

The Fall 315

Chapter 315: Against the Clock

Worry marred Zac's face as he looked out at the ocean of silver puppets. He already knew the force that Salvation could summon was huge, but it was still intimidating to see such a line-up in person. The endless silver rivers looked like scars in the sky, and the combined aura of the puppets on the ground was extremely daunting.

"This kind of power should not be available to an F-Grade warrior," Ogras muttered, his face slightly pale. "There must be some kind of drawback."

"I didn't sense any weakness last time, apart from the fact that his actual body is pretty weak. He needed to use treasures and his puppets to stay safe. If I can get to him I'd be able to kill him in one swing," Zac said, mustering up some courage.

He was still not happy about the situation, as the arrival of the army arrival was too fast. The forest they were in was an hour away from the central city that Salvation had occupied, a chunk of former Los Angeles. It should have taken the puppets even longer to get here, meaning that Salvation set out toward this place hours ago.

Had they already been spotted?

"Well, so much for a sneak attack," Ogras muttered, echoing Zac's thoughts. "So what do you want to do?"

Zac frowned as he kept looking through the incoming horde through a pair of binoculars. Every single one was a puppet, which in a sense was good news. It meant no one had allied with Salvation, not even the Zhix under control of the Dominators. He did spot a few of the insectoids, but they had invariably been turned into puppets, just like the humans and Ishiate.

However, there were simply so many of them. What if he summoned another face in the sky, except that this one was a hundred times larger? Zac doubted that even he would survive such a strike. But he suddenly froze when he spotted the familiar form walking among the puppets.

Salvation still looked like an insane hobo, but Zac could spot even from this great distance that he had noticeably aged. Silver streaks ran through his oily head and wild beard, and his face was marred with wrinkles. Had he been forced to utilize Life Force in battle recently? If so he might be weakened, making this an opportune moment to strike.

The mad prophet had also arrived at a similar solution to his amputation as Ogras. The hand that Zac managed to chop off at the last minute in the hunt had been replaced by the metallic liquid that ran all the way up to his shoulder. Suddenly Salvation's head snapped straight toward their direction as Zac scouted him out, and it felt as he looked straight into his eyes. Zac didn't know why, but he was sure that it wasn't just a feeling, but rather the truth.

They had already been spotted.

"Let's head down," Zac said. "Perhaps we can surprise attack him while speaking. He's the kind of lunatic who likes an audience."

Ogras nodded and the two jumped down from their position up the tree. Just two minutes later they stood in front of the enormous army of puppets, with Salvation having walked toward the front. The world had almost turned monochromatic from the rivers obscuring the suns, but Zac's whole attention was on the lunatic wearing the dirty sheets.

"Like a moth to flames the spirit longs for salvation," Salvation said as he stepped forward, with ten silver rivers circulating him for protection. It looked like he wasn't taking any chances with Zac within axing distance. "Are you ready to join the Great Undertaking?"

"Unfortunately not. I'm here to finish what I started back in the hunt. Why don't you call your Zhix allies here as well?" Zac said, making a gambit that Salvation was too crazy to realize he was digging for information.

"Those three are but tools of the Great Lord," Salvation said with some disdain. "They lack the piety and the dedication to the cause and only serve a purpose until they've led the Great Lord here. They know better than to encroach on the holy land."

Zac felt some relief when hearing that, as it didn't look like Salvation was lying. His mind was consumed with his insane crusade, and things as subterfuge were beyond him at the moment.

"This one is even loopier than I thought," Ogras muttered with some interest as he studied Salvation like one would a rabid animal.

"Do not worry, horned one. Not even the scions of Lucifer are beyond redemption," Salvation said, throwing Ogras a pitying glance.

"Oh? You know of Lord Lucifer?" Ogras said with surprise, making Zac look over with some shock.

"What?" Ogras asked with some confusion after seeing Zac's look. "Lucifer is one of the most powerful demons around, a true hero. This whole region should know of his name."

Zac wanted to ask a dozen follow-up questions to that, but there were far more pressing matters at hand.

"How did you find us?" Zac couldn't help but ask of the grimy man.

"The Lord hears all, sees all, is all," Salvation lifting his eyes far into the air. "How can I not sense your Sapience, your suffering. Let me free you."

That was all the time Salvation was willing to waste on the conversation as five rivers descended from the skies to charge at the two. Meanwhile, an enormous change took place with the rest of the rivers. They started to change and form fractals in the sky, creating a circle of inscriptions.

A dozen shadow spears suddenly appeared around Salvation that tried to skewer him the moment they rose out of the ground. But it was as though the swirling rivers around their enemy had a mind of their own as they blocked all the strikes before Salvation himself even had time to react.

Large clouds of dissipated silver rose into the air, and a few dozen of the innumerable spare puppets immediately liquefied and joined the defensive perimeter around their master. Ogras tsked in disappointment as he looked up at the change to the liquefied puppets, his spear already having appeared in his hand.

"They seem to be forming an array," Ogras muttered. "We should probably disrupt it."

"Can you handle it?" Zac asked. "I'll try to go straight toward the source."

"Fine, you're better suited for charging straight into it like a bull anyway," Ogras agreed as the two huge shadow wings sprouted on his back.

