

The Fall 214

Chapter 214: Traps and Ladders

Only fools would rush up to the mountain peaks, becoming unwitting meat shields to try out whatever trials those places had in store. Because going by how the System operated it wouldn't simply leave piles of wealth for anyone to grab, there likely was a trick to it.

Besides, even if he might not have the highest Luck of everyone arriving here, he should at least be in the absolute top. That he was dropped off right in front of this specific temple might mean there were some good things inside.

There wasn't anything noteworthy to see as he walked across the small square in front of the temple, and he quickly ascended the ten steps to the real entrance. The doors were closed but a simple push opened them with a creak, giving him a clear view of the insides of the temple.

The interiors were completely barren with only two exceptions as far as he could see. There was a large painting hung on the opposite side of the temple, and a simple prayer mat that appeared to be woven by reed in front of it.

Zac got curious and after taking one last look around entered, but the moment he put his foot inside an enormous pressure descended upon his mind. The surroundings changed and he suddenly found himself on a desperate battlefield.

Any way he looked there were bloodied and muddied warriors desperately trying to kill their opponents, their eyes tinged with red in madness and bloodlust. No one cared the slightest about their own well-being, only constantly pushing forward, desperately swinging their weapons.

Zac looked down to find an axe in his hand, and suddenly an overwhelming battle lust overcame him. It was as though a god of war was beckoning him to massacre everything, to stand on top of a mountain of corpses. He wanted to bite into the opponent's flesh and drink their blood and revel in the madness of battle.

The next second Zac grunted as the vision shattered, and he once again found himself in the empty temple. He actually hadn't moved, and he still only stood with one foot inside the building. But his back was soaked in sweat and he was panting from the strain. There was even a trickle of blood running down his chin, as he'd apparently bit his lip.

It was an offensive illusion array. That was the only thing that Zac could guess. Luckily between [Mental Fortress] and his staunch determination he quickly broke himself out of it. Otherwise he'd be a sitting duck, standing in the doorway like a fool.

He immediately regretted not having trained with Janos more. There were various ways to break out of illusions, and he had just now used the most basic one, brute force. But that would only work when his will and determination could overpower the strength of the illusion.

There were far more skilled ways to break illusions that didn't depend on strength to such a degree. It had been on his list of things to learn in the future, but there were always a million things to do, making him forget about it.

But he knew a few basic pieces of information. The most important thing was to never lose a sense of self. The moment you forgot who you were, taking on the role of whoever the illusion provided you, then you were likely screwed.

Losing the sense of self would mean that you stopped fighting the illusion, and it would take a miracle to get out in one piece. As for breaking illusions while trapped, it was actually possible. The world that was created had so-called fault lines, or weaknesses, that one could use to break out.

How to localize them and break the loop of the illusion was an art in of itself, and not something Zac could do at the moment.

But now that he knew there could be arrays he'd be in a better position. His defensive skill was already active, but he started actively control it as he took another step inside. However, this time nothing happened, and another few steps proved that there likely only was one array as protection.

Zac looked out through the door to the vast number of buildings in the mountain ranges. Perhaps all structures had these kinds of protections put in place. If that was true the palaces might be real death traps.

A small temple in the middle of a mountain had an array that almost managed to suck him in. Just what kind of defenses would the grand structures where the elders lived have? Perhaps the treasure hunters themselves wouldn't be the greatest danger to this hunt, but rather the arrays.

Zac put it out of his mind and slowly walked over toward the painting, keeping his mental defenses up and running all the while. However, it truly seemed that everything was safe after defeating the array at the entrance.

He soon stood in front of the mat and the painting, trying to understand their meaning. The painting was only one large character from some unknown script. It was clear that it was derived from the normal fractals, just like those of the Demons and Creators, but it was different from both of them.

The mat looked pretty cheap from first glance, but it likely was made from some high-quality material rather than normal reed. The reason was that it looked pretty much brand new, even though it should have been left here for millennia. Normal reed would have rotted away long ago.

It truly looked like it was a setup to meditate upon something. Someone would sit at this mat and stare at the painting on the wall, trying to reach new insights. After making sure there were no more traps around in the area Zac squatted down and touched the mat.

Nothing happened, making Zac sigh in relief. After hesitating for a bit he sat down on the mat, looking up at the painting. He wanted to see what whoever once sat here saw as he or she looked upon the weird character.

Zac didn't know why, but as he stared at the exquisitely drawn painting he almost felt drawn in, but not like with an illusion. Rather that it was trying to teach him something. Zac let himself get inundated by the feeling, trying to understand the concepts that the sign contained.

However, a jarring sound broke Zac out of his reverie, and he turned around with annoyance. Outside the doorway three humans stood looking around the temple. Since there wasn't really anything else inside the trio soon turned their gazes to Zac.

The three of them didn't enter, but one of them took out a small book and quickly went through it.

"He's not on the list," Zac could hear one of them say with a subdued voice.

Since the temple was completely empty the words carried over to Zac on the other side. Zac's curiosity was somewhat piqued, as he'd never heard of any list. Perhaps someone had compiled a list of rankers with descriptions by now.

He still had the information package he bought long ago from New Washington detailing the top of the Ishiate ladder. However, on that information missive only names were given.

