

The Fall 457

Chapter 457: Desolation

Zac's large donation was compensation for pushing Jaol's fate off-course, but it wasn't completely born from benevolence. Such a huge sum would draw massive suspicion toward the comms officer, and his end would no doubt be pretty horrible if he stayed on the ship.

But the same probably held even if Zac hadn't done it. The guy seemed pretty shell-shocked, and Zac was afraid he didn't understand the severity of the situation. This way he forced the guy into action to save his skin. It was both an apology and a threat. Jaol could take that money and escape, taking the knowledge of Zac with him.

Of course, the easiest solution would have been to kill Jaol, but it wouldn't sit right with him. Zac's actions of reciprocity with Thelim, the Ent back on the 6th floor, had opened his eyes to an important truth. Giving back or severing Karma wasn't only vital for Karmic cultivators, but everyone.

If he had cut down Jaol after having received help with the heist and all that valuable information it would have festered like an untreated wound in the back of his head. So he could only rely on this little ploy to deal with him instead. The money was a huge sum to most people in the F-grade, but it was almost nothing to Zac, especially after looting the mentalist. Just one of her dresses was probably worth five times that amount, and there were over a dozen of them.

He was already rushing toward the containment center, but Zac was observing the young technocrat through [Hatchetman's Spirit]. He saw Jaol run inside and snatch some things from the laboratory before fleeing toward the escape vessel as fast as his legs could carry him.

Zac nodded in satisfaction as he ran to the metallic gates guarding the room housing the Shard, and he breathed out in relief when they soundlessly slid open without prompting. He was thankful he hadn't gone full musclebrain as he had initially considered as he saw the doors were over two meters thick with three layers of hidden energy shields within.

There was no way he would have been able to cut through such an arrangement in short order.

The interior chamber was massive, with a ceiling height of well over a hundred meters. It was inside the core of the ship, the monstrous spherical construction that had given the ship its name. The cubic chamber that housed the Shard just took up a part of it though, even with its impressive size. It was a good reminder that the ship was like a flying city, and he wondered if completely crippling it had ever been on the table for an F-Grade warrior like himself.

Roughly fifteen technocrats were standing inside the room, and they looked up with shock at the intrusion. None of them seemed like a threat though so Zac rather focused on the giant ball with a diameter of 100 meters in the middle. It was the outer shielding that protected the ship from the Shard, and dozens of tubes as large as a man ran along the floor from the right, likely powering the thing up.

Zac could barely discern another, far smaller, shield inside the ball. But further within, there was just a radiant light, like they had captured a miniature sun. He couldn't actually see the Shard of Creation, but he was sure it was within the core. This was somewhat proven by the fact that the splinter in his mind was fully raging by this point, pushing the Miasmic Cage to its limits.

He was considering how he could use the doctor's head to pass by the defenses when an alarm suddenly started blaring out from hidden speakers as dozens of robotic sentries rose from the ground. The seemingly empty containment chamber had turned into a battlefield in an instant. The technocrats didn't seem to be combatants though as they fled for their lives through a smaller exit in the back.

Zac didn't stop their escape as they were essentially civilians, and he had given up subterfuge by now.

Bad turned to worse as a dangerous spike in his mind prompted him to quickly discard the head, just in time before it exploded in a concentrated gush of purple plasma that immediately melted the reinforced ground where it landed. Zac couldn't believe the professor would up and kill himself.

But Zac's brows rose when a cylindric box inside the inner layer released some steam and opened up, at which point Dr. Fried stepped outside, completely unscathed. Soul Transfer or a backup body? The technocrats were full of weird means.

"Thank you for carrying me the last stretch," the doctor snorted as a series of clanking sounds echoed out from within his body. "Good thing I kept a few spares in case something happened with the treasure."

Zac wanted to retort something clever, but he couldn't come up with anything before he was bombarded with attacks from the robotic guards that had repositioned themselves to protect the power supply of the shield.

It seemed the sentries had only held back due to the presence of Dr. Fried's head, but now they weren't restricted any longer. Zac furiously charged the closest machine as he released [Nature's Barrier] along with [Hatchetman's Spirit] to turn the surroundings into his domain.

He knew his time was limited as the captain could appear at any moment.

He needed to break through the shield in front of him, but the machines kept blasting him with concussive projectiles that threw him off-balance. It wasn't enough to hurt him as the leaves still absorbed most of the damage, but it did slow him down considerably.

Three furious swings with [Verun's Bite] crushed the thick shield protecting the robot, and another one cleaved it in two. He tried launching a few fractal blades at the shield next, but they were actually shot down mid-air by the remaining sentries. Zac grunted in annoyance and glanced at the machines, but he didn't have time to figure out his next step before his danger sense went off again.

He quickly flashed away with [Loamwalker], and it was just in time as a substantial explosion erupted where he had just stood, making him realize the machines were triggered to blow up the moment they were out of commission.

"It's useless," the voice of Dr. Fried drifted over, and Zac's eyes widened when he looked over.

A massive machine had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, looking like a mix of a walking crystal ball and a mecha. It had eight sturdy spider legs that held a platform in the air. On top of it, a ten-meter crystal ball rested, and it resembled the containment shields a bit. Finally, there was a platform on top that the doctor himself stood on.

Over a hundred thin arms reached down from the upper dais, and appendages ended with small satellites pointed at the crystal ball from every direction. It looked to Zac like they were used to restrain the ball in the middle, and he could understand why. A chaotic swirl of febrile energies rushed around inside the crystal, and Zac started to wonder if the crazy researcher had turned the Shard of Creation into a weapon.

