

The Fall 292

Chapter 292: Westfort

"It's almost night already," Emily huffed. "We're so late!"

"Ibtep tells me this one is neither your progeny nor your mate," Nonet said as it looked down at Emily with curiosity. "What purpose does she serve? Is she a warrior slave from a vanquished hive? Zhix slaves are seldom accorded such freedom of speech."

Emily stopped in her tracks and gaped up at Nonet, who calmly returned her gaze. Zac coughed as he shot a gaze at the teenager. It honestly was a good question. Just what was Emily to him? In a sense, he had picked up her in the spur of the moment, and he knew he had somewhat used her as a temporary replacement for Kenzie, like an emotional binky. But now he wasn't sure.

"I guess she's a mascot?" Zac hesitantly said after a bit, drawing an enraged glare from Emily.

"I'm battle support! I can make anyone stronger! I just had a late start," she said grumpily before she turned toward the teleporter and walked away in a huff.

"The young can be capricious," Nonet said with a nod. "We usually send them into the deep caverns to learn survival and moderation. Is human childrearing the same?"

Zac was about to say no, but he wasn't sure if that was true any longer with Alyn in charge. They did send the students to battle beasts as soon as they were strong enough. He also remembered Abby saying that making a beginner zone was already underway.

"Well, we do something similar with our Academy here I guess. But now we have adapted to teach more about Cosmic Energy," Zac said.

"Would it be possible to send a few of our young to this Academy of yours?" Nonet asked.

"Sure," Zac said with a shrug, as he was sure Alyn wouldn't mind a couple of war crazy students to increase the competitiveness. "It's getting late, let's go."

"Wait, let me come with," a light voice suddenly resounded, making Zac look over with a slight frown.

Alea was walking over, wearing one of her battledresses that contained defensive charges. Zac was unsure what to say when he saw her approach with Calrin in tow, as the two hadn't spoken since Zac told her off.

She had avoided him since the incident, even skipping out on meetings in favor of cultivating at the odd poison-tree in the mountains, and Zac didn't really know where he stood with her. However, the thought of bringing a slightly unstable poison mistress to the Marshall Clan made Zac's hair stand on end.

"Why do you want to go?" Zac hesitantly asked.

"To provide back-up. Adran and Calrin will likely be busy in meetings all day, but the Marshall Clan has so many people. You need someone who will be able to keep the bureaucrats at bay while you focus on

the library and other more pressing matters," Alea said. "Ogras said I should go. Janos won't be any help and Ilvere is a meathead."

"You should understand why I'm reluctant to bring you," Zac said.

Alea slightly frowned for a few seconds before she suddenly looked up at Zac with a determined look. The next moment she started to change, growing into a horrifying swamp monster that was as tall as Nonet. Zac took a step back in surprise, and a knife appeared in Nonet's hand as though from nowhere. However, the large monster didn't attack anyone, and it soon started to shrink again, turning into a conspicuously naked Alea. Zac's eye widened a bit before he forced himself to look away.

"Before I arrived at this planet I tried to force a change in my constitution to one that would better suit my skills," Alea said, as she unhurriedly dressed herself again. "My heritage is incomplete, and some critical details were missing. It went awry and that form was the result of it. It has also caused some internal imbalances that made me... impulsive."

Zac looked over at Alea who looked straight back at him.

"But the past month I've made tremendous progress by cultivating beneath the tree of Toxic Ascension. My body is still slightly impacted, but I have at least driven out the toxins out of my mind," she said.

"... Fine, let's go."

Zac honestly wasn't sure about his decision as he walked with the others in tow toward his teleporter, but he felt this trip could be used as an experiment. Alea was extremely powerful, and would likely be more helpful than anyone else in the upcoming battles, apart from Ogras.

If she could prove herself that she could be trusted and work in a group again it would be for the best. Then he could slowly return various responsibilities to her. And truth be told, he simply missed having her around. And he didn't believe she would cause too many problems, especially not after what happened the last time.

"But I'll make it clear. No poisons anything like that unless we are attacked, got it? These people are our most important allies for the upcoming battles," Zac said.

"I know what to do," Alea simply nodded.

Soon they arrived at the teleportation platform, and the group found Ibtep, and Adran waiting along with Emily. Zac internally sighed again as he felt this would be like a repeat of his motley crew when he went to the auction.

Only this time the ratio of Aliens to Humans was even worse.

"Eh, Alea is coming as well?" Emily gaped from her spot next to the teleporter before she gave Zac an odd glance. "You are pretty gutsy."

"What?" Zac asked with a frown.

"Nothing," Emily said with a giggle. "Let's go!"

The next moment the teleporter lit up, and the group walked inside one by one. The group soon found themselves in a modern lobby. Zac didn't know why, but he had for some reason expected to arrive at some old Gaelic fortress or something of the kind.

Thea hadn't talked a lot about her heritage, but from what he had pieced together the Marshall Clan was practically ancient, with over one thousand years of history. But the surroundings reminded Zac of the lobby in New Washington, looking a lot like a terminal.

However, there were signs of the new reality they lived in as well, as large fractals covered both the walls and the roof. They were pretty crude compared to what he had seen in other places, but it clearly showed that the Marshalls might put even more effort into inscriptions than Port Atwood did. He remembered the homemade tools Thea used for example, such as the hazmat suit and the tent.

