

The Fall 224

Chapter 224: Salvation

"Uh, did you get that prompt at well?" Zac said and turned over to Thea who had paled a bit.

"Yes..." was all she said as she vigilantly looked around, trying to pierce the darkness with her gaze. She also moved a bit closer to Zac and his lantern.

It looked like the System had something planned after all. People killing each other for treasure wasn't enough it appeared, the System also felt the need to remove their safety net at an inopportune time. If he knew the system it had orchestrated some sort of trial that would either kill them or help them get stronger.

"Feels like we're in some horror movie," Zac muttered as he kept looking around for anything to pop out from the darkness.

Nothing happened as the minutes passed, but that did nothing to calm Zac's fraying nerves. It still felt like something was brewing, and the Darkness kept going stronger. Soon the lantern only reached half the distance compared to before, creating a small circle of light with just him and Thea inside.

The few stars in the sky had long winked out of existence, and it felt like it was only the two of them set adrift in the void. At first it almost felt like the odd space he found himself when he rolled for survival, but this darkness was different.

There was something sinister and oppressive about the gloom that surrounded them, whereas that odd space was completely sterile. If Zac turned off the lantern in his hand they would be completely swallowed by the dark, whereas the other space had some odd unseen source of light.

Any idea of heading to the next mountain to look for treasure was completely forgotten, and now Zac was only focused on survival. He was extremely happy he'd decided to keep going with Thea, as sitting alone in this environment would have been way more nerve-wracking.

He quickly glanced over at his companion, and she returned a look that told that she felt the same way. Neither of them spoke though, afraid of drawing the attention of whatever was lurking out in the dark.

Suddenly Zac thought he heard something, and he hesitantly glanced over to his right. But of course, only darkness met his gaze. However, the sound kept growing clearer, and soon Zac could make out some incessant whispering.

Zac's neck hair stood right on edge, and he couldn't help but speak up.

"Do you hear those whispers?" Zac said with as low a voice he could.

A nod from a deathly pale Thea was all the confirmation he needed.

When he saw the prompt he had assumed that the system would unleash a horde of beasts upon him, just like with the beast hordes. But perhaps that wasn't exactly the case. He nervously fiddled with the bangle on his arm as he took active control of his mental defense skill.

The minutes passed as the whispers grew more intense, and Zac was starting to feel the strain. He couldn't tell exactly what the voices were, but he assumed it was something like evil spirits. Their whispers were a pervasive mental attack, and it almost felt like they tried to burrow themselves into his head.

"Some sort of wraiths," Thea said, seeming to be under an equal amount of pressure. "They are trying to possess us."

Zac grunted in affirmation as he kept rebuffing the insidious murmurs. A few minutes later it seemed the whispers had reached a peak, and thankfully the intensity didn't keep increasing. Zac felt a bit relieved since he felt confident that he would be able to bear the mental burden through the night if needed.

A glance over at Thea showed that she seemed to be mostly fine as well, and she was currently holding on to an inscribed rock that looked like an ostrich egg. It probably was some mental protection tool she had attained somewhere.

Suddenly a piercing wail with enough force to cause undulations in the air hit Zac with enough force to make him completely blank out for a brief moment, losing control over [Mental Fortress]. Instantly he felt a chill in his mind, followed by a chaotic jumble of disorienting thoughts.

Hatred.

Thea had leeches off him for a whole day, stealing the treasures that were rightfully his. Using him as a shield to brave the dangers of the arrays, laughing behind his back. Insidious, treacherous.

Something needed to be done.

An all-consuming killing intent as he turned his murky eyes toward her lithe neck, his fingers itching. He could just reach out, and with a snap he would be vindicated.

Suddenly a tomahawk was in his hand, taken out from his Cosmos Sack. Thea looked over with surprise, only to see him swing it down to gore his own thigh. The next moment a thick vibrant aura of life exuded from Zac, after having activated his Dao Field for his Dao of Trees.

"What are you doing?" Thea asked as she cautiously looked at Zac like he had become a lunatic.

