

The Fall 565

Chapter 565: Convictions

There was no time to lose now that everything was dealt with. They were already running behind the others who had spent weeks, even months inside the Mystic Realm already, and they needed to catch up.

Kenzie immediately started drawing the final inscriptions that would complete the outer array since Zac had given the go-ahead. The assistants had already moved away just in case, with only Kenzie staying next to the array. The final touches only took a few minutes, and Zac saw the air all around them shudder for a few seconds before it returned to normal.

"It worked!" Kenzie exclaimed a few seconds later as the inner array lit up as well.

"Uh, it did?" Zac asked, feeling there was some lack of payoff.

He had almost expected a massive tear in space to appear, only for Kenzie's array to beat it back after a herculean effort. Zac obviously wasn't the only one feeling this way either. Ogras looked at the array with a visible disappointment, and Thea was looking at Kenzie with confusion.

"That's it," Kenzie snorted, clearly a bit miffed about everyone's reactions. "I can add some fireworks to the next array if you want."

"Just thought there would be some spatial rifts or something," Zac sheepishly smiled before he refocused. "I'll go first to make sure it's safe."

"I'm coming with, I know the place best after all," Ogras said. "I've also been inside enough to be able to tell if the array works as intended."

"What? In your condition?" Zac frowned as he asked with a low voice. "What's your goal? Last time we almost had to drag you through the teleporter."

"I figure I'm better off on the other side in case this thing breaks down after one use," Ogras shrugged with a grin. "I'll just hide in your shadows and reap the rewards."

"Well, fine," Zac said as he turned to Thea and the other leaders. "I'll send a message back through the portal in a minute at most. You can begin the transfer as soon as I've done so, provided Kenzie gives the go-ahead."

Thea looked reluctant at being left behind, but Billy didn't care in the slightest. Nigel on the other hand looked like he was praying for the thing to fail so that he could stay behind. As for the Zhix, they stoically stood in vigil, their facial expressions unreadable.

"What should we do if this thing breaks after you enter, Warmaster?" Rhubat eventually rumbled. "The enemies of the Zhix are on the other side."

"If this thing really breaks down after we go through, have Kenzie fix it. If she's unable to... Enter through the New World Government's tunnel. Thea can show you the way," Zac said without hesitation.

This was something he had about before, and he eventually decided to sacrifice the New World Government if it came to that. The survival of Earth was more important than anything else, and they simply didn't have any other options. He had sent out dozens of squads in search of other tunnels, including to the uncharted continent. But they hadn't found anything, meaning the New World Government tunnel was the only other one remaining.

Of course, following the Dominators through their own tunnel would have been the best option, but no one had been able to figure out where it was. Void's Disciple must have tracked down a pathway as secluded as the one on Mystic Island.

"Be careful around the New World Government though. The tunnel would be filled with traps. And be careful as to not let anything dangerous reach Earth."

"You won't mind if we oust your kind?" Rhubat asked curiously.

"They're not my kind," Zac shrugged. "But try a non-violent approach if possible, no matter if we meet them inside or outside. We're all part of this planet after all."

The Anointed nodded in agreement, and Zac stepped onto the array with the demon following close behind. The darkness lasted just an instant until he appeared in a familiar room, a wave of relief washing over him when he could confirm that the array worked just fine. He didn't even realize that he had been holding his breath as he stepped through, and his hands were clammy as well.

Getting almost killed while teleporting once had undeniably left a shadow in his mind.

"Ah!" a scream echoed out the second Zac appeared, and he spotted a young woman grasping for a spear that stood balanced against the wall. "Intruders! Wait, Lord Atwood?"

"It's me. Tina, right?" Zac smiled as he recognized the Valkyrie. "I'm sorry it took so long to reopen the entrance. Is everyone okay here?"

Ogras appeared before Tina had a chance to answer, glancing around the building before walking up next to Zac.

"The array seems stable enough," Ogras muttered after he threw the Valkyrie a glance. "I didn't notice any differences compared to the last times. Should be fine I think?"

"Good," Zac nodded as he sent back an information crystal to the other side, telling the others that it worked.

"More people are coming soon, so let's get out of the way," Zac said as he led the two out of the Teleportation Building.

The base camp outside looked pretty much the same as the last time Zac visited, except for a couple of new buildings having been added to the mix. The odd lines covered the sky, and the trees created a perimeter around the fields far off in the distance. Finally, there was the barely discernable wall, and Zac's heartbeat sped up at the thought of what awaited inside.

"Everything seems fine here. Have there been any problems?" Zac said as soon as he could confirm that there were no immediate threats.

"Nothing much has happened here apart from us going a bit stir-crazy," Tina said as she waved at the other castaways who looked at Zac with relief in their eyes. "We have just explored the vicinity and cultivated. Those worm-things don't attack as long as five of us travel together. We have encountered something odd though."

"Odd? What's going on?" Zac asked as he looked around again, properly this time.

Only then did he realize that Ogras had stopped in his tracks after stepping outside the teleportation building, a deep frown adorning his face. Zac had only been here for a few short visits when he needed to talk with his sister, but he hadn't actually left the immediate vicinity of the entrance. However, it appeared as though the demon had figured something out.

"This world is growing," the demon finally blurted out, his eyes wide with shock.

"They are here," Leviala said, her milky-white eyes opening for the first time in weeks. "The door has been reopened."

"Sorry for having you do this, child," Uvek sighed as he hurriedly handed his granddaughter the extract before the backlash kicked in.

She drank the murky texture down with a slight frown, but she didn't complain about the astringent taste. She never did.