Someone named Starlight was on the first spot and still held a commanding lead according to the Ishiate on the island. He or she was currently level 54, even beating out Salvation, which was quite impressive.

If there was a more advanced copy of the ladder circulating he wouldn't mind getting his hands on it. It wasn't that he was afraid to encounter some of the stronger humans, but he wanted to know what the big players looked like.

It would help him out in his side-mission, creating a business monopoly with the help of Calrin. He was about to ask the trio about it, but they kept talking between themselves.

"Hidden or weakling?" another muttered with a hushed tone.

"No need to risk it, we'll stay low and observe for now," the person in the middle said.

The three nodded and made to walk out again while warily keeping their eyes on Zac. It seemed they had decided they didn't want to fight with Zac for the meager treasures inside.

Zac wasn't surprised. It was just the start of the Treasure Hunt, and only fools would enter fights blindly with complete strangers. The ladders would give an indicator of power within a week or two, but at the moment everything was a mystery.

But Zac truly was curious about that list, so he stood up.

"Wait," he said with a calm voice.

The three hesitated for a second and turned back toward Zac.

"What?"

"What list are you talking about?" Zac asked.

"The Omniscient Eye's elite list, of course," the man said with a frown.

"Omniscient Eye?" Zac asked with confusion.

This wasn't a term he'd ever heard of before. There was an Eternal Eye high up on the ladder, and the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes, but no Omniscient Eye. But judging from the context it seemed to be an individual or organization that focused on intelligence gathering.

"Why play ignorant? Is this an Empire ploy?" the man in the middle said, and the others seemed to ready themselves for battle with worry in their eyes.

The confusion in Zac's mind only increased, until he started to have a sneaking suspicion. Without another word he flashed right in front of the trio and snatched the book still in the leftmost man's hands.

The three seemed shocked by Zac's speed, but they were experienced fighters, each of them unhesitantly attacking with their swords. But Zac barely registered their actions, simply swatting the swords out of their hands with a wave.

Horror appeared in their eyes, and the leader of the three unhesitantly called for a retreat. But how could it be that easy to get away from Zac when they were in melee range?

Zac flashed after them and threw all three down on the ground. But before Zac had time to react they had taken out their tokens, intending to crush it. Zac only had time to snatch the token out of the hands of the leader before the other two instantly winked out of existence.

"Please, my life won't give you many points and I haven't collected any treasure yet. Killing me will award you nothing," the man said with a pleading look.

"I'm not going to kill you, but I need answers," Zac said as he used [Inquisitive Eye] on his captive.

[Revor – Human. Level 37 – Strength]

[Hunter 97 323]

[Gatherer 97 323]

Revor possessed neither the attributes or the skills to block out his middling scouting skill. The man in front of him should be a pretty average trial taker, roughly the same as those from his island.

But what Zac found more interesting were the additional two lines beneath his name. The System provided additional information about ladder positions. That would soon become extremely helpful in finding juicy targets or avoid dangerous people.

The sheer number of participants was also higher than he had expected. He'd realized that the tokens weren't quite as rare as he'd first thought after seeing the others in Port Atwood. But almost a hundred thousand participants were quite a few.

"Ask me anything, anything," the Revor quickly nodded.

"First of all, do you possess an identification skill?" Zac asked.

"I do, but only a basic one," he nodded.

"Use it on me and show me what it says," Zac commanded.

He felt his bangle slightly heat up the next moment telling him that an attempt on him was blocked. But even so, a screen appeared the next moment looking identical to the two lines that detailed Revor's ladder position. It was Zac's own ladder position which was a few spots ahead of Revor's.

"I can't see your name, only these two lines. I've never seen them before," Revor quickly said.

Zac nodded in confirmation. It was as he'd expected. Those lines were something added by the System, and not something even a treasure from Greatest could block out. Next, he wanted to find out if his suspicions were correct.

"Open up your ladder next," Zac said.

The man looked confused, but he complied with the request, and soon two almost ladders appeared in front of them. It was the Hunter and Gatherer ladders, and Zac sighed when he saw that some already had started to accrue points on the Hunter-ladder. But this wasn't what he was after.

But just as Zac was about to speak up Revor interrupted him.

"I can see your placing again without using my skill!" he said with surprise.

Zac's brows rose and he opened up the temporary ladders as well, and it was just as Revor said. Two lines once again appeared above him.

[Hunter 97 309]

[Gatherer 97 309]

The man's placing had gone down a bit. But since he neither had killed nor found treasure it could only mean that people had died or fled the hunt in that short interval. But that wasn't what Zac cared about.

Neither Zac's bracelet or his [Mental Fortress] skill activated in the slightest, but Revor was able to glean information about him even so. It meant that anyone would be able to spy on him without him noticing by simply opening the ladders.

Zac felt that it wasn't great for him, but it might help save a couple of lives. It would give the weaker people a chance to avoid the more murderous powerhouses.

"Not that ladder, the normal one for levels," Zac said, refocusing on the real issue.

"Of course!" the man quickly said, but his face only got more confused.

The next moment a normal ladder appeared in front of him. But just as Zac had expected, he didn't recognize a single name on that list.