

The Fall 955

Chapter 955: Trapped

"The etherstorm is descending," Onandar said as she glanced at the crimson horizon. "End them."

"They're just children," Thea entreated as she looked down at the huddled captives, her hand shaking both from the mental strain and the rampaging intent coursing through her veins.

It was getting harder to control. She had been drinking out of the tainted well of the Blessed Kin for years now, and Thea knew she wouldn't be able to prevent the madness from seeping into her Dao for much longer. She was so tired, having been forced to stand guard against the liquid every moment. And in this place, she was constantly tested.

By this point, Thea only felt a hollow numbness thinking back to horrors she had come across as she'd roved the Stoneshatter Valleys as part of the Hallowed Mother's scavenger squads. Of course, scavenger was a relative term when most of their resources were 'scavenged' by slaughtering rival camps, bandits, or other unorthodox factions hiding in the valley.

Normally, Thea hadn't minded. The Blessed Kin were evil people slaughtering other evil people – on the Goldblade Continent, there were few innocents outside the distant citadels. That was doubly true for fell regions like the Stoneshatter Valleys. Anyone not equipped with ruthlessness and strength would have died before long in this place.

If anything, slaughtering these monsters helped Thea release some of the budding madness before it infiltrated her intent and twisted it. Still, it accumulated in her body, like a monster constantly nourished by that alchemic concoction. There was nothing Thea could do about it. She had tried everything to rid herself of the vile mixture without any result.

And Thea knew there would be no going back if she gave in.

The vile brew of the Hallowed Mother allowed her and the Blessed Kin to push forward at a mad pace, but it came at a terrible price. It drained you in exchange for pushing past your limits. Drained you of longevity, of thought – even of your humanity. And as soon as you stopped struggling, you'd become an addict. The moment it infiltrated your soul, you wouldn't survive without it for long.

The rest of the scavengers had all given in to the Hallowed Elixir, including Onandar. They were all addicts, madly roving the valleys for loot they could exchange for more elixir. That was how the Hallowed Mother ensured her underlings were loyal and productive. It was a treadmill of suffering and depravity.

She still didn't know why the Hallowed Mother, a terrifying Monarch of the Unorthodox Path, had bothered capturing her three years ago.

Thea had accomplished some small feats after being dropped off at a desolate corner on this nightmare of a continent. She had quickly realized that her chances of survival in this place were almost nil, no matter what her status back on Earth was. It was simply too chaotic. Just three days after arriving, she had accidentally stumbled upon a battle between two Peak Hegemons.

Tens of kilometers had been devastated by their battle, and Thea had almost succumbed to the poisonous mists one of the two had conjured. By now, that encounter felt like a small greeting by the Goldblade Continent. It took her two months to recover and capture someone weaker than her to get a lay of the land.

And from there, a plan had formed. She needed to get to the Cloudsoar Terrace, a famed Sword Sect at the Continent's center. The environment there was apparently beyond comprehension, and the Sect's foundation was immense. From what she'd managed to piece together from various sources, it probably surpassed any of the factions in the Zecia Sector.

More impressively, this was on a continent without the System. These masters had reached the levels of Peak Monarchs without the aid of the System – their foundations and insights into the Sword had to be immeasurable to accomplish that. If she could enter the tutelage of one of the Sword Saints of the Terrace, while still retaining the System's features, a limitless future would await her.

But a C-grade Continent is just too vast. For years she had traveled toward her destination, narrowly avoiding death on a daily basis. But her luck finally ran out as she passed by the Shatterstone Valleys. The Hallowed Mother herself had suddenly plucked her from the sky and marked her by a seal that prevented her from escaping.

The old hag had never explained herself, nor had Thea ever seen her after being abducted. The only hint that her status was special was that she had been given a house of her own and a larger share of cultivation resources. But she was forced to drink the Hallowed Elixir all the same, just like the warslaves and common members of the Blessed Kin.

And now, it had finally come to this. She could feel herself right at the precipice. Circumstance and accumulation had finally put her at the limit of what she could endure. Thea felt herself losing control over the concoction in her body, and her very sense of self was fraying at the corners. The elixir egged her on and told her to just embrace the realities of the Goldblade Continent.

But she couldn't.

This ragged group of children was just between five and twelve years old. They hadn't even embarked on the road of cultivation yet. From the looks of it, they were the remnants of a collapsed clan fleeing from whatever took them out. Even the light in their eyes was different from the murky or red-rimmed orbs of the Shatterstone natives. They hadn't been twisted by life in this place yet.