Zac panted for a few seconds, his forehead covered in a sheen of perspiration before he looked up with clear eyes once again.

"I think I got possessed, but the pain woke me up enough to release my Dao Field. The Dao of trees had been effective against ghosts before so I thought it might help," Zac said.

That was a close one. It had been extremely disconcerting to feel a bunch of consciousness in his mind, urging him to perform unspeakable acts. It was like he had been afflicted with schizophrenia, unable to discern what was real and not.

Luckily Zac had some experience of his mind being flooded with violent impulses thanks to his [Hatchetman's Rage] skill, and it allowed him to perform two last-ditch efforts. Wounding himself wasn't optimal, but the pain cut through the chaotic jumble in his mind and allowed him to unleash his Dao.

For a split second his mind had been flooded with pained wails as the Dao purged the specters or whatever the whispering things were, and they unhesitantly fled out of his head, away from the vibrant Dao.

He also noticed that the effect of the Dao of Trees was great, silencing the penetrating whispers to a low murmur. However, the response was almost immediate as a claw stretched out of the darkness, heading straight for his throat.

Zac immediately swung his tomahawk, but it went straight through the incoming attack. Zac frowned as he gathered some Cosmic energy while he took out [Verun's Bite], swinging it before the claw managed to reach him.

Luckily the hand was cut, and to Zac's surprise something that looked like black ichor dripped down the edge of his axe before it turned into a black haze that drifted away. These things perhaps weren't actual ghosts, but some nefarious creation that just looked similar. But before Zac had time to sigh in relief tens of claws reached out of the darkness, and a few ghastly faces emerged as well.

They were humanoid but without any facial features, apart from a huge maw that seemed to contain a black hole. The hair was standing straight out on Zac's whole body by now, but there was nothing to do except start swinging like a madman.

He summoned a huge fractal edge and with a growl let it rip through the crowd of humanoids, shredding them to pieces. However, he wasn't happy with the result. The things were clearly destroyed into motes of darkness, but he didn't gain a smidgeon of Cosmic Energy from the kills.

That kills rewarded Cosmic Energy was one of the most fundamental aspects of the multiverse, and not gaining anything should mean that these things didn't die when they were destroyed.

They did not reform though, at least not immediately, which gave Zac a brief respite until he once again was thronged with wraiths.

"I can't kill them," Thea said with some franticness in her voice.

"Me neither," Zac said. "Perhaps we just need to keep them at bay until sunrise."

Thea didn't have any better idea, so they placed themselves back to back with the lantern glowing in between them.

The assault of the beings wrought from darkness kept increasing in intensity. In the beginning they were just fodder and were instantly disintegrated with a swing by Zac. But after a couple of hours, they were almost as strong as the demon warriors back on the island.

One by one they still wouldn't be a problem, but they were endless. Worse yet, they were completely unheeding of their own safety since apparently they couldn't die. They were content in sacrificing themselves just so long as they managed to deal any kind of damage.

Small wounds started to accumulate on Zac's body, but these levels of wounds were nothing to Zac who kept stoically swinging his axe. However, Thea didn't possess the same endurance as Zac did, and started to wane after four hours. That left Zac to cover two-thirds of the circle of light. Still, it was better than being alone and getting accosted from all around, so Zac didn't complain as he kept swinging.

The night finally passed and Zac slumped down, completely exhausted. The assault had thankfully ended the moment the night was broken by the first rays of dawn. Thea was already holding an E-Grade crystal in her hand, absorbing it while rotating her Cultivation Technique.

She had a few wounds on various parts of her body, and it appeared a few of her old ones had reopened. Zac soon did the same and took out an E-Grade crystal as well. He was almost completely spent, and what was worse he had barely made any gains from the desperate struggle.

What a horrible night.

What a glorious night.

Gabriel couldn't help smiling as he stood barefoot at the summit, the ragged bedsheets he had fashioned into a robe fluttering in the wind from the residual shockwaves from the battle. He closed his auburn eyes for a moment and swept his long oily hair back as he sighed in contentment.

