

Defiance of the Fall

Chapter 674: Equanimity

On the other side of the door was a small balcony overlooking the enormous crater left behind after the Havenfort Monarch. Zac had been prepared for the hole to be big after reading about it in the missive, but even then he wasn't mentally prepared to the staggering scene.

The chasm was endlessly vast, possibly having a diameter that eclipsed Zac's whole island. As for the depth, it was even greater. Zac fought off his vertigo and walked over to the edge of the balcony, but he immediately regretted peering down. There were protective barriers preventing anyone from falling into the chasm, but Zac fell back and had to sit down even with those measures in place.

It was endless.

It felt like the chasm reached all the way into the abyss itself. Had the whole planet been pierced through when the C-grade cultivator fell? It almost seemed like it. Zac couldn't imagine the force that would be required to create a crater like this. And this was even after the Monarch allegedly controlled the eruption and directed most of his force toward the Heavens, which explained why the chasm was almost perfectly circular.

Zac shuddered at the thought of someone like this targeting Earth.

His mental state soon calmed down though, and his gaze turned to the right. The balcony led to a pathway, thankfully five meters wide, that seemed to stretch along the edge of the tube-formed crater down into the depths. On a second look, there were hundreds of similar balconies as his own, each of them leading down a path of their own.

Judging by the incline and circumference of the crater, Zac guessed that each checkpoint might be one single loop around the chasm. He couldn't spot a single trial taker though, but Zac figured that was because there was some force or array preventing people from seeing and helping each other.

There was a barrier blocking access to the pathway, and Zac figured that there was someone already using the current path. But since he was teleported to this specific balcony, he guessed that the one currently on his path had almost finished his or her run. So, Zac took out one of his prayer mats and sat down, slowly steadying his mind.

As expected, it only took two hours before a soothing bell woke Zac up from his meditation as the shield dissipated. Zac saw no point in loitering about, and he took a steadying breath before he stepped onto the path. However, he only took a single step before he stopped as a quest prompt had appeared in front of him.

Depths of Despair (Limited, Trial): Descend into the chasm. Reward: Havenfort Chasm Limited Title. (0/5)

Zac read the description, but there wasn't much to go by. The (0/5) in progress no doubt referred to the five checkpoints on this trial. The situation was straightforward enough and he started walking down the pathway.

He walked for a few minutes, and the only sounds in the area were his steps and the occasional moaning echoes created by wind swirling around in the chasm itself. There was definitely an odd energy suffusing this place, which Zac hadn't noticed before. He did feel a heaviness on his body, but it was barely noticeable at this point.

Not only that, Zac did feel slightly dour, but he honestly wasn't sure whether that could be blamed on the trial. The surroundings were dark, the atmosphere was oppressive, and he wasn't in the best state of mind himself. It would be weird if he felt exuberant at a place like this. Still, there was a mental component to the trial, so he didn't relax his focus.

The minutes soon turned into four hours as Zac progressed further and further down the chasm, and the pressure eventually turned palpable. However, the first checkpoint was still nowhere in sight, and Zac decided to speed things up a bit. Unfortunately, it turned out that his movement skill was blocked. Perhaps he shouldn't be surprised, as there were all kinds of odd movement skills.

What if someone started moving through the ground itself shooting straight down toward the final checkpoint?

Zac also noticed that the suppression turned a lot more powerful if he sped up, and he was eventually forced to slow down to a brisk walk. No wonder the missive he bought said that the trial was expected to take up to ten days. You needed to slowly and gradually make your way down.

There was not much to do except walk in silence, and Zac's thoughts eventually started wandering. Zac tried to focus on the future, to plan out his next steps, but his thoughts kept returning to those he had lost. His father, Alea, Ogras and Billy... Thea. Some were dead, others lost where he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to meet them again.

After all, the Million Gates Territory was vast, almost as big as the whole Allbright Empire. Finding a hidden realm in that place would be like searching for a needle in a galactic haystack. And if the existence of the Dimensional Seed became widely spread, that was even worse. How would Ogras and Billy survive when Hegemons and perhaps even Monarchs made their move?

The sea in his mind was growing erratic, and the clean line between life and death became blurred as dozens of whirlpools erupted. Even the island in the middle, the very core of his being, was assailed by powerful waves that crashed into it. The small ocean had turned into a mirror of his mental state, and it didn't look good.

An errant thought was all that it had taken for it to spiral out of control, and Zac realized that he might not even make it past the first checkpoint unless he started to take things seriously. A trial that blocked mental defense skills would test one's soul, but also one's willpower and focus.

