

The Fall 449

Chapter 449: Pawn of Fate

Zac's heart hammered with horror as he plunged further and further into the abyss. He tried to find something to hold on to, but he found himself pelted by one rock after another as massive boulders detached from the walls and slammed into him with the force of a speeding truck. There was no way that this wasn't the work of the old Hayner Patriarch.

He did however notice that the old man had fallen inside as well, and he was some ways above him. But his situation didn't seem nearly as bad. The old seer was sitting on a piece of land as he sailed toward the bottom as well, but not a single boulder hit him or even came close. Zac glowered in anger at the man who had caused this mess and quickly charged up a [Chop].

However, a second after he launched the strike at the old man a massive boulder slammed into the fractal blade, resulting in mutual destruction. Zac was about to charge up another strike but just as he was thrown off-course by another boulder. Was all this really a coincidence, or was this what it was like to fight against Karmic Cultivator?

It would take more than some errant rocks to take him out though, and Zac stopped trying to hit the man and instead focused on the depths below. They had fallen for almost 15 seconds already, but Zac noticed the dive was about to have a very abrupt end as the ground below was quickly rising up to meet them.

Zac only had a second to think, and without any better options available he activated a defensive charge of his robes along with another talisman as he infused himself with the Dao of the Coffin. He couldn't actually die or get seriously hurt from just falling in standard gravity, but he didn't want to risk getting knocked out as he suspected the old man had some means to deal with the landing.

Zac landed like a comet, causing a massive crater with himself in the epicenter. Zac felt the taste of iron in his mouth, but he ignored the pain and scrambled to his feet to meet the next wave of attacks. A massive boulder had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, but Zac cut it apart just in time to see the shockwave of his own crash landing buffeting the old man's descent.

It actually allowed him to land as smoothly as if he had only jumped down from a small incline, and Zac couldn't help himself from swearing at the scene.

"You are quite adept at resisting karmic manipulations. I am Ter'Erian Hayner, former patriarch of the Hayner Clan," the old man smiled when he noticed Zac's glare.

"Why did you do this?" Zac growled, his anger already building. "You should have realized that trapping yourself in here with me can't end well for you."

"Even a blind old man can see how powerful you are. My descendants aren't your match. So I nudged events a bit to create this place for us since I learned of your coming," he said. "Of course, nature had already laid the groundwork."

Zac looked around, and he had to say he was pretty shocked by what a karmic cultivator could do. The hole they found themselves in was the biggest one he had ever seen. It was hundreds of meters wide,

and its edges were almost completely sheer. The sky could still be visible far above, but even he would have some trouble getting back up in short order.

"Do you have the clan-defining treasure on you?" Zac asked.

"The [Star of Aryaldar] is placed on top of a flying treasure. The flying treasure has also been reinforced with an illusion array and an isolation array, and my descendants have been instructed to keep flying across this vast continent for 23 days before returning," the man smiled.

"Twenty-three days," Zac repeated with an even stare.

"Indeed. The star is the core of our heritage, we cannot lose it. We sacrificed much to glean find a path out of this calamity. The longer it is hidden the better, and after 23 days the treasure will be safe. You might still be able to find the treasure if fate is on your side, but are you in a position to worry about that?"

A surge of anger flashed in Zac's mind as the pieces of oblivion seemed energized. But Zac quickly calmed down as he tried to understand the situation. The Hayner clan was obviously the real deal since they had indirectly inferred the rules of the Tower even if they didn't know about its existence. Twenty-three days was how much time remained of his climb.

The treasure would be safe in 23 days as he would have been thrown out of the Tower by then. But Zac suddenly froze when he realized what the old man had said.

"What do you mean position to worry?" Zac frowned.

"Celestial stone will fall into this hole in a short while," the old man said, some ruthlessness finally shining through his congenial facade.

"A celestial stone?" Zac muttered with confusion until his eyes widened in alarm. "A god damn meteor?"

"My clan worked for a thousand years to form a karmic link with one of the stones sailing about in the vast beyond, gently nudging closer to us. It became our clan-defending treasure, and when better to use it than now?"

These people were lunatics. That was the only thing Zac could think of as he looked the old man with an aghast expression. Dragging a meteor down on top of his own head to take out a threat to his clan was beyond overkill. Even if his mission succeeded he would have destroyed half his country from the impact, along with getting himself killed.

Zac also knew that there was no way that the old man would let him climb out of the hole in peace either. He could only take him out as quickly as possible and pray that he was the level guardian. A storm of energy immediately exploded around him as he activated [Hatchetman's Rage], and almost looked like a sea of flames was conjured by his wrath.

He hadn't used the skill too often since he was worried that the mental effect of the skill would synergize with the anger that the Splinter was always fanning in the background, but now was not the time to care about such things. A towering power made him feel flush with potential, and he almost welcomed the descent of the metro to test his mettle against it.

However, he quickly snapped out of it and instead focused his attention to the old man. Each upgrade of the skill had prolonged the effect of the boost by 10 full seconds, so he still had less than a minute to finish the fight before he would enter a weakened state. However, that should be more than enough to settle the fight.