The voices of the lost had clamored for relief as they gathered around him for redemption all through the night. He was the light bringing the wayward sailors back toward shore, the divine shepherd. The whispers begged for passage into his mind, and he had gladly obliged.

Gabriel couldn't help licking his mouth at the memory, ignoring the horrified whimper from below. The sustenance he gained from delivering salvation to the wretched specters during the night was as effective as weeks of hard work.

The universe had even awarded him with two levels due to his hard work to emancipate those lost in the darkness. It would have been more if the voices hadn't shied away after their brethren entered his mind and were granted salvation.

Gabriel could only pray to The Great Redeemer that the lost children of the dark would come back tonight as well so that he could continue his mission from God. In the meantime, there was much work to be done.

He finally looked down at the man who had been the cause of unrest this morning. The man was somewhere in his forties and looked foreign to Gabriel. The man was decked in an elaborate golden robe, and it appeared that he was a ruler of the other world that had joined him in this so-called hunt.

When he had seen Gabriel he had immediately tried to leave, but Gabriel wouldn't have it. Almost a hundred men that were cursed by their freedom, how could he ignore such a plight? He had immediately attacked, unhesitantly sacrificing almost half of his Silver Guards.

These apostates had fought hard against salvation, damned by their ignorance. Their leader had even been infused with the power of the soldiers, reaching powers beyond anything Gabriel had ever seen before, apart from The Great Redeemer himself of course.

But how could a mundane ruler stop a messiah on a mission? The soldiers who fought alongside this royal had already joined the crusade, silently standing behind him with their new brethren.

"Through pain comes clarity," Gabriel said with equanimity. "Through clarity comes salvation. Join the crusade."

"No, please let me go. I've already given you all my treasure and you've taken my army," the golden robed man said with utter terror in his eyes as he looked upon his former subordinates. "You have taken everything, no need to make the Medhin Empire an enemy. I am the 18th son, Supratej Medhin, and I can help you in various ways."

"Neither King nor Pauper can avoid the reckoning. Bask in The Great Redeemer's glory," Gabriel said, his eyes burning with an inexorable conviction.

"The Great...?" the Medhin royal said, his brows rising. "Wait! I am--"

But he didn't get any further as Gabriel ignored him and started the purification.

He bent down and gently tapped Supratej's head, just like he had done with tens of thousands of others. A silver fractal appeared on the head of the recruit's forehead, and the Medhin princeling stopped struggling, his eyes turning blank.

The two silver guards stopped holding him down and instead bowed toward Gabriel and returned to the ranks of the Silver Crusaders.

Gabriel didn't give the two a second glance and instead reverently looked down at his new parishioner. Even after seeing the transformation innumerable times over the past months hadn't killed off the surge of euphoria he felt when bringing another lost lamb into the fold.

The silver glow of the Redeemer's Light quickly flowed through the whole body of the man, the fractal in his forehead absorbing a great amount of Cosmic Energy from the atmosphere. Gabriel suddenly received a large amount of Cosmic Energy as well, showing that the purification was a success.

The cosmos sack at the parishioner's waist turned into lights that entered Gabriel's own, but he couldn't care less for some material possessions. He still hadn't deigned to use the thing since he arrived, as The Great Redeemer had already provided him with all he needed.

A small translucent copy of the man appeared out of the fractal on the man's forehead, and it appeared to be howling in pain and fear. Gabriel knew the lost soul just didn't understand the great gift that it was being given, and didn't get angry by it.

The soul soon entered the golden fractal on Gabriel's own forehead, and soon it had joined the others in unity. The body of the new parishioner slowly stood up, its skin tone now a divine silver, and wordlessly joining the rest of the army. The Army of God in this temporary hunt was now over three hundred strong.

Gabriel couldn't help feel some jealousy as he glanced at the stoic back of his new Silver Guard. He was now unburdened by things such as a soul and discordant thoughts, and instead became a part of the unity. He knew his own deliverance would come sooner or later, but not until his work was complete.

Existence is pain, sapience a curse. But he was Salvation.