

## The Fall 223

### Chapter 223: Darkness

“What’s with that face,” Thea said with a small smile as she scooped the soup with a ladle. “Don’t you still have the cauldron and a bunch of these things?”

“I guess,” Zac said as he took out a piece of meat from the E Grade Tiger and tore into it.

The cloud of energy from the trapped pill had completely refilled his reserves, but he was still a bit hungry. The two were content to switch to small talk as they ate their dinner, neither seeming really interested in talking about things like their respective factions or plans for the hunt.

It was a simple dinner, but Zac felt it was a welcome respite from all the responsibilities back at his island. He also sensed that Thea was feeling the same way, and she never made any attempts to gain any knowledge about his faction or personal power.

Thea said that the vegetable had a greatly nourishing effect, and Zac could see that she had regained color to her face. Since they'd had their dinner and Thea was feeling better they immediately packed up afterward and got ready to head out. The mountain was completely sheer on this side, stopping them from any plans of making a descent here, so they had to go back from where they came.

Besides, Zac wasn’t completely done with the palace. As soon as they entered the garden again Zac immediately flashed over to one of the gardener automatons and picked it up by its neck. It actually went completely still, not struggling or resisting in the slightest.

The next moment it simply disappeared, entering Zac’s Cosmos Sack. He breathed out in relief since he wasn’t sure it would be possible to store those things. He already knew that it wasn’t possible to store Sapient golems, such as the Creators, but these things were basically just machines that ran on Cosmic Energy.

They spent the next five minutes scouring over the whole place, and in the end Zac found 14 golems. They also found a couple of them that were broken down and didn’t move, and Zac snatched those as well. Perhaps he could find someone that could repair them in the future, so leaving them would be a waste.

Of course, Zac also snatched everything that wasn’t nailed down in the house, leaving an empty husk of a mansion. Thea wasn’t idle either, plucking all kinds of flowers and seeds.

“Those aren’t Spiritual Herbs, you know?” Zac said as he saw her take a flower that stood in a window sill.

“I know, but they are beautiful. Haven’t you realized most of these flowers don’t exist on earth? I might be able to transplant a couple if they survive the sack,” she explained with some anticipation in her eyes.

It felt reasonable, so Zac did the same and gathered a couple of types he thought that Kenzie might enjoy having in her garden. It might also help the golems acclimatize if they recognized some of the flowers.

After that, they were finally done and exited through the same path as they entered. Just like with the other mansions they weren't accosted by the array on the way out, saving Zac the effort of having to carry her again through the gravity array.

The mountain was still completely desolate when they exited, and no warning bells went off in Zac's mind from hidden threats. Perhaps someone had come, but seeing the crater full of human remains and the other signs of an intense battle chose to retreat.

The two quickly oriented themselves and descended in the direction of the mountain Thea chose. After discussing it they decided to skip the buildings lower down on the mountain. It simply wasn't worth it to go over the servant's quarters with their limited time. Their efforts were better spent on scaling as many summits as possible.

While there were magnificent mountains as far as they could see there were almost a hundred thousand treasure takers. If all scaled a couple of mountains a day it was possible that all treasure would be snatched up well before the month was up. The more of the top tier treasures that went into their pouches immediately the better, since people could leave with their loot at any moment.

Zac was at first afraid Thea wouldn't be able to keep up with him barreling down the mountain at breakneck speed, but she clearly had no problem on that front. It was also evident that her Dexterity was well above his own, as it conversely was Zac that was forced to struggle to keep up.

While he rushed down like a bull she nimbly jumped down using anything from a branch to an outcropping as a foothold, not being restricted at all by the winding path. Zac wondered if that kind of footwork was a skill since he was completely unable to move like that even with his impressive amount of Dexterity.

Sometimes it looked like she would plummet to her death, but she simply landed at some almost indiscernible ledge and kept going down alongside him. With their pace, it didn't take long for them to reach the foot of the mountain and they stopped their mad dash.

"That palace we saw was two mountains over. Should we stay down here, or go over the mountain ahead?" Zac asked.

"Up to you," Thea said.

"Let's take the passage. It's a bit longer but there are so many beasts here to help grind the ladder," Zac said and eagerly took out his axe.

Thea had no objections and simply nodded. Zac immediately set off, rushing through the dense forest covering the valleys between the mountains. The shade was almost perpetual at the forest floor, as the little sun that got past the mountain tops was blocked by the canopies.

The trees themselves were quite tall and had almost all their branches far up in the sky. As for vegetation on the forest floor, there wasn't too much of it. There were quite a number of boulders that might have fallen down from the mountains though, and also rubble of broken-down buildings.

It looked like there had been towns that went all along the mountains, forming pockets of populations between the towering mountains. These buildings, or rather the remains of them, were far shoddier and mundane compared to the glistening palaces on the mountain tops.

