

The Fall 571

Chapter 571: Back-up Plans

Zac curiously looked where the demon pointed and he realized that there were three thin spikes, each of them no more than five centimeters long, at the bottom of the sign. Just like the rest of the signpost they seemed to be made from the very same material as the walls, though the spikes had intricate engravings covering their surface.

His eyes immediately moved to the spot where the sign stood earlier, and he saw that three matching holes could be seen in the floor. However, the cavities were rapidly closing, and just a few seconds later they were gone. It would have been impossible to know that something was socketed there just a moment ago if they hadn't seen it themselves.

"Weird," Zac muttered, and he stabbed the sign down into the ground to see whether it would get stuck again.

However, a pinging sound echoing through the corridor, and three light marks on the floor were the only results of his attempt. Not even forcibly pushing it into the ground did any good, and neither did instilling the board with his Dao or Cosmic Energy.

"We're clearly missing something," Ogras eventually said after having watched Zac's failed attempts for half a minute.

Zac nodded in agreement and stowed away the sign, hoping that his sister or the scientists would be able to figure out what's going on with the help of that thing.

"You want to follow the map?" Ogras asked.

"We've done what we came for," Zac said with a shake of his head after some thought. "Let's return."

The two started making their way back while simultaneously searching for other points of interest, but there was really not much going on. There were just more corridors and storage rooms, all of which were emptied apart from the occasional crate full of worthless materials.

They also made a slight detour to see whether Zac's own leave-behind had survived like the signpost, but neither of them was really surprised to see that both boulder and communication crystal were gone. It wasn't a disappointment though as it cleared some things up for Zac. There really were secret rules that governed this place, as evidenced by the native's ability to manipulate the floor and sign like that.

Was this perhaps the true message this Cartava Clan wanted to convey?

The message was short, but it had exposed a lot. First of all, Clan Cartava knew of their existence somehow. Secondly, they showed that the previously thought impervious metal was somehow possible to influence to great lengths. The map might lead to a third clue as well. All-in-all it proved the value of the clan, and Zac leaned toward following the map as soon as possible.

They soon reached the security door leading to their area, and Zac used his credentials just to test that his unique title worked as well as the caretaker credentials. However, they didn't immediately return to the settlement as there was something Zac wanted to try first. They walked into one of the massive empty warehouses, and Zac took out [Verun's Bite].

Ogras had already reported how sturdy the alloys the base was made from were, and seeing what happened with the Signpost had piqued Zac's interest even further. He wanted to cut off a piece and bring it back for further study.

Zac walked over to a wall and swung his axe in a precise arc, but he only ended up with a slight pain in his wrist as the wall didn't budge at all. He frowned and infused the axe with the Fragment of the Axe, and his weapon finally cut into the wall without too much resistance. However, it reminded him of the early days of the integration, where he barely managed to cut into the extraordinarily hard walls of his Nexus Crystal mine.

Worse yet, the wall quickly healed itself the moment Zac prepared to swing again. However, a minute of furious swings later he had managed to cut out a slab of metal that was as big as his fist, and it actually weighed over a hundred kilograms from the feel of it.

Ogras walked over curiously to take a look at the sample, but neither of them could make heads or tails of the situation. The alloy had definitely changed properties after Zac managed to cut it out, but not as they expected. He had almost thought that it would turn liquid from what they had seen, but it had only turned.... Worse.

It was definitely a solid like before, but Zac had no problem remolding it with his hands. It suddenly felt like it was barely as hard as gold, let alone steel. It was a far cry from the walls, or the signpost that seemed to be extraordinarily sturdy as well. However, they didn't have the opportunity to play around for long before Zac's senses prickled as previously unseen scripts appeared across the walls.

Zac had specifically chosen to enter a storeroom to cut out a sample since not one of the warehouses they had visited were booby-trapped with spatial rifts. However, it was quickly becoming clear that not even these side chambers were safe as the whole room transformed in front of their very eyes. The walls turned into spears that shot toward them, and worse yet a red barrier had appeared across the exit, blocking their escape. A series of spatial tears emerged a second later, all of them heading for Zac.

"Give it back!" Ogras screamed as he dodged the incoming stabs, and Zac could only comply.

He tossed the slab of metal toward the wall where he took it, and they both breathed out in relief when the spears slowed down. However, Zac was still forced to block a series of attacks for half a minute before the room had calmed down again and the barrier disappeared.

"What a stingy building," Ogras muttered as he kicked one of the empty shelves, and Zac couldn't help but agree.

It had billions of tonnes of this alloy, and it couldn't share just a handful of the stuff?

So it was mostly empty-handed that the two returned to the town, though the signpost caused some waves among the core members of the expedition. Some were worried that their activities were already spotted, and a frantic search for hidden cameras begun. The scientists were instead more curious about the spikes, and the odd material that seemed to almost be alive.

Their first assessment was that their earlier assumptions were correct. It wasn't the material itself that was magical, it was either the script that covered the walls or some sort of energy that transformed it.

However, why the natives could build a sign made from the material and maintain its strength while Zac couldn't even harvest a single ingot still eluded them.

