

The Fall 225

Chapter 225: Diplomacy

Zac and Thea decided to stay inside the protective enclosure of the summit array in order to rest up before starting the day. Both were completely exhausted, neither having slept a wink the whole night. They simply sat down a few meters from each other as they restored their reserves.

It was normally no problem for them to go a few days without sleep, but with threats both known and unknown all over this trial they didn't want to take any chances. A mistake by tiredness could quickly have dire consequences.

Oddly enough the area was completely devoid of any Cosmic Energy after the Darkness receded, forcing them to only rely on crystals. Thea was still far quicker to restore herself back to fighting condition due to speeding up the absorption with her cultivation manual, and after roughly an hour walked over to Zac who opened his eyes.

"I will sleep a bit, can you guard me for two hours before we swap?" she said, looking over at Zac.

"No problem. I still need some more time to refill my batteries," Zac nodded.

That was the first time he saw a Cultivator restore themselves, and he couldn't help but become a bit jealous of the speed. He estimated her to be able to absorb Cosmic Energy around three times quicker than he himself, and that was one of the side-benefits of being a cultivator.

It was even more frustrating when he felt that his body would be able to handle far larger streams of Cosmic Energy than what he currently was able to drag out of his crystal. This was nothing compared to the massive energies that had coursed through his body before. But he simply had no method to speed up the process.

Thea walked a few meters away and took out a small but high-end tent from her Cosmos Sack. It was clear it was another creation of the craftsmen of the Marshall clan, since the nylon tent was covered with low-grade runes.

They were so basic that even Zac could tell that their purpose was simply to make the material sturdier, but it was better than nothing. Thea crawled inside and closed the flap behind her, and in just seconds he could hear the even breaths of someone asleep.

Zac kept absorbing the energy from his nexus crystal as he kept watch, going over the events of the night. It was extremely frustrating that he fought so hard, yet there was not a single Nexus Coin or any energy as a reward.

He tried using all his Daos and skills, but nothing managed to kill the weird specters. The Dao of Trees was far superior to anything else in destroying the things, but it wasn't able to actually kill them. For all he knew he was actually fighting the same things over and over after they reformed.

However, the night wasn't completely without its rewards. His skill [Mental Fortress] had actually advanced to late-stage from Zac using it constantly to prevent himself from getting possessed again.

The upgrade didn't bring any changes to the skill apart from making it sturdier. Even the cost of using it was the same as before. While it wasn't very exciting Zac still felt that it was just what he needed in his current situation.

If this would become a nightly event the upgraded skill would be a godsend.

Next he up his ladder, and what he saw was extremely surprising. The first thing he noticed was that Salvation had actually sailed all the way up to the first spot on the Hunter ladder. Zac frowned and opened up his normal Power Ladder from Earth.

To his shock he saw that Salvation had gained two full levels during the night, something that felt almost incomprehensible. He was now level 55, only 7 levels behind Zac. Of course, those levels were a great chasm, but Zac worried that they might actually be bridged faster than he'd hoped.

Either Salvation was met with a very different trial during the night, one that gave a lot of Cosmic Energy, or he was able to slay the specters. Zac actually hoped more for the first scenario. If salvation could massacre the endless ghosts during the night he might actually pass Zac in levels if he kept going for the whole month.

Zac wasn't so petty that he didn't want others to pass him, but this situation was a bit problematic. The rumors surrounding Salvation and his Cradle of God weren't great. If he managed to attain E-Rank and the titles Zac assumed would come with the evolution it might spell trouble.

The second shock to Zac was the sheer number of remaining participants. While Zac desperately fought within the darkness he thought that there might only be a handful of surviving participants after that insane assault, but he was proven wrong by the ladders.

There were still a full 80 thousand participants in the trial, which completely baffled Zac. How could others fight through that kind of assault and survive? He personally would have barely made it if he was alone, and he actually guessed that not even Thea would survive alone unless she had some aces up her sleeve.

That thousands and thousands of people of middling power were still running about was extremely surprising. Zac could only guess that the assault was somehow adjusted to the power of the participants, and others wouldn't have to withstand such a strong assault.

Another possibility was that it was related to the palaces. The atmosphere was still a bit glum, and while the cosmic energy was gradually restoring itself it was still extremely sparse. It was a stark contrast to the extremely dense energy that covered the top tier palaces they visited yesterday.

The mountains clearly had some sort of arrays that gathered the energy of the atmosphere to create cultivator havens up on the summits. If the ghosts fed on Cosmic Energy it would make sense that they would gather at the top tier palaces, where the density was the highest.

Perhaps Zac and Thea simply found themselves at the ghost's feeding ground, which resulted in their frenzied assault.

The weaker participants would likely not be at the summit during the night since the risk of meeting powerhouses up there was higher. And they should have learned by now that the summit arrays were extremely strong, and not something they could break through.

Another indicator that this might be the case was that another of the Medhin Royals had fallen during the night since his name was removed from the list. Perhaps he did the same as the two of them, staying within one of the palace arrays for safety.

Thea got out of her tent two hours later on the dot, and the two swapped places. Zac didn't bring a tent for himself since he was used to sleeping outside, so he simply rested his back against a tree and closed his eyes. But he kept his axe in his hand in case something happened.

Later the morning the two descended the mountain, heading for another palace three mountains over. They had decided to keep going like yesterday since the events during the night shouldn't affect their treasure hunting.