Zac immediately launched a series of fractal blades at the outer shield as he spread the storm of leaves to block any attempts at shooting them down. However, the fractal blades ineffectually hit the shield, only creating small ripples even though they were infused with the Fragment of the Axe.

"I told you," Dr. Fried laughed. "As long as the sentries are standing you won't be able to destroy this shield, and the captain will be here long before then."

Zac growled in annoyance when he saw the researcher sitting snugly on top of the weird machine, and he launched another series of fractal blades at the shield. But it was completely useless like the last time.

He quickly realized that his current strategy wouldn't work. The bots were too durable and they focused on slowing him down rather than taking him out. He quickly forced a storm of Cosmic Energy toward the fractal on the right side of his chest, and soon after the first axe of [Deforestation] appeared above him.

The bots were just too annoying, and he would rather fell them in one big swing. His arm swelled as he swung [Verun's Bite] in a wide arc toward the group of sentries that protected the massive array of tubing. The machines had proven a tough target for [Chop], but against the [Axe of Felling] they were little more than pieces of lumbers as they fell apart and exploded in an instant.

"You fool!" Dr. Fried cackled when he saw Zac launch his massive strike. "Did you really think that the shield was reliant on exposed power lines? Who would design such a shoddy defense?! You cultivators are really not much better than animals."

Zac only snorted in response, but he was honestly a bit surprised that it didn't seem to have any effect at all. He had still managed to destroy most of the robots though, and he was sure that the massive tubes at least provided some power to the shields. Perhaps it was only running on some auxiliary powers right now, and the doctor was only putting up a brave face.

Besides, it wasn't like Zac was all out of options.

Veins popped out all over his arm as he forced even more energy into the skill fractal, and the flaming axe appeared next, causing the very air around it to twist and combust. Zac didn't waste a second as he launched it straight at the shield, empowering the strike even further with the Fragment of the Axe.

The cutting flames of [Infernal Axe] slammed into the containment field with the force of a tidal wave, and flames were pushed in all directions, incinerating everything around them. Dozens of expensive-looking machines were reduced to scorched pieces of scrap, and even large sections of the floor were turned into molten pools.

But the shield had endured. Some cracks had appeared across its surface, but they were quickly mended. Zac tsk'ed in annoyance when he saw that the containment held. He hadn't expected that the outer shield could withstand the second strike, even after losing its main power supply.

“You’re decent enough for a cultivator, but how can you match up to my lovingly crafted isolation sphere? It can even restrain the Shard, so what can a fiddling little h- ah?” the doctor ranted, but was interrupted as a pulse suddenly spread from within the core containment.

Zac couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw the molten plasma around him turn to mud, and trees and mushrooms appeared out of nowhere inside the huge room, causing the shield to flicker a few times before it died out. Zac and the researcher mutely stared at each other for a second, both obviously shocked by the turn of events.

Was the Shard helping him?

It seemed as though the Shard destroyed the backups while Zac took out the outer power source. The question was whether this was a random act of creation, or whether the Shard was sentient and had some plan of its own. But Zac couldn’t focus on that right now as the air twisted and turned as Dr. Fried seemed ready to launch his final attack with the weird machine.

But Zac had one more card up his sleeve and he endured the pain as he pushed almost a third of his Cosmic Energy into the fractal of [Deforestation], initiating the third and final swing. His bones creaked and groaned as he pushed his arm forward, but he wasn’t the same person as when he attempted the swing in his battle with Salvation.

A terrifying axe appeared in the air, and even Zac felt some palpitations in his heart after sensing the aura. It was an ashy-grey single-bladed axe with a long edge that almost formed an inverted ‘S’. The poll and shoulder of the axe seemed to form a robed being whose four arms ran along the cheek of the axe head.

The shaft was straight and unadorned, ending at a spiked knob, showing none of the craftsmanship of the intricate axe head. But the most striking aspect of the axe wasn’t its incongruous design, but rather the desolate aura that spread out around it.

A tremendous resistance pushed against him as Zac almost finished the swing, but he roared and struggled to complete the motion with everything he had. He felt a sharp pain in his forearm as accumulated wounds from past levels reopened, but he didn’t care. Zac could have activated [Hatchetman’s Fury] to effortlessly finish the swing, but he didn’t dare to be under the influence of that skill at the moment.

The scientist had noticeably quieted down as he no doubt understood the power of the attack Zac had brought forth, but he didn’t flinch as he frantically tapped at a console in front of him. It looked like the rampant surges of power inside the crystal were being magnified, but they were still being contained.

“Die!” the researcher screeched as dozens of the machine’s appendages rapidly reshuffled to no longer envelop the ball, but rather expose the side facing Zac.

The sphere immediately started to destabilize, and a second later the crystal cracked as a terrifying surge of destruction rippled toward him. Zac’s mind screamed of danger, but he was unwilling to back down as canceling his strike now would not only cause a backlash but also put it on a long cooldown. It was also unclear whether [Nature’s Punishment] would even work in a place like this, as there was no nature to draw from.

His destructive capabilities were in other words quite limited, and his other class wouldn't be any help in breaching the core containment field either. He could only meet fire with fire and bet the house on his ultimate strike. Zac roared in defiance as he finalized the swing even though his arm was strained beyond its limits.

A grey wave silently swept forward as the sinister [Axe of Desolation] matched the swing, and the whole ship shuddered as the two monstrous attacks collided.