Zac left the sign with his sister, hoping that they could figure some things out. As for himself, he didn't head out again. There was no point in him running around in those endless corridors himself. Zac and Ogras had been walking around for hours, but they had only seen a fraction of the immediate area. It was more efficient to send out a hundred scouting units who could work together to map out the place and mark all traps.

As for himself, he still had multiple things to work on, the most pressing being the intrusive Dao from Void's Disciple and pondering on the Dao.

This was both a way to save time and a way for him to relinquish some control. Zac knew he had a problem with delegating tasks he considered important since seeing Alea fall. He left the nitty-gritty to his people in Port Atwood while doing the rest himself. But his explorations had really driven home just how massive this base was, and the fact that he wouldn't be able to explore it by himself even if he was given months.

Things progressed quickly over the two following days. Kenzie's drone army was a huge help in mapping out the interiors of the base, which allowed the subsequent scouting squads to make rapid progress inside the Mystic Realm. The master map of the corridors was quickly expanded and improved upon without needing Zac to do much of the work himself.

There were a few issues that had quickly cropped up though. The drones were unable to move too far in the tunnels as Kenzie, or rather Jeeves, would lose control over them. This wasn't something unique to the Mystic Realm, but rather that the range of the AI was limited. Kenzie believed that this range would increase by a huge margin if Jeeves evolved, but there was no indication of that happening anytime soon.

Jeeves had only consumed a scant few items from the Technocrat Incursion, and Zac doubted an item that magical would be easy to evolve. That was exactly how Zac liked things though, as an overpowered AI was not something he wanted to deal with. It was better if Kenzie focused on her own Strength in Zac's opinion.

The real issue was the matter of the missing squad.

One Hundred scouting units and ten elite squads set out as soon as a strategy could be devised, and their goal was to find and map out the areas that the Drones couldn't reach. The elite units consisted of powerful warriors of all factions, and they were supposed to take the vanguard in case one of the native factions showed up. They were all equipped with a lot of powerful talismans, both offensive and defensive, to the point that they would be able to blow up half a city if need be.

However, one of the ten squads, which included three Valkyries, had simply gone missing. There had been no sounds of struggle, and there were no clues left behind. They had vanished without a trace. Zac himself had set out to search for them, but there was simply nothing to go by, forcing him to return after a few hours.

Zac initially suspected Clan Cartava of kidnapping his people, but after thinking it through he wasn't so sure. The map they provided seemed to indicate that the Clan was located to the east, while the missing

scouting unit had rather tried to move northbound in search of a way into the core sections of the base. That might mean that the second force in the area that was responsible, or perhaps even some new type of trap.

But the spatial barriers that blocked the corridors weren't actually that dangerous unless you forced your way inside as Zac did, so most were inclined to believe foul play was involved. They also had no idea whether Clan Cartava was the werewolves Ogras encountered or the humans, or perhaps even a third force. In either case, it wouldn't be a surprise if there were both hostile and friendly factions inside the mystic realm.

However, the rest of the scouting units were making rapid progress, and the command center was bustling with activity as well.

A massive courtyard was immediately cordoned off for Zac in the original biosphere, which raised a few brows among the different forces. He already had a massive area for himself on his island, so people started to wonder whether he had turned agoraphobic or something. However, the real reason wasn't quite so exciting, though Zac still didn't want it to be known.

His compound needed to be pretty big to house not only his home, but also his Life-Death Array. Kenzie and Triv had dismantled it when they arrived to his cultivation cave a few days ago, though it only was a temporary measure until Kenzie was able to create an Array Disk able to match the death-attuned one in his possession.

Zac wasn't willing to let up on his soul cultivation, and who knew how long this place would be locked down when the Dimensional Seed awakened. This had become especially important after realizing that the array also kept his soul in check. Thankfully he only caused some murmurs with his massive set of concealment and isolation arrays, and there was no lack of open space around.

In fact, people had already spread out across all the Biospheres within the outer section they controlled. It allowed the various forces to keep to themselves a bit, and it was also necessary to deal with the limited amount of Cosmic Energy.

A surprising issue had cropped up while Zac and Ogras were off exploring. More and more people arrived in the Mystic Realm, and the supply of Cosmic Energy soon couldn't meet the demand. Thankfully this issue was solved the moment they split up.

The tunnel to the real world also held steady, and according to Kenzie it should definitely stay that way for at least another week, which incidentally was the deadline of the New World Government projects. It was Jeeves' opinion, based on data it extrapolated from analyzing the array that kept the pathway open. The cost of keeping it running kept increasing as the turbulence from the Mystic Realm's side slowly grew worse, and it believed the spatial chaos to reach a breaking point in around 7 to 12 days.

After that point, the turbulence would be too strong for the natural pathway to remain open. The array Kenzie set up would be rendered useless, and the portal would naturally close. Zac was pretty impressed that AI had managed to extrapolate such critical information just from an array, but he was perhaps even more impressed that the New World Government seemed to have figured the same thing out somehow.

It was a valuable reminder that even a weak force like the New World Government had a lot of talents that he didn't even know about. A lot of the top scientists of the old world were probably part of the government as well, along with any next-gen technology that the governments controlled before the integration. That might be what allowed them to make such detailed plans for the Mystic Realm.

With things being a lot clearer, Zac finally decided to take the