They didn't encounter anyone for most of the descent, but they actually spotted a woman blankly staring at a man who seemed to have died recently. Zac and Thea shared a silent nod, and Zac disappeared the next moment.

A split second later he reappeared holding the woman by the scruff of her shirt. She looked to be in her thirties and had quite a few scars. She was also covered in a few bandages, and judging by how wet they were the wounds were recent.

Both her ladder positions were in the last quartile and it wasn't really worth to either rob or kill her. Zac was simply after information. Since she was within arm's reach he let her go, knowing that he could stop her before she could take out her token and crush it.

The woman fearfully looked at Zac and Thea, and suddenly her eyes widened further in horror. She had likely checked their ladder positions, learning that she was caught by some of the most powerful people in the hunt.

"We are not interested in your life or your treasures. We want to ask you about what happened to you during the night," Zac simply said.

The woman breathed out in relief, before glancing at the corpse.

"My husband and I got a prompt that darkness descends, and it got very scary," she started explaining without any preamble. "Suddenly we heard an extremely loud wail. That's when it got crazy."

"Crazy?" Thea probed.

"My husband went mad. He actually tried to bite my throat. These wounds are from him biting and scratching me. It got so chaotic I had to kill him in self-defense," she said, her eyes reddening. "We knew that we might not survive this hunt, but not like this..."

"I'm sorry, it seems your husband was possessed," Zac said with a sigh. "What happened next?"

"There were a few ghosts that attacked me later, but the rest of the time I stayed huddled with my back against a rock," she said.

Zac frowned and looked over at Thea, who only shrugged. They asked a few more questions after that, but it was clear that she was barely attacked during the night. She had somewhat discerned some whispers, but it was only at the start of the night.

They let her go afterward, and they saw her store her husband's body before she crushed her token. It seemed the events of the night had crushed her spirit, making her unwilling to stay in the hunt. Zac felt leaving was the right choice, it was meaningless to die for treasure.

As the two kept proceeding toward their targeted mountain they caught a few more treasure-hunters, and their stories were similar. In the groups with multiple members at least one had turned insane, and were either killed or subdued.

However, they encountered another interesting case when they caught a solo hunter. He had admitted that after hearing that penetrating wail at the start of the night he completely blanked out and didn't remember anything before waking up on top of a corpse, drenched in blood.

It was the same with those who got subdued in the groups. When morning arrived they came to again, not remembering a single thing. It appeared that getting possessed might not necessarily result in death. It would rather turn one into a bloodthirsty beast, and whether you survived depended on whether you encountered weaker prey or stronger predators.

The piercing wail was also something everyone mentioned, even after they had traveled over ten mountains in the afternoon. Everyone had clearly heard it, and it felt like a mental attack. Zac initially thought the wail originated from their own mountain, but that wasn't the case.

Just what kind of ghost could scream so loudly that everyone heard it across the whole mountain range? It seemed that there was a big boss ghost somewhere that was the originator of the wail. Were there perhaps some hidden rewards for killing that thing? What other secrets did this place hold?

Zac knew he wouldn't attempt killing the thing even if it rewarded some great rewards. He couldn't even kill the small buggers, just how would he kill the leader ghost that was strong enough to attack everyone on multiple mountains simultaneously?

A sudden heavy thumping of feet on the ground dragged Zac out of his musings, and he turned around to see what kind of beast was running toward them this time. However, what he saw was no beast. The moment Zac turned he spotted the largest Zhix that he had ever seen, almost half a meter taller than the Anointed of his own hive, Nonet.

Zac immediately opened up the ladder and breathed out in relief when he saw that it wasn't one of the two E-Grade Dominators. Since that was the case he didn't feel they were in trouble. Still, this Anointed radiated immense power, and it clearly didn't care about Zac and Thea's ranks since it emitted unbridled killing intent.

Thea readied herself for battle with a determined glare, but Zac waved at her to stand back.

"Let me handle this. I trained in Zhix diplomacy before coming here," Zac said while taking out the ceremonial dagger he received from Ibtep.

He took a few steps toward the Anointed barreling toward him and held up the dagger. He said nothing, instead only cutting his palm before stabbing the dagger into the ground.

The Zhix actually stopped in his tracks in surprise, but soon after took out a dagger of its own. It also silently cut its wrist, stabbing it down as well, which made Zac internally sigh in relief.

The next moment the two veritably disappeared, before they clashed with tremendous force. The Zhix's huge fist slammed straight into his gut, but Zac didn't try to dodge. He only took it head-on and was pushed back ten meters with a grunt.

But the next moment he flashed forward once again and returned a punch in kind. The attack created a huge shockwave, and it looked like the Zhix was blasted out of a cannon as it crashed into a large tree, turning it into splinters.

Zac didn't follow up, and instead retrieved a large rug and the medallion Ibtep also gave him. Next he took out a table and placed a large spit of grilled meat from the E-Grade tiger on it, and sat down as he looked over in the direction of the Anointed.

It looked like it had passed out from the punch, and didn't move at all.

"What's going on?" Thea said with confusion after she walked over to Zac's side. "Didn't you say you would try diplomacy?"

"Well, the Zhix customs place a large focus on strength," Zac said as he noted that the Zhix started twitching.

Soon after it arduously got to its feet and started walking toward Zac, who held up the medallion. The Anointed hesitated for a bit before it sat down on the opposite side of the table with a thump.

"You know the rites and have the tools, but you are no Anointed, human. What is going on?"