Zac simply nodded and exploded into motion with [Loamwalker] pushing him straight toward Salvation himself. As he pushed forward he charged up his new and improved [Chop] to tackle the protective layers surrounding the puppeteers.

Cosmic Energy effortlessly entered the fractal as usual, but when infused the fractal with his energy Zac noticed a startling change. For one he infused over ten times as much energy as usual before the blade assembled, but that wasn't all. As the fractal edge materialized he also formed a mental connection he had never felt before.

Suddenly it was as though the large five-meter edge was a part of his body, and with a simple mental command, it detached from its position in front of his axe. However, it didn't shoot off toward Salvation and his metallic rivers but rather started to hover around him like a large scythe of death.

Zac tried to summon another edge, but this time there was no mental connection forming, but rather just another standard blade that required the regular amount of energy. It looked like the change in his skill was that he received one special edge, while the others remained the same.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the time to experiment where the limits of his new addition lay, and Zac refocused on the battle instead. He created another five blades and launched them in quick order toward Salvation, as the special edge stayed within like a bodyguard.

Each blade was imbued with the improved Dao of Sharpness, and they pushed Salvation's defenses to their limits. Each edge completely ripped a river to shreds before dissipating, forcing over a hundred puppets to liquefy. Only around a month had passed since the two fought last time, but Zac had not only improved his Daos considerably but also his weapon.

The rabid fanaticism in Salvation's eyes was briefly doused as fear flashed in his face for the first time. Zac was almost upon him, but this time Salvation wasn't willing to confront him head-on. The ten rivers surrounding him swallowed him up before they scattered in different directions, making Zac unable to tell where he had gone.

Another fifty rivers were created from the puppets, and as they twirled and intertwined it was completely impossible to tell which was which. The only relief was that he hadn't launched [Nature's Punishment] immediately in an attempt to destroy Salvation, as he had gotten even better at staying hidden. He would have been forced to waste the huge hand on killing a few hundred puppets, wasting its massive power and energy consumption.

Soon the rivers started to shoot toward Zac, and he rapidly started to destroy them by launching his blades at them, but there was no end in sight. He soon realized that he would need to infuse the blade with the Dao of Sharpness to completely destroy a river, but his mind would become overtaxed before he managed to launch enough attacks with [Chop]. Salvation had simply brought too many puppets.

“Shit! What are these things made of?” a frustrated shout could be heard from above as Zac hesitated what to do next, and he looked up to see Ogras desperately trying to destroy the enormous fractals that had already fully formed.

The rivers in the sky had turned into a long string of fractals in just seconds, and they formed an enormous circle in the sky. Its diameter was at least a square kilometer, and it encompassed the whole battlefield and the puppet army. So far he couldn’t sense them doing anything, but even he could sense the massive amounts of Cosmic Energy they started to absorb.

Zac frowned and launched a handful of Dao-infused blades toward the fractals as well, but they were extremely sturdy. The strikes did chip them down somewhat, but a handful of the tens of thousands of puppets immediately reinforced them. Ogras swooped down toward him with some hesitation on his face when he saw that the battle below had stalled as well.

“It has truly formed an array,” Ogras said. “This guy is just too weird. We might be better if we exit the encirclement before we consider our next step.”

“You have entered the Holy Kingdom, it is time for you to join the unity. Through pain comes clarity,” the voice of Salvation echoed across the field, though it was impossible to pinpoint its source.

A foreboding feeling crept into Zac’s heart as he shot Ogras a glance. He started to feel that they had been a bit overconfident in confronting this madman. They should probably have backed off when they saw the huge resources that Salvation had expended to confront them, but he had been too anxious to finish the fight, emboldened by his recent powerups.

The demon imperceptibly nodded and the two immediately disappeared from their spot, rushing out of the encirclement. But the moment they were about to cross the threshold it was as though Zac slammed into a wall, and the rebound threw him over ten meters back.

A shockwave made Zac’s robe flutter immediately afterward as Ogras launched a beam of shadows at the invisible shield. But there was not even a shudder, making the ominous feeling in Zac’s heart worse.

“There’s no way we will break this thing in the short run,” Ogras muttered.

“What do we do?” Zac asked, pushing down any panic that threatened to rise to the surface. He hated feeling like a trapped animal.

“Everything should be controlled by that man. We kill him and the rest of it should sort itself out,” Ogras hesitantly said. “Judging by how the fractals are absorbing energy it will take a few minutes for them to charge whatever they’re supposed to do.”

“I have no method of locating him though,” Zac said with a grimace. “He can seamlessly move about the puppets. He might even turn himself into that liquid form what I can tell.”

“Well, all the puppets are within the array, so he should be as well, no?” Ogras said. “So if we destroy all the puppets we should be able to find him. If we still can’t find him we will at least have destroyed what allows the runes to regenerate, which might allow us to destroy them.”

Zac thoughtfully nodded in agreement. It was far better than just standing around, even if he still was a bit unwilling to destroy these poor people who had become victims to Salvation.

“But we’re against the clock here, so no holding back,” Ogras added.

“I think I have just the thing,” Zac said, tightening the grip on his axe.

Zac once again started to run toward where he came from. But this time his aim wasn’t to directly kill Salvation, but rather to cause widespread mayhem.

It was time to unleash [Deforestation].