The trial thankfully wasn't timed, so he stopped for a moment and took a few deep breaths as he tried to enter a meditative state. With the pervasive pressure in the air Zac was unable to completely turn off his mind, but the chaos in his mind slowly calmed down as he forcibly focused on the task at hand.

After a few more minutes his soul sea had returned to the previous state with a clean line of demarcation. Zac took a deep breath and continued down the endless chasm. His body could barely feel the effect of the trial's physical pressure, but he was shocked at how fragile his mental state was.

Zac didn't let his thoughts stray any longer, and he kept a constant vigil as he pushed forward. He soon passed by the first checkpoint, but he didn't even

stop and catch his breath as he continued further down. There was a qualitative change in the pressure at the second layer, but Zac wouldn't give in at all. The second checkpoint arrived just a day later, and two days later the third, which meant he had gained a better title than most trial takers.

By this point the pressure was immense, and Zac was unable to think about anything but moving forward. Right foot, left foot, rinse and repeat. The slightest loss of control could be extremely dangerous, to the point that his soul would get hurt. The pressure on his body was bearable by its innate power alone, but he knew that he was in trouble in regards to his mind.

He was moving forward on pure willpower by this point, but his soul wouldn't be able to go much further. He had just passed the third checkpoint, but the pressure was more than twice what it was after the second. It was no wonder that most warriors only managed to reach the second stop. Even with a reincarnated soul, he was no mentalist, and he knew that his willpower wasn't as strong as some warriors who had tempered themselves for centuries.

Yet he felt it was too early to give up now. Eventually, he had taken three days on the third layer. He was like a zombie by this point as he stumbled forward, his eyes red from strain and veins covering his forehead. It felt like the harder he tried to fight the pressure, the stronger it got. It was like an annoyance that just increased in severity the more you focused on it.

Eventually, it came to a tipping point, where Zac simply couldn't keep going as he was. The pressure was too great, and his whole mind aperture vibrated ominously from the invisible pressure. The two oceans were extremely chaotic even when he desperately tried to impose order, which was a telling sign of his mental state.

Zac stood in place, looking down at the depths with mixed emotions. Should he give in? This was ultimately not a life-death situation for him. Passing just three checkpoints would give him a pretty bad title, but there was no point in risking cracking his soul for a slightly better one. He could always go for another trial instead.

Zac didn't immediately leave though, but rather looked down at the chasm with reluctance. He had come here in search of more than just a title, yet he had gained nothing. He walked up the path for a bit, but only to the point that his mind wasn't shaking any longer. He sat down and slowly relinquished his strict control over his emotions.

A thousand thoughts immediately flashed through his mind and his mind shook from the onslaught, but it soon calmed down as Zac started to impose order to the chaos. He didn't let his mind run haywire, but he also didn't shut any thought down. He slowly started to go over everything he had encountered and done over the past months, trying to find some closure.

Zac soon realized that he had fallen into the same state as he did soon after the Integration.

One trauma after another had kept accumulating back then, each one turning into a scab that had numbed his soul. Eventually, he had almost turned into a utilitarian killing machine who could weigh lives against benefits without blinking an eye. The first months after the Mystic Realm had been a confusing blur when he suddenly didn't have anyone to unleash his bloodlust on.

Only when he stopped running did he realize what he had turned into. It had taken a long, long time for him to regain a sense of his humanity, and Thea had been a huge part of that process. Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that he had jumped into the same pitfall the moment tragedy struck, where he got completely consumed with his cultivation and plans to reap resources.

But there had to be a balance.

It was true that the Multiverse followed the law of the jungle, and being soft would cause more harm than good. But losing one's humanity on the path to power, discarding all attachments as though they were weaknesses, would strip away the core of your being until you were only a ball of violence striving for power.

Zac kept going over everything, but he was suddenly startled awake when he realized that the pressure on his soul had lessened by a significant degree. He slowly got up and resumed his descent, time turning into a blur as he was now more focused on his inward journey. The pressure kept increasing, but the waves in his mind were actually slowly growing weaker. It was like the suppression on his mind forced him to confront some things he had kept at bay for so long.

One step after another took him deeper and deeper into the abyss. It felt like his mind was being honed in a completely different way than when he cultivated it with his Soul Strengthening Manual. He was making a spiritual

journey, where his willpower was sharpened through processing years of pent-up trauma. That wasn't to say that he was reveling in his suffering.

There were no two ways about it, he had gone through some messed up things over the past years. Friends and family had fallen, and his hands were completely drenched by blood by this point. Pushing everything down wasn't the right way to deal with it, and tears Zac had started pouring down his cheeks at some unknown time.