It made Zac wonder if these were the towns of normal mortals, living close to the mountains for protection by the cultivators. Had people living down here once looked up at the magnificent palaces and dreamed of becoming a powerful warrior as well?

The travels through the forest went just like Zac expected. It only took a couple of seconds before he was accosted by a bunch of rats. He made short work of them with his axe, not even bothering to summon a fractal edge for these vermin.

Thea clearly had a competitive bone as she immediately started slaughtering beasts as well, even running off in the wrong direction to find additional prey to kill. Beasts fell by the wayside, most of them with a large tear in their throat bleeding them out in seconds.

Her speed of clearing out animals was slightly faster than his own, even after he started using [Loamwalker] to shorten the time between the packs. However, Zac didn't see it as a discrepancy in power, but rather that her skillset seemed more suited for their situation.

Zac could improve his speed of killing as well if he summoned a couple of fractal edges and shot them at beast packs in the distance, but he would create a spectacle if he did so, mowing down trees and destroying ruins.

He wouldn't alert any potential threats just to kill a couple of additional rats, which allowed Thea to gain an edge on him for the moment. She flittered through the woods slight a silent reaper, and anything within thirty meters of her died.

The scene allowed Zac to form a more educated opinion about her skillset. First of all, it was obvious that there were numerous invisible weapons around her, not just one. He'd seen well over ten beasts die simultaneously by getting their throats slit individually. He absently wondered just how she controlled so many blades at the same time. Was she able to split her focus in so many directions at once?

Secondly, her range of attacks seemed to be around 50 meters at the most, as no beast further than that died from her blades. However, Zac didn't discount the possibility that she was holding back, not showing her maximum range. Taking things for granted was how one got killed after all.

From there on out it was pretty straight forward. The two kept a rapid pace until they reach their destination, and without taking a break climbed it as well.

When they reached the peak they saw a couple of corpses and a group of 8 people standing outside the palace, and it seemed they were discussing methods to get in. They all wore individual gear, making Zac unsure whether they were from earth or the other planet. But they likely weren't from the Medhin Empire, since they all seemed to be wearing the same thing.

They were of middling rank for both the hunter and gatherer ladder, and all seemed decently strong. One of them spotted the two of them immediately, even though they had taken care to make no sound as they approached. The moment the two were discovered the whole group of men looked over.

"Flee!" one of them screamed, and the group unhesitantly threw out large balls at the ground between themselves and Zac, which each exploded into a firestorm.

Zac only gawked in surprise at the inferno that reached almost ten meters in the air in front of them.

“Pretty smart, creating a firewall while they flee. Your ladder rankings will make it hard to rob most people unless we catch them unaware,” Thea commented, not bothering with hunting down the group.

“Well, I don’t think those guys had much of value in any case, they couldn’t even get past the array,” Zac said as he swung a huge fractal edge at the flames, the force of his swing dousing the fire immediately.

With the help of Thea's skills, they didn’t have much trouble entering the palace, and both had respectable gains from it, and it even helped Thea reach the 53rd spot on the ladder from her earlier spot in the thousands. Since the cooperation worked well they kept going for the rest of the day, going from one mountain to another until it was pitch black outside.

By this point they had scoured four mountains in total, encountering almost no resistance. They had seen a few people who either fled or crushed their tokens the moment they saw them and also caught a couple of people unaware.

Thea had a pretty straightforward tactic where she robbed everyone whose hunter position was higher than their gatherer position, and depending on how evil they seemed either killed them or crushed their tokens. The others she simply ignored.

Zac robbed only people that had a decent placement on the ladder, but he kept increasing his requirements since his Cosmos Sack was quickly filling up with junk.

It was currently pitch black outside, and the two stood inside one of the summit palaces deciding whether they should keep going or call it a day. The sky was almost completely devoid of stars, and the world they found themselves in didn’t even have any moon to reflect some light down on them during the night.

Zac’s increased attributes didn’t give him night vision so he couldn’t even see his hand in front of him with how dark it had gotten. It felt a bit suffocating so he took out a lantern that ran on Nexus Crystals that lit up the immediate surroundings.

But oddly enough it was as though the darkness was pushing back the light, making the lantern unable to light up anything apart from the immediate vicinity.

“That’s pretty odd,” Thea said with some worry in her voice, seeing the weird phenomenon as well.

“There is something wrong with the darkness.”

“Perhaps we should stay inside these arrays for the night,” Zac hesitantly said.

Honestly, the situation was a bit spooky. Something had completely destroyed this place once upon a time, leaving not a soul behind. And now the darkness was acting up. Zac was about to ask for Thea's opinion, but a screen appeared in front of him.

[Darkness descends. Tokens deactivated. Survive.]