Unsurprisingly the group consisting of beings of all shapes and sizes garnered quite a bit of attention, but people were more prepared this time. Roland Marshal had clearly been waiting as he was snoozing in a comfortable sofa. But when their group arrived he quickly perked up and hurried over.

"Lord Atwood, I am happy you were able to make it after all. I must say, only a few days have passed and your aura has become even more formidable. As expected of Earth's greatest powerhouse," he shot off in quick succession as he got a proper look at the group. "I see that you've brought a larger retinue this time."

"As you know my city is on an island," Zac said with a small smile. "A few people wanted to come with to stretch their legs."

"Of course," Rolan said with a nod, as though bringing this odd group was completely normal.

Zac introduced them one by one, though Roland clearly knew of Ibtep and Calrin from before due to their appearance at the Auction. The impatient Sky Gnome immediately tried to glean why he hadn't been able to set up a branch in Westfort, but Roland expertly dodged the question.

"We will have time to go through all these matters, but if you all would follow me first. All visitors must receive their tags. It is a security measure to combat infiltration by invaders or other hostile forces," Rolan said as he ushered them toward a manned counter.

Zac and the others simply followed along, and each got a small metallic disk. Surprisingly enough there was a small engraving on it.

"This seems to be a tracking rune that is used in conjunction with an array," Calrin said as he glanced up at Roland. "In most societies, this level of monitoring would be considered rude."

"I do apologize. However, war calls for desperate measures. We are limited in our methods compared to the established forces of the Incursions, and have to use a somewhat heavy hand to protect our interests," Rolan said with an apologetic smile.

"It's fine," Zac said with a disinterested shrug, as they had no plans to do anything untoward at Westfort.

"Excellent. If you would follow me to the West Compound. It is the inner area of Westfort where the main clan resides and does its business. A small welcoming dinner is prepared, and I am sure Thea would be happy to see you again," Roland said.

Zac nodded but remembered his company and threw Alea a sneaky glance to make sure she wouldn't cause any trouble. She caught his glimpse and only rolled her eyes in response. The group was shown to a series of cars, and Zac noticed that even the car windows had engravings on them. Just how many inscribers had these people employed?

The town was larger than Zac had expected, and he suspected that well over a million people could live here provided that the buildings they passed were occupied. But he noticed that most of the structures were recent additions. In fact, Zac realized Westfort might contain more recently built structures than Port Atwood.

There was not much traffic though, and they soon arrived at a manned wall. It didn't seem to protect the core of the town, but rather a side-section much like his own inner wall. Roland flashed a badge and their convoy passed through the heavily armed gates without issue. They found themselves in a large neighborhood with a mix of large mansions. If Westfort wasn't a small town he would have guessed that they were embassies by their varied designs.

"While the marshall clan maintained larger offices in London before the integration, much of our business was still handled right here in Westfort. These buildings were both residences and offices for family members holding various positions in our conglomerate," Roland explained when he noticed Zac's interest.

"Just how many family members do the Marshall Clan have?" Zac asked.

"It's hard to say, really," Roland said. "The core family has around two hundred members, but we also have thousands of branch family members. Some branches are a proper part of the family and worked within our businesses before the integration, but many also paved their own path."

Zac nodded in understanding, but he wasn't nearly as impressed as he would have been before the integration. A family consisting of thousands of members was extremely uncommon in the old world, but in the Multiverse it could barely be considered a clan.

With the increased lifespans families could grow extremely large, and many dynasties had hundreds of millions of members according to Alyn. Even Clan Azh'Rezak had almost a million family members all told, and it was considered a small and newly established group. It would have gotten even more out of control if it wasn't for the fact that it apparently became harder to conceive a child the stronger one got.

"We're still some ways away," Roland added. "We're heading to the old homestead. It is where the Marshall clan was founded, and parts of its structures can be traced back all the way to the 9th century."

Zac whistled, suitably impressed, though Calrin and the Demons seemed a bit confused.

"Our history is extremely short and our technology has pushed us forward. Finding a structure over a hundred years old is pretty impressive, let alone one over a thousand years old," Zac explained.

Soon the mansions gave way to large fields, and they drove on a solitary road toward a huge sprawling mansion in the distance. As they approached it he started to wonder how a palace like this could be called a homestead.

It was a huge Palladian mansion that should have been built a few hundred years ago. Just a glance would tell anyone that it was thousands of square meters large, and Zac wouldn't have been surprised if someone had told him it was a summer castle for the British Royals back in the day.

However, there were also some new additions to the mansion. Three large side-structures in matching design seemed to have been added quite recently, and one of them was still not quite finished. There was also a massive building to the side that looked like a gargantuan spiraled seashell. It rose well over a hundred meters into the air, and Zac had a strong suspicion that this was the library that Thea received.

Another small wall had been erected some distance from the compound, and it encompassed all the structures along with a sizeable garden. The wall wasn't even two meters tall, but Zac knew that it wasn't just decorative as he could see a shimmer in the air above it. There was likely at least one array protecting the area, perhaps a full set of them.

"I think we might have a different definition of a homestead," Zac said to Roland, who shrugged with a smile.