

The Fall 487

Chapter 487: Heart

Zac growled from the pain as it felt like his soul had been doused in kerosene and lit on fire. The torment made it almost impossible for him to form a coherent thought, let alone erect some sort of defense.

Not that there was any. He knew that skills and items were useless in a case like this, and he could only bear with it. The pain was agonizing, but it wouldn't actually hurt his soul unless he gave in. He repeated the word 'endure' over and over in his mind, turning it into a mantra of perseverance.

The pain was well beyond what he had expected for a tribulation though, it was almost up there with other terrifying ordeals such as his dip in the Cosmic Water pond. Did everyone have to endure suffering of this magnitude, or was he given special attention because he chose an Epic class?

However, he didn't have time to form any hypothesis before his surroundings blurred, and he suddenly found himself in his bed. Zac looked around in confusion, his past experiences turning muddled and indistinct as a slender arm reached around him. He smiled and turned over, coming face to face with his new girlfriend.

"What is it?" Hannah asked she scratched his beard with a wink. "Can't sleep?"

"Something like that," Zac smiled as he dragged her closer to him.

"Hmm," Hanna hummed as she leaned in for a kiss as her hand reached downward.

Zac's body was quick to respond, but he froze just as he was about to reciprocate her actions. How did he get here? Why did things seem so off?

"What's wrong?" Hannah panted in his ear, her hand stopping just as it was about to reach inside his underwear.

Lust fought with unease, but Zac finally shook his head and climbed out of his bed, his head darting back and forth with a wildness in his eyes.

Something wasn't right.

A heavy sense of wrongness encompassed him even though everything in his studio apartment looked like it should. But a shocking pain in his mind almost made him keel over, and he held his head in his hands as the world turned blurry.

"Zac? What's going on? Should I call an ambulance?" Hanna asked with fright as she ran over, but Zac's eyes widened when a knife suddenly appeared in her hand and sank deep into his chest.

"You're not real," Zac growled, finally remembering what was going on. "This is not real."

"Yes, isn't that what you like to tell yourself after you discarded me like trash?" Hannah sneered as the world collapsed.

Anxiety burned in Zac's chest as he urged the flying disk to move faster, but it felt like he was flying through solid matter as he saw his beleaguered army in the distance. Alea stood in the front,

desperately fighting to create an opportunity for the army to survive. But it was for naught as she was cut down where she stood by a group of spectral assassins.

Zac finally managed to push through the solidified air as he landed next to her, and he quickly put a healing pill in her mouth. But it barely had an effect as the wounds kept bleeding, staining the ground in a crimson hue.

"Why didn't you save me?" Alea cried as she looked up at Zac with desolation in her eyes. "I loved you. I bled for you. But you only saw me as a tool to further your goals."

"I-" Zac stammered, but he had no chance to form a response before one sobbing voice after another spoke up around him.

"Why did you give up on us?" a Valkyrie cried. "You were supposed to lead us out of misery, not into it."

"Why?" a dozen dying soldiers cried in anguish, their wails growing in agony and sorrow by the second.

"Why?!"

"WHY?!"

The chorus grew louder and louder, and Zac felt like his mind was splitting apart. A wave of pain came from nowhere at that very moment, making him fall over in agony. He arduously got to his feet again, and he tried to explain himself to the angry mob of corpses. He didn't mean for anyone to die. He was trying to do the right thing, but he was just one man, unable to save everyone.

But the words didn't come. It felt like when he was in a dream where he wanted to throw a punch, but he was wholly impotent to actually urge his hand to move. He wasn't even sure whether his explanation could be considered a legitimate excuse, but it was moot as he couldn't even vocalize a single word. Zac only helplessly fell backward, the screams growing ever louder in his mind.

Alea crawled closer as he mutely sat on the ground, leaving a trail of blood and intestines behind her. It was with great exertion she managed to drag herself up along his torso, completely drenching Zac in blood while doing so. She whimpered in pain as she enclosed him in a final embrace, her head resting on his shoulder.

"Was this all a game to you?" the sorrowful voice of the poison mistress whispered in his ear. "You played around in the Underworld, looking for opportunities to level up. You left us to fight one of the strongest forces in the Multiverse. You sent us to our deaths. You're the leader, you should join us."

"Join us!" the chorus echoed as a storm of poison seeped out of every pore of Alea's body.

Zac felt muddled from the blazing pain in his head, but his Danger Sense screamed for him to wake up.

No!

Zac ardently recoiled in his mind, and the world around him cracked like a broken mirror.

Shame and self-blame threatened to drown Zac as he stood in front of Thea's sickbed. Her piercing blue eyes had lost their luster as she hollowly stared at him, and her ragged breaths told him she already hovered at death's door.

"I thought we had formed an understanding during our time in the Hunt. But the moment we left you forgot about me, discarded me for the next shiny thing. Was that all I was to you? A means to an end during the hunt?" she asked with a voice so weak that it was barely audible.

"Billy was true in his sincerity toward you. But were you sincere toward him? Or were you just patronizing him while abusing his naiveté and strength? You didn't even bother going in person to help with his Incursion, you rather sent a subordinate to steal the main achievement from him," Thea continued, despondency creeping into her voice.

"That's not--"

"Yet we came here, leaving our own people to fend for themselves. Just so that you wouldn't have yet another excuse to avoid doing the right thing. We bled for you. Why won't you do the same?" she said just as her eyes grew blank, her final breath leaving her lungs.

Panic made Zac's heart beat like a drum, but he suddenly calmed down as he looked at the unmoving body of Thea Marshall.

"You're alive, and I will save you all," Zac growled as the world crumbled.

He had dreaded this moment, but Zac was finally here, his fingers fidgeted with nervousness as he walked across the field toward the man sitting on a rock. His steps were unsteady from the mounting pain in his head, but this thing couldn't be held off any longer.

The man looked upon hearing Zac's approach, his disfigured face scrunching up in anger upon seeing who it was. David slowly stood up with the assistance of a cane, and he spat at the ground the moment Zac arrived.

"I was captured, tortured, left for dead. All because I used to know you," David said before Zac had a chance to greet him, his face contorting in anger and pain. "I wake up screaming every night, drenched in sweat, because of what that lunatic put me through. But you didn't even come to visit me. You threw me out of your mind as you stowed me away on this desolate island, where I wouldn't be able to remind you of what you've become."

"Hannah," Zac said, but he was interrupted by David, whose fury was quickly mounting.

"Hannah was traumatized, manipulated, and abused. First by The Lord of Eyes, then by the infiltrators, and finally by your little demon lover. You couldn't even wait for a second to cast her away the moment she finally regained a sense of stability. All because she didn't fit with your 'new self', the great lone-wolf warrior who consorted with Demons," David spat.

"But perhaps it's for the best, no?" the mutilated man said as he swung his cane at Zac. "Better to be a cast-away than turned into a cursed piece of jewelry."

Zac tried to catch the cane, but another wave of pain made him space out, and he found himself on the ground as David desperately tried to pummel him.

"It's all your fault!" he screamed, but he was forced to stop as he spat out a mouthful of blood from the exertion.

"I'm sorry," Zac said through grit teeth as he woke up from his stupor, once again realizing he was inside an illusion. "The way I treated you isn't right. I will visit the real you when this is all over."

The world dissipated in a haze, and he was surprised to find himself in a very familiar place, this time completely aware he was still undergoing the Heart Tribulation. It was his childhood room where he had lived until he moved out at 21. However, it looked vastly different from how it did before the Integration. It was rather decorated exactly the same as when he was a child.

That wasn't all, as he could actually see himself lying asleep in his bed. Why was the System showing him this? It was no doubt another trick of the Heart Tribulation, but why was it so different compared to the other ones that preyed on his emotions? Why had he come here like some sort of Ghost of Christmas Future?

A wave of agony suddenly burst through the illusion, and Zac found himself soundlessly screaming into the room. The waves of pain were getting worse, and Zac was getting worried that the other Tribulation was running amok with him stuck in these visions.

Becoming aware that this was all an illusion obviously wasn't the key to getting out, so he started to look around for any clues on how to break the illusion. But there was no clearly identifiable clue to help him escape, and he could only turn to the sleeping form in the bed.

It was a surreal feeling to see himself as a ten-year-old. Things he had completely forgotten were reproduced with perfect crispness as well. There were his posters and the orange lava lamp that always were turned on when he went to bed but inexplicably turned off when he awoke. Of course, it was his parents who turned it off as they checked in on him, but today it was still turned on in the middle of the night.

However, that small detail wasn't the only thing that was a bit off.

There was a note of discordance in the memory, the sounds of agitated voices seeping through the door. The two voices grew gradually louder, but Zac still couldn't make out any distinct words. The fact that it felt like his head was splitting apart didn't make things easier either. He tried to move closer to the source of the commotion, but he found himself stuck next to the bed, or perhaps rather stuck to his younger self.

However, the argument taking place outside his room was soon enough to wake up the ten-year-old version of himself, and Zac couldn't help but feel some trepidation as he saw himself getting out of bed. He looked just as confused as Zac felt, but he still silently moved over toward his door. Zac thankfully moved in accord, and they got closer to the source of the sounds.

"... Doctor," Zac heard as they inched closer, and he could finally confirm that it was his father's voice, though the voice sounded frantic in a way that he had never heard before.

Young Zac seemed to come to the same realization as he slowly turned the doorknob and created a small crack in his door without making a sound. It was just enough for some light from the corridor to bleed inside, along with the voices. The voices of his parents.

"Doctor? What would some mortal doctor be able to help me with?" Leandra snorted, her voice dripping with disdain. "Besides. I am telling you I am not sick."

“Darling, calm down. You just had a baby, don’t get agitated,” Robert seemed to try to placate her.

“I’m not agitated, I’m just telling you what needs to happen,” his mom answered with a cold tone that Zac had never heard before. “I guess I can consider myself lucky that the pain of childbirth startled me awake.”

Zac frowned as he listened in on the conversation from his vantage as a silent specter behind his own body. Was this actually a memory of his, or yet another lie shown by the System? Because he couldn’t remember this ever happening in his real life, though his childhood had always been a bit hazy.

But judging from the discussion and how old he looked, this might just be the night when his mother disappeared, never to be heard from again.