The fourth checkpoint suddenly lit up the path around him, but Zac didn't care in the slightest as he kept walking. The pressure was getting pretty extreme by this point, and he was steadily losing Cosmic energy to just walk forward. Black swirls of unidentifiable energies occasionally passed Zac by as they danced at the depths of the chasm.

But a smile started to emerge on his face even as the pressure threatened to crush his mind entirely.

Memories kept coming back, but they were no longer all of self-loathing and doubt. He remembered the happy times, the intimate moments between just him and Thea. He no longer focused on the fact that he had failed to reach his father in time, or how Leandra had muddled the issue of paternity. He remembered those thirty years before where Robert Atwood had raised him and Kenzie alone.

He was being baptized by his own experiences, and he felt like he was in a trance. Each step was a herculean task by this point, but at the same time it felt like it was someone else's struggle. He didn't know if hours or years had passed as he was swept up by the past, but suddenly the pressure disappeared.

The world shifted and his soul shuddered, and then there was just tranquility.

Zac knew he had somehow passed the trial, but he still didn't open his eyes as he was immersed in his current feeling. But eventually, he opened his eyes and looked, only to realize that he actually had reached the bottom of the chasm. Zac's heart thumped for a second, but he soon quashed any errant thoughts.

It was clear he wasn't the first one, since he was looking at a vast graveyard. Or perhaps it was more correct to say it was a shrine, with thousands upon thousands of small memorial items left below. There were headstones,

statues depicting all kinds of races, small trinkets like rings or necklaces, all kinds of items left on the ground. Zac wasn't surprised at the scene after going through the trial, and he walked for half an hour until he found a spot.

He first took out a thin wooden sword and stabbed it into the ground. It was the training sword Thea often had used while practicing in his courtyard. He took out his axe and carved 'Thea' on the hilt before he stood and watched the sword for over half an hour.

Only then did he keep walking for a while, at which point he found another spot. He took out a framed picture and a boulder pedestal from his spatial ring, and carefully put the picture down on it. It was a picture of Himself, Kenzie, and Robert. He looked at his family for a few minutes more until he walked toward an illuminated spot in the center of the graveyard.

Zac stepped onto a teleporter a while later, and he immediately appeared in an opulent chamber. Right in front of him was a large plaque with just two lines written.

The night is the mother of the day

Chaos is neighbor with order

The words were simple, but every stroke was full of meaning. Whoever wrote it was definitely a high-grade cultivator, as it echoed with a Dao far beyond his own. Zac looked at the line for a few seconds until he turned to a meditating gnome he had spotted sitting to the side. She looked cute and fuzzy like a plush toy just as the other natives he had met, but there was an unfathomable power hidden within her diminutive frame.

Zac was surprised to sense an aura almost as powerful as that of Greatest's as she opened her eyes and looked back at him. This was a real hegemon, probably at the late stages or even at peak D-grade, and Zac couldn't help but tense up a bit.

"Congratulations, trial-taker," the gnome said. "It has been a while since someone reached the bottom, which requires you to hold on to your mortal heart. Those who discard all sentiments in the pursuit of power will reach the fifth checkpoint at best. Only the trees which can bend to the wind will survive the harshest storms. Our ancestor, Mandar Havenfort, never bent in his life and he only realized this truth when it was too late."

“Elder,” Zac slightly bowed before he asked curiously. “Why don’t you advertise the truth about the trial, that there’s a second way to complete it?”

“Our Grand Elder won’t allow it,” the gnome said with some helplessness. “He said that catharsis is something that should be chanced upon on the journey of life, not something actively sought for benefits. It was he who wrote those words.”

Zac nodded in agreement and left the building soon after taking another look at the sign. The hidden powerhouse seemed benign, but it was still uncomfortable to be alone in a room with a being that could eradicate him with a slap. There wasn’t anything else keeping him on this planet, and he immediately started walking toward the Teleportation Hub as he opened his status screen.

[Equanimity: Reach the floor of the Havenfort Chasm. Reward: Base Attributes +2%. Wisdom, Endurance +2%.]

Zac looked at the title with surprise. The Trial was supposed to give 0.5% to Endurance and Wisdom along with flat attributes for the first four checkpoints, and then 1% for the final level. But it looked like the whole title had changed by reaching the foot of the chasm, turning it into a far superior title that provided a boost to all base attributes.

The title was a far cry from the titles provided from ordeals such as the Tower of Eternity, but there was also very little danger involved. In fact, any titles providing over 5% to any base attribute in the E-grade came with a real risk of death, and they also weren’t publicly open like the **[Havenfort Chasm]**.

With his two previous Limited Titles, Zac now had three of his slots filled up, which would be the limit for most. That obviously wasn’t the case for him, so Zac gave it some thought before he stepped onto the teleporter heading toward the next trial.