly grind down the infected parts since the main body of the Splinter was still locked away in its cage.

Thirty minutes quickly passed as Zac almost went into a trance-like state where he tried using his new fragment to the utmost while absorbing E-Grade Miasma Crystals and Healing Pills. Some fresh hell was no doubt waiting outside his special zone, and he needed to be at his best.

He was still far from top condition, but it should be enough for him to survive the initial chaos and properly rest somewhere else. He would have rather stayed inside the black dimension for a few more hours, but the whole zone had started to shudder, indicating that it was time to leave.

The problem was what reward to choose, as all of them were extremely tempting. He knew that evolution of the weapon wasn't something as simple as an upgrade from Middle to Peak E-Grade, but it was rather more akin to a bloodline evolution of a beast. It might provide Verun with a matching attunement to his own, or swap out the materials with ones of far higher quality.

The somewhat humble origins of his axe hadn't been a problem so far, but it would sooner or later start to fall behind, or even get stuck in a bottleneck. It needed fortuitous encounters just like himself, and this was a great opportunity to improve his companion to something with greater potential. It would probably also help during the final remainder of the climb, and he would need every advantage he could get.

As for the Specialty Core Upgrade, it spoke for itself. He already had the [Pathfinder Oracle Eye] in his possession, so it was not completely needed in his case. But the eye was an amazing treasure that could be used for almost anything it seemed, and upgrading his core this way would free up the treasure for other uses.

As for upgrading Port Atwood to a World Capital, Zac wasn't as clear what it would entail. It would no doubt come with a slew of advantages to his force in general, and it would probably also give him some sort of title for being the one who founded the capital after integration. It would provide access to all kinds of new businesses and other beneficial buildings as well since it was a common requirement in the Town Shop to have the World Capital.

Indecision gnawed at him for a minute, but he knew he couldn't stall forever. His eyes eventually went to the middle option, and he picked the Duplicity Core upgrade. His reason was simple; his core was a unique mutation, and there were no guarantees the eye would be able to upgrade it even if he ate it after evolving.

Meanwhile, the System termed it as an upgrade, and there shouldn't be any chance of the upgrade failing. Evolving Verun would have been nice as well, but Verun was ultimately a pretty common Spirit Tool, and finding other opportunities to improve it shouldn't prove impossible. Even his Pathfinder-Eye could upgrade the Spirit Tool if need be.

Besides, Verun was still keeping up at his current power without a problem, especially after he had managed to light up another fractal on its handle. He would probably need to reach level 100 or so before the axe started to fall behind.

As for the World Capital, he had great confidence in accomplishing that on his own, provided that he didn't get himself killed first. Taking that option would ultimately only speed up the process, and he felt it wasn't worth it. It would perhaps have given him a better title for getting the World Capital while still in F-Grade, but he wasn't lacking for titles.

The choice was made, so Zac waited for him to be teleported to the start of the 8th floor. But nothing happened for a few seconds until a startling change took place in the empty space. A densely inscribed circle appeared beneath his feet, and it illuminated him in golden luster.

A volatile surge of energy entered his body the next moment, and Zac had to force himself to stay still instead of rolling around in pain. The colossal amount of power streamed straight toward his core, and he didn't dare make a move in fear that he would ruin what was happening.

Who would have known that the system would force an upgrade immediately, rather than handing him some pill?

The pain thankfully only lasted for less than a minute, and Zac could only guess it wasn't a big deal for the System to upgrade a simple F-Grade Specialty Core, even if it was a mutated version. Zac wanted to immediately inspect the upgraded Specialty Core, but the surroundings changed as he was teleported to the next world.

The massive Bulwark from [Immutable Bulwark] was conjured within a second of arriving as he hefted the somewhat restored [Everlasting], and [Indomitable] defended his mind from taking another hit. The cherry had worked wonders, but he guessed the soul was still a bit vulnerable after having almost crumbled to pieces.

It was lucky as well, as a massive blade slammed straight into his shield just as Zac appeared in the new world. A pained roar followed as [Deathwish] retaliated the strike. But even then he didn't get any respite as his danger sense hollered in the back of his mind, forcing him to jump to the side as the air itself where he stood was ripped open.

[Seize the Hayner Clan's defining treasure before the invaders.]

Zac sighed in disappointment even though he saw the quest was related to a defining treasure. He had been down this road before during the past floors, and he knew things weren't so simple. First of all, he

was thrown onto some desolate beach without any civilization nearby, and he had no idea where this Hayner Clan was located.

But that was just the start of his problems. Right behind him was a massive pillar that stretched into the sky, and one warrior after another appeared around him. The soldiers were immediately beset with attacks from a defending force that didn't ask any questions but rather tried to immediately kill anything that appeared.

The situation was all too familiar to him. It was an incursion.

