

The Fall 453

Chapter 453: Clearance

"Where is the Shard stored?" Zac asked after having made his decision.

"It is in a restricted holding bay, with multiple layers of defenses around it," Jaol said, his eyes widening upon the realization that Zac wasn't deterred by the presence of the captain. "The captain will come the moment he hears his cargo is being targeted. He is part-owner of the whole vessel, and it has taken a lot of damage from this mission. If the mission fails he will face disastrous consequences, but if he succeeds he will gain centuries' worth of resources."

"How would I gain access?" Zac pushed, ignoring the warnings.

"You can't," Jaol said without hesitation. "I have no idea how to get inside!"

"Think harder," Zac growled as a black mist started to steam out of his mouth, adding an acrid smell to the cabin.

"I-I... You would need to have special authorization. But it is impossible for you! You have no neural implants, and even if you get inside there are extremely strong autonomous Class-2 Guardians inside," Jaol exclaimed.

"Don't you have access-cards or something?" Zac said with a frown.

"Cards? Like a medieval key?" Jaol said with incomprehension. "Why would we have such a blatant security risk as keys that can be stolen?"

"I guess that means you'll have to take me there," Zac smiled.

"Are you crazy?! You will be spotted in ten seconds after leaving this place. There's no one on this ship that has eye-augmentations that even slightly look like yours," the comm's officer staunchly refused. "We'll both be dead within a minute."

Zac snorted as he activated his Transformation skill, and the neverending black in his eyes quickly gave way to white sclera and irises. His deathly pale complexion gained life, and he was once again a normal human, at least outwardly indistinguishable from a technocrat human.

"Wha-" Jaol sputtered as he looked up and down at Zac incredulously. "How is such a perfect transition possible? Not even the chimera Transcenders are able to do something like this before reaching Class-3."

"What's with these classes you're talking about?" Zac muttered. "Isn't it just ranks?"

"We refuse to use the classifications of the Cursed Heavens," Jaol said haughtily before remembering he was a hostage at the moment. "Uh, no offense."

"So you're just being obstinate? Each Class represents a grade?" Zac confirmed.

"Well, yes," Jaol coughed.

"So can we go? And remember, our fates are bound together. I die, you die," reminded his hostage.

"... You can't." Jaol sighed after a short silence. "That's what I've been telling you. You have no implants, so the Ship will consider you an intruder. Only people with clearance will be able to walk around this ship. I don't even understand how you can stand in my cabin without detection."

Zac glared at Jaol before he looked around. The implicit meaning was that the technocrat had expected a rescue, but none seemed to be forthcoming. Zac's brows furrowed with contemplation as he tried to figure out what was going on. Was it the System that protected him? The problem was that he had no idea if that protection extended out of the cabin he found himself in.

"So how do I get clearance?" Zac asked.

"Get clearance? Impossible. You aren't even connected to the Multiverse Network through implants or your sigil, getting clearance is impossible. If it had been so easy we would have been infiltrated and extinguished long ago.

Zac felt a bit helpless as he looked around the room before he spotted a few small holes in the wall not far away. Did spaceships have air ducts? They should have, considering how many people were aboard. Perhaps if he cut through the floor he'd find whole service levels he could traverse instead. But before he could ask about it he suddenly had a thought, and his head snapped back toward Jaol.

"Sigils?" Zac said, an idea suddenly popping up in his head. "Like this?"

He took out the necklace that Leandra had left with his father before disappearing. He still hadn't found any use for the thing, but it was obviously more than a simple piece of metal. It had been able to vibrate and move about in his Cosmos Sack when he met the technocrat researcher back on earth, and it might have other functions that would be useful now.

He wasn't really worried about attracting his mother's enemies either, as he was transported god-knows-where by the System. If anything it might rather throw Firmament's Edge off the scent by thinking Leandra had popped up on this vessel.

The small token suddenly shuddered, making Zac worried he had activated some hidden alarm, but it quickly calmed down again. However, the technocrat hostage wasn't as calm as he looked up and down at Zac with confusion and fear.

"This is impossible!! How did you get such clearance?!" Jaol almost screamed.

"What are you talking about," Zac said, starting to get a bit exasperated by the rapid change of his captive's emotions. "And keep your voice down."

"A- I..." Jaol sputtered with clear hesitation on his face.

"Remember, if I get pushed into a corner I'll take you out before anything else," Zac muttered and pushed Jaol with his axe when it looked like the comm's officer was planning on cooking up another lie.

"I swear I don't understand! I don't recognize that insignia, but it has somehow given you Level 4-access on our ship! Even I only have Level 2-access. It uses some archaic access code I have never heard of before, designating you as a Council Inspector! What Council?!" Jaol blabbered.

Zac looked down at the necklace in his hand with mixed emotions. It looked like his mother had come through for him after all. He had already known that she was probably some sort of big shot among

technocrats before something happened to make her turn traitor, and this seemed to further confirm it.

But where was she? Why had she left Earth and her alone, even to the point that her husband had died from the integration? Long repressed emotions threatened to run rampant as he held the sigil, but he quickly gathered his wits and focused on the task at hand.

"Is Level 4-access enough to get to the Shard?" Zac asked.

"No," Jaol said. "It gives access to all parts of the ship except critical areas that need the Captain's direct authorization. In other words, special authorization."

"Who has special access?"

"Just two people as far as I am aware. The Captain and Dr. Freid," Jaol said.