"Are you questioning the Hallowed Mother?" Onandar said as her eyes thinned. "I knew it was a mistake to give all those resources to a half-formed outsider. Cannot be trusted, cannot be depended on. Weak of will and weak of intent. A waste of the precious elixir. Mother dotes on you, so you will get a final chance. Kill them, or I'll cripple you and bring you back for judgment."

The pressure kept building as Thea resisted the murderous intent. Her heart beat so hard it felt like it would break out from her chest, and Thea felt like a volcano about to burst. Her whole body twitched, and veins started to pop out all across her body. She couldn't move; she could barely think. Thea was like a small raft on a raging sea, just trying to hold on a bit longer.

"I have to say, it's my good luck finding this group of cattle," Onandar eventually said with a twisted smile on her face. "It will make your surrender much more enjoyable."

Thea didn't answer; she wasn't able to. The sharp intent she had honed for the better part of a decade was being overrun by madness and synthetic killing intent, and the walls of her Soul Aperture were starting to show cracks. So Thea could only settle for giving her captain a murderous glare.

"That's right; I knew," Onandar sneered. "You thought yourself better than us, resisting the Hallowed Elixir? Fool. Most of us never even tried to fight it. Why would we? The concoctions of a Nascent World Alchemist are almost impossible to get for commoners like us. Where do you think our members come from? They travel far and wide to join the Hallowed Mother's protection and receive her blessings. Your little struggle amounts to nothing.

"It's just been a source of entertainment to see how long you would hold on. I have to admit; I'm a bit annoyed. I lost six Bloodeye Rubies betting that you'd only last a year. But now, Mother's patience has run thin. You'll come back as a good daughter, or you'll come back as a cripple."

Anger.

Searing fury cut through the madness of the Hallowed Elixir, threatening to replace it with a different type of insanity. Thea remembered the nights of bitter training, of tempering herself to withstand the burning pain of the elixir. Of breaking down in tears in the corner of her home after having been forced into one bloody struggle after another with the other scavengers. Of the constant emotional and spiritual toll she'd endured over the past years.

It was all a joke to you? To the god-damn Monarch hiding in the shadows? Then I might as well lash out and satiate my hatred against one of you. Thea felt that even if the brew consumed her, even if she died, she should at least drag Onandar with her down to hell.

Purpose gave her a new wave of strength. Her struggle, her conviction, and her path; they all converged as Dao and purpose became one. It cut apart the madness and severed the chains of the Hallowed Elixir. It danced through her body like a cleansing wind.

But it wasn't enough.

"I—"Thea said hesitantly, but her hands didn't share the hesitance. They were filled with intent so strong it could pierce the sky.

Aigale tore through the air, but not toward the children. Years of frustration had crystallized into a sword intent of absolute sharpness, and it headed straight for Onandar. She didn't need Cosmic Energy or a skill to carry her Branch of the Clouded Sword. They would only slow down her ambush.

Space tore apart, and Onandar didn't even have time to circulate her Cosmic Energy before the Sword Intent passed through her body and continued into the sky.

"Wha—" Onandar said as a sanguine shield sprung up around her.

However, the barrier only managed to form for a second before it fizzled out. A sloshing sound followed as Onandar fell apart, cleanly cut in two.

Thea looked at the corpse on the ground while panting, barely believing her eyes. She had never moved that quickly before, and she had never managed to conjure Sword Intent that pure. Not even the intent

Irei had left her could compare. It felt like she had put everything in that strike, and it had been enough to kill a Middle-stage Hegemon instantly.

Of course, Onandar would no doubt have won in a real fight, especially considering that Thea wasn't sure she would be able to conjure that level of Sword Intent again. It had been fueled by years of suffering, and that was not something she could just pull out of a hat. Still, it was a monumental first step.

She might not be able to freely conjure that kind of intent right now, but she would be able to in the future. Now that she had accomplished it once and gotten a feel for it, she would slowly be able to work her way toward it. Not only that, but Thea could feel that the Hallowed Brew barely affected her right now. It was still there like an unwelcome passenger, but it was almost completely restrained.

Now, she only needed to figure out how to get rid of the prisoner seal. But just as Thea dared dream of freedom, a void plunged her right back into the pits of despair.

"Good child. You had me worried there for a while, but you really didn't let me down."

The next moment, Hallowed Mother appeared in the sky, looking just like the last time they met; an elegant but severe woman appearing to be in her fifties. Her slightly greying hair was pinned up in a simple bun, and a few crow-lines could be seen when she smiled down at Thea. If not for the fact that her left arm was an oversized monstrous claw with six gaping mouths on it, she would have looked like any random middle-aged lady back on Earth.