However, the chaos was still a bit different from the one he was used to. It looked like he had arrived just minutes after the pillar appeared, yet an army full with peak F-Grade to powerful E-Grade warriors were already fighting back great ferocity. The attacks he had just avoided came from the defenders who looked like a mix of humans and trolls.

They stood almost three meters tall and had pale green skin. They seemed to favor physical combat as well, and even the strike he barely dodged had come from an explosive arrow-attack. Zac could understand the words the humans streaming out of the pillar screamed, but the defenders spoke in an unintelligible guttural gibberish.

How would he find out where the Hayner Clan was? And who was the guardian in a scenario like this? He seemed to be allied with the raiders, but also not judging by the wording of the quest. He could liken it to being an infiltrator who had joined the incursion with hidden motives, so everyone was an enemy.

Was the Incursion leader the guardian, or was it perhaps the patriarch of the Hayner Clan? As for actually finding the treasure, he had already given up on it. He knew that even if he found the clan there would be all sorts of hurdles to jump in order to get the treasure, hurdles he didn't have the time nor the skills to deal with.

Eventually, he could only find one solution to his situation, and Zac's searched the area until he spotted a human radiating a sinister aura as he commanded his troops to take down the defending armies. Zac steadied himself as he activated [Profane Seal], appearing in front of the man without warning.

The man looked extremely shocked to be attacked by one of his own, but he immediately reacted as a huge bird made from hundreds of flying daggers appeared in front of him as he flashed away. However, the cage was already erected, and Zac steadily grew to his towering form as miasma covered the area.

The flying daggers assailed him like an angry swarm of bees, and Zac was quickly forced to actively block with [Immutable Bulwark] as he noted that the daggers were infused with a Dao fragment and could cut straight through his miasmatic armor. The fractal shield thankfully held though, and Zac saw Dao Empowered specters appear around the incursion general in an instant.

However, most of the specters' strikes were diffused with some sort of small shields that appeared around the leader, with only a few of them managing to land an actual blow on him.

Zac knew he had taken the strength of the potential guardian too lightly at that moment. He hadn't mentally adjusted due to the increased difficulty because he hadn't fought a real floor guardian at the end of the 7th floor, but rather a bunch of cultivators. It made him still think of his competition as

roughly the same as the 62nd level, forgetting about the sharp increase that came with the final levels of a floor.

The man was also an incursion general, which Zac had ample experience in defeating without exerting any herculean effort. It had made him confident in deflecting the small blades with his impervious armor, but he received a rude awakening as over ten daggers bore into his body and reopened some wounds.

If that was all that happened it would have been fine, as such small weapons weren't any threat to Zac's towering physique. But a blistering pain started to radiate from the wounds in an instant, and Zac felt the world lurch for a second before he found his bearings. He realized what was going on in an instant; the daggers were poisoned.

The only relief was that he sensed the poison being immediately contained to a pretty large degree as he activated the Fragment of the Coffin. But it was nothing like when he fought the corroded monkeys back on the third floor. The Coffin didn't make him magically immune to all poisons, it only strengthened his resistance to it and allowed him to refine it.

This poison he was struck with was on a completely other level compared to what he had absorbed before, and it seemed to also be empowered by a Dao of its own. It wasn't life-threatening as far as Zac could tell, especially with his Draugr-body's natural resistance against poisons as well. But it would still take some effort to refine it all.

"You are not one of ours!" the man roared from the other side of the cage, a large festering wound having appeared on his arm.

Zac didn't answer as he was focused on combating the poison spreading through his body, while simultaneously making sure that he wasn't cut by any more of those small daggers. He noted that a concerted effort to break through from the leader's soldiers was already underway, and he knew his time was limited.

He quickly pushed his taunting effect to the limit as he rushed toward his target, with ten of the fifteen chains targeting the general. The other five started to take out the people who had been caught inside the cage along with their leader, and these people quickly turned into nourishment for him. The Incursion Leader managed to stave off the chains though by allocating a large number of his flying daggers to fight them off.

A poison master was a decent counter to his build since intangible attacks like poison or illusions wouldn't trigger [Deathwish], but that didn't mean Zac was helpless. He could still retaliate if the man used daggers rather than pure poison attacks like Alea, and he also had his massive bardiche to strike back.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as Zac ran straight toward the incursion leader, but the man seemed intent on stalling as he was swallowed by a hurricane of blades before he was whisked away. Unfortunately for the man, he hadn't realized he was under the effect of [Vanguard of Undeath], and the general suddenly appeared only five meters away from Zac.

Zac's arm was already bulging from cramming it full of miasmic energy from [Unholy Strike] and the sounds of ghastly wails filled the cage as the massive black axe crashed into the whirlwind just when the general appeared.

The axe went straight through the general's torso, but Zac felt no elation as the swing provided no resistance, and it looked like he had struck a pile of mud as the invader's body fell apart into a rotten pile on the ground. The general had escaped his killing blow.