Messing with the captain was obviously out of the question, which only left him with one option.

"Who is Dr. Fried?" Zac probed.

"Uh, no idea," Jaol said.

"Jaol..." Zac growled threateningly.

The comms officer hesitated for a few seconds before he eventually reached towards his eyes, and literally pulled them out of their sockets. Zac couldn't stop himself from gaping in shock as the man handed his eyes to him. Zac unconsciously accepted them with confusion, before he looked back at Jaol with utter befuddlement.

The comms officer didn't say anything, but Zac noted that he had pointed his head down, and it almost looked like the empty sockets were staring straight at Zac's waist. Zac tried to follow the lack of vision, and he suddenly had a hunch of what was going on. He immediately stowed the two eyes into his Cosmos Sack.

"I put your eyes in my Spatial Tool," Zac said as he looked at the Technocrat with interest.

"I know, I just lost connection," Jaol nodded.

"What's going on?" Zac asked.

"I don't want any hard evidence of divulging information about Dr. Fried. He comes from a powerful corporation," Jaol sighed. "Dr. Fried was sent by Deramex Dynamics, our employer's employer. He's an expert at force fields, and he is in charge of keeping the Shard of Creation restrained."

"Sounds like he's doing a pretty shit job," Zac muttered as he tried to look anywhere except the two empty sockets that stared right at him.

Was this was it felt like talking with him when he was in his Draugr-form?

"Yes, well," Jaol shrugged. "I don't understand how that works, but he has set up multiple layers of restrictions around the shard in the middle of the bean. I've heard from a few guards that the problems

we've seen are just the tip of the iceberg of what goes on within the containment field. Dr. Fried has said that the Shard does not like being without a host, and it resents being trapped."

"Likes? Resents?" Zac asked with shock. "It's alive?"

"It's beyond me. Perhaps alive in the sense that a virus is alive?" Jaol ventured.

Zac felt like it was an apt description after having observed the Splinter in its prison over the past few months. It wasn't an inert object, but it also didn't feel sentient.

"What strength is the Doctor?" Zac asked.

"I think he's late Class-2?" Jaol said hesitantly.

"Is he strong in combat?" Zac asked with a frown.

"I am pretty sure he's a pure researcher," Jaol said. "Their combat strength is on the lower end, but they no doubt have some means to protect themselves."

Zac grunted in affirmation. This was exactly what he hoped for. The plan he had come up with was pretty simple. He'd use the necklace to get to Dr. Fried, kidnap the researcher, and use him as a keycard to the Shard. Seeing as the doctor seemed to have a pretty high status he might even be able to use him as a hostage to blow up the engines and pass the stage afterward.

"Do you know where to find him?" Zac asked.

"I can point you to his lab on the map," Jaol quickly said. "It's not too far, you'll be able to get there easily."

"Point on the map?" Zac smiled. "We're going together."

Jaol froze for a few seconds before he deflated with a sigh.

"Alright... Is there anything else I need to know about the doctor?" Zac asked.

Zac asked a few questions to gauge his strength, but Jaol didn't seem to know too much. The researcher spent almost all his time split between his lab and by the Shard. He was also pretty haughty and barely socialized with the crew. He even seemed to have taken a superior stance toward the captain even if he was just a Class-2 non-combat class.

But that was fine with Zac. It meant that he would get his opportunity as long as he managed to get to the laboratory to set up an ambush.

"Okay, let's go," Zac finally said after he had asked everything he could think of.

"Well, you're still looking a bit...." Jaol hesitantly said.

Zac looked down and immediately realized the problem. He looked like someone doing cosplay with his ancient robes and weaponry. It wouldn't take an AI to figure out something was wrong if he walked down the corridors wearing cultivator's robes. His first idea was to take clothes from Jaol, but waving around an axe for months while focusing on Endurance and Strength had made his build pretty bulky.

Jaol was a head shorter and probably weighed 100 pounds less, so getting into his fitted uniform was impossible. It also seemed that the clothes they wore didn't have an automatic-fit like his robes. Sending Jaol out for a disguise was out of the question as well. The Technocrat would probably rat him out the second he was out of earshot, so Zac had to go with the second-best option.

"Call someone here. Someone with a similar build as mine," Zac said.

"A- alright. I need my eyes back then," Jaol said, and soon enough pushed back the two orbs into their respective sockets.

"So weird," Zac muttered.

Jaol didn't dare to comment, but he rather summoned a screen that appeared in front of him, looking a bit like the status screens that the system used. Zac saw a bunch of faces flash by on the screen until Jaol's eyes lit up. The screen disappeared the next moment, and Jaol slightly turned away.

"It's Jaol. Something is wrong with these calculations, could you assist me? I'll owe you one," Jaol started muttering out into thin air. "Well, it's a bit inconvenient, could you come to my compartment? Yes, I am sorry, I'll provide 10% of this month's salary as compensation."

"Well?" Zac asked.

"A colleague will come over in a minute, he is off for the day so no one will feel it out of place if he's not around," Jaol said, a small smile creeping up on his face for the first time since getting captured. "His build is pretty similar to yours as well."

"Why do you look so happy about this?" Zac asked with a raised brow.

"He's kind of a work rival, and we're up for the same promotion," Jaol said, looking a bit embarrassed.

"If I have to live through this calamity I might as well drag him with me."

"Fair enough," Zac snorted as he walked next to the door. "But no funny business."