Zac shot toward the old man as he shot out five fractal blades in an instant, with a sixth starting to whirl around him like a buzzsaw. The air screamed from the power in the blades as they contained the highest power Zac could muster. However, it almost looked like the old man was a hologram as he flickered the moment the attacks were supposed to hit him.

The fractal blades passed right through and crashed into the sheer wall behind, causing massive scars in the rock that ran for dozens of meters. Zac didn't exactly understand how the old man dodged without moving, but he guessed he was messing with fate somehow. But Zac still rushed forward, confident that there had to be some limits to what the man could avoid.

However, the ground suddenly crumbled beneath his feet just as he was about to attack the Hayner patriarch, which completely robbed him of his momentum and made him slam into the ground. A crystalline staff appeared in the Hayner patriarch's hands just as Zac was about to get back on his feet, and Zac summoned a storm of leaves to protect himself from whatever strike was coming.

A shudder in the air lifted Zac from his feet and threw him dozens of meters away. However, his danger sense hadn't warned him of anything, and as far as he could tell the attack hadn't harmed him in the slightest. He felt some disorientation for a second, but he regained his wits after shaking his head, and soon enough he was back on his feet. The old man had conjured a massive avatar behind him by this point, a shimmering priest holding a large crystal toward the heavens.

Reality suddenly shifted, and Zac suddenly saw dozens of versions of himself split off from his body. A few rushed toward the old man, whereas others started channeling Cosmic Energy into his arm. There were even two massive spectral axes from [Deforestation] that appeared in the sky.

His mind was a confused jumble as competing ideas and impressions clamored for supremacy, and he felt his cosmic and mental energies rapidly drain into the different versions of himself. But Zac suddenly roared at the top of his lungs as he stomped in the ground with enough force to cause cracks to spread over ten meters in each direction. Five explosions followed in quick succession as Zac pushed toward his target.

It felt like he was forced to push through solid matter to advance, and it was as though his mind was being dragged toward the other incarnations of himself. But it wasn't enough to stop him and Zac was soon upon the old man again. [Verun's Bite] fell, its sanguine glow illuminating the surroundings.

Zac stood panting to restrain his rage as he looked down on the old man on the ground. A massive wound ran from his shoulder down to his navel, and he was almost split in two by Zac's strike. He looked down at the troll with some confusion, as he hadn't actually expected his strike to hit that easily. The idea had been to push him a bit further to expend his defensive treasures, after which he would finish him with [Nature's Punishment].

But perhaps he had overestimated the old man.

"How?!" the ancient troll coughed with confusion in his eyes as he was bleeding out on the ground. "Why are you immune to the pull of fate?!"

Zac wasn't completely sure what the old man was on about. The weird illusion he had been put under was pretty annoying, but it could barely be considered a nuisance due to draining his energy. Was it supposed to do something more?

Perhaps he had his almost inhuman pool of Luck to thank for avoiding any serious harm. Karmic warriors seemed to fight by slightly augmenting causality and fate in their favor, but Zac had a huge amount of Luck that did the same thing. The special attribute might be the best way of countering these kinds of people.

The battle was over as the man lay dying on the ground, and Zac could breathe out in relief when he saw that a Teleportation Array had appeared a few meters away. Killing the guardians was never a requirement unless it was stated in the quest, defeating them was all that was needed. However, most of the battles so far had ended with a fatality as the guardians were seldom good people.

The battle hadn't been too exhaustive and he was completely unscathed. However, he still wasn't too elated with the results. Normally he would have stayed on the floor an hour at the least to recover from his weakened state and calm his mind, but he knew that wasn't an option this time.

A massive ball of fire had appeared in the sky by now, and Zac knew he would have to leave within a minute.

"Why did you go this far?" Zac asked as he looked down on the old man. "You should have seen that I didn't really want your life."

"Sometimes drastic measures are needed to push fate in the direction one desires, Warmaster," the old troll coughed. "Or should I say trial-taker?"

"You know?" Zac said with surprise.

"Even the heavens aren't perfect. Fragments and pieces slip through," the old man wheezed. "However, that knowledge is what led you to our doorstep. I peered too deep, and I cannot be allowed to live. At least my family is ignorant of the truth, and the calamity will hopefully end through my death and your disappearance."

Zac looked at the old man for a few seconds, but he had no idea what to say. What could one say in a situation like this? It might be true that he was being used as a real Hatchetman by the System, taking out those in its net who had learned too much.

"I'm sorry things ended this way," Zac sighed and started to walk toward the teleportation array.

"Freedom is an illusion, trial-taker," the old seer coughed as Zac stepped onto the platform. "Are you any freer than us?"

Zac took one last look at the old troll. The seer's face had turned into a grotesque mask of anger and irreconciliation as the blank eyes stared up at the sky. Zac wasn't sure if he was looking at the meteor that was fast approaching, or the heavens above.

"I am Ter'Erian Hayner, and I am more than a pawn!"