"It's not more horned beings," Leviala said. "Well, there are, but there are other races as well. Some I have never seen before."

"Any humans?" Tictus, the squirrely chief Datamancer, asked with worry in his eyes.

"Yes, most," Leviala nodded.

The eyes around the table lit up, but Uvek shook his head.

"Things outside are not like in here. Our races will not bring us together. Remember, it is our clan that that needs to stand united, even against other humans," Uvek said.

The other elders soon remembered themselves and low discussion as to what to do next appeared in the sealed Elder's Hall.

"How powerful are they?" Tictus eventually asked.

"I can't see," Leviala said with a shake of her head.

"How about..." another elder muttered.

"No! She cannot open the Eyes of Heaven again so soon. She had used her bloodline too much already to keep track of all the changes. It might kill her if we push even further. We need to remember our goal! These outsiders that keep pouring in are after that thing in the center, but what are we after?" Uvek said.

"Freedom," Tictus muttered.

"Exactly! We need to leave here, but then what?" Uvek said as he looked across the room.

"I have learned some things by speaking with Hekruv Vira of the True Sky faction. They have had ample contact with the outsiders through their terminals. If he is speaking the truth, and I believe he is, then the planet outside has changed, and it will be thrown out into the universe in one hundred years. We need to have a D-Grade warrior before then to protect us, and Leviala is our best hope! She is the first one since the ancestor to awaken [Heaven's Eyes] instead of [King's Eyes] or [Lord's Eyes]. We can't ruin her potential for short-term benefits!"

"Do not forget Yvian," the decrepit voice of the second elder spoke up, and Uvek forced himself to nod in acquiescence.

However, his inner thoughts weren't quite as agreeable. It would be a disaster for Clan Cartava if that impetuous man became the next Patriarch. They had already been captured once due to their unique bloodline, and he knew they needed to keep a low profile as they stepped out into the true universe. But Yvian carried dreams of grandeur, to lead the clan to the peak.

But he didn't understand that they were just ants in the grand scheme of things. Their ancestral homelands had been like a fortress, and their echelon elders were known across the sector for their prowess. But their sanctuary was reduced to ashes the moment the ancestor passed away, their elders slaughtered like chickens, proving they were just frogs in the bottom of the well.

Having wealth was a sin if you weren't powerful enough to protect it.

Even then, Yvian bore a deep desire for conquest. Before he had wanted to conquer this accursed cage, but now he had turned his sights to the planet outside. He believed that it was ripe for the picking as the outsiders were pathetically weak according to the True Sky Faction. But Uvek knew better. The real powerhouses hadn't made their moves yet, or they moved in the shadows.

"So what do we do?" Tictus asked.

"The storms are acting up again," Uvek muttered. "And we haven't found any terminals that can reach this new faction."

"The old patterns no longer holds, and some subsystems have completely shut down," Tictus sighed said with a shake of his head. "A unit was caught unaware in Red-04, only three managed to return alive. We can't go to Section 8 at all the moment."

"We left a message where the horned one appeared," Uvek eventually said. "We can't go there now, but we might soon meet in the inner sections."

"What if they're hostile?" the second elder asked with a rasping voice.

"We won't look for trouble, but we will not back away either. We will never be captives again," Uvek said, his eyes burning with determination.

"Never again," the others echoed.

"This is our edge. The outsiders are treating this as a treasure hunt. We are fighting for survival. Our convictions aren't the same."

"He's hurt," Yano whispered, the soulgems studding his head glimmering as his fury instilled them with power. "Another is missing, and the third is in the vat. This is our chance!"

"We can't," Helo sighed, his own, far grander, gems instead spreading a soothing blue radiance. "Only three Masons remain, and they are badly wounded as well. And remember, they are not alone. Their armies outnumber us five to one. Those insectoids might be weaker in general, but you saw how they fought. We can't match that suicidal ferocity. Our kin is not meant for battle like that."

"But another opportunity like this won't come again!" Yano spat, though the red glow of his gems had clearly dimmed.

He knew the horror of their new masters better than anyone. He had seen his own parents getting ripped apart by the bare hands of the one called Void's Disciple, their soulgems being harvested the same way the old controllers did. What had their kin done to deserve a fate such as this? Captured and experimented on for thousands of years, and when they finally saw a chance at freedom, they were slaughtered and enslaved once more.

But Helo wouldn't give up. To many had fallen for him to give in to despair now.

"We need to be patient," Helo eventually said.

"You keep saying that, but our people are dying," Yano said, tears already streaming down his face. "Besides. If you help Void's Disciple to create that item... Even if you survive, you'll be cursed. Heaven's won't abide something like this. With the old Masons fallen, only you can lead us now."

"I will survive. I can't fall here," Helo said with determination, the soothing gems flashing a sanguine red for a second before he got a hold of himself. "We must endure for another ten days. At that time the thing will be born. The elders believed that would bring about huge changes to our world, with previously inaccessible parts being forced open."

"How does that help us?" Yano asked. "Without our Masons, we are not powerful enough to compete for that thing."

"But we might be able to nudge events in our favor. Perhaps we might even be able to nudge those monsters right off a cliff. The Grand Mason told me something before he succumbed to his wounds, something that she only learned recently," Helo said, his voice growing even lower. "The Administrator is alive."

"What? How is that even possible? The cataclysm back then—" Yano exclaimed, his gems turning grey out of fear.

"I don't understand either," Helo said, his gems shimmering yellow in confusion. "But if these insectoids want the item, they will have to enter the Administrator's domain. These interlopers are strong, but do you really believe they can survive such an encounter?"