"I'm only on the sixth iteration, but it looks like this mixture can stimulate one's heart and even nurture intent," the woman said. "Of course, there is something off about you. Perhaps I chose a subject with too strong a providence. Before I can draw any definite conclusions, I will have to study your body and the secrets it holds."

Thea looked up at the crazy Alchemist with a sense of anger and helplessness. So that's what it was. For the other scavengers, her struggle was a joke. For the main culprit, she was just an experimental subject to test her drugs. She wanted to scream, she wanted to cry. She was so tired of old monsters appearing in the sky to mess up her life. Most of all, she wanted to send another sword beam into the sky and cut that mad scientist in two.

But it was hopeless. First of all, the Hallowed Mother was a genuine Early Stage Monarch, or a Nascent World Stage cultivator as it was called on the Goldblade continent. Even if her Sword Intent had evolved just now, it wasn't enough to kill that kind of being. Secondly, she didn't have it in her to send out another one.

She still had all of her Cosmic Energy and a decent amount of Mental Energy remaining. The problem was her emotional state. She had infused everything into that swing, leaving her numb. Intent was ultimately a fusion of Dao and Heart, where your convictions took corporeal form. And with her heart exhausted, the power of her intent was drastically diminished.

"Pl...ease... Mother," a gurgling voice said on the ground, and Thea was shocked to realize Onandar had actually survived being cut in two. One of the halves lay unmoving, but the other desperately grasped toward the sky.

This was one of the downsides of cultivating on an unintegrated planet; Thea might have the System 'installed' on her body, but others didn't. The most noticeable consequence for her was that she didn't get any Cosmic Energy from kills. Because of that, reaching peak E-grade had taken at least two more years than it could have, and the lack of kill confirmation could result in surprises like this.

Not that it mattered now, with the Hallowed Mother appearing in person. Thea knew she was doomed no matter whether Onandar lived or not.

"You are just a useless prop, but I suppose you fulfilled your task admirably," the Hallowed Mother muttered.

The next moment, one of the mouths on her arm spat out a green blob that landed on the dying Hegemon, and Thea's stepped back with shock-filled disgust as the green goop started to wriggle and writhe. Initially, Thea thought the vile-smelling concoction would fuse the two halves, but that was only partly true.

The mixture partly dragged the two body halves closer, but it more so seemed to turn into greenish flesh that replaced what had been cut off. A new creature resembling a mutated conjoined twin had been formed in just seconds. It was more than twice as wide as the original Onandar, and the mid-section was a green horror show filled with tumors and boils.

"A-Ah," the left half of Onandar's face gurgled before her remaining good eye rolled up into her socket. The miscreation crumbled, and Thea was certain she wouldn't get up again.

"Hm, heads are still out of reach," the Hallowed Mother muttered before glancing at the children, who looked up at the sky with abject horror.

"Wait," Thea shouted. "Spare them, and I will go with you willingly."

Thea knew she was done for. There was no escape escaping a Monarch; she might as well try to overturn the heavens. But if she could save these children, then at least something good would have come from her death.

"Your willingness does not matter. Sooner or later, all your secrets will be laid bare whether you like it or not," the Hallowed Mother calmly said. "And leaving stragglers like this can have unexpected consequences."

"Run!" Thea screamed as she rushed in front of the group of huddled refugees.

"Dying for some random trash," the Hallowed Mother smiled with a shake of her head. "What foolishness."

"Better than become an old monster who has lost everything but her power," Thea spat as she gathered everything she had for a final strike of defiance.

Thea knew her actions were futile, but she wouldn't just stand by. It was like her heart had been reignited, and an even greater Sword Intent was formed. Thea looked at it with marvel as it flew toward the sky. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever created, and she felt a sense of accomplishment even if it was just empty bluster in the face of a Monarch.

"Blessings, blessings," a sudden sigh echoed through the world.

Thea didn't have a chance to react before her sword beam lit up with golden splendor, and it shot forth with impossible speed as it expanded through infinity. For a moment, it looked like the whole sky would be cut in two. But the scene only lasted for a moment before it turned into something even odder.

The blade of Sword Intent was suddenly gone, and in its place were two enormous hands pressed together in prayer. Thea's heart shuddered, and her instincts told her to kneel in obeisance to the holy aura it emitted. She felt like she was looking up at the actual hands of God, descended to the mortal realm to shield the innocent.

"Benefactor is right," the voice continued. "Life and death are but fleeting moments. Mara is forever. To sully oneself is to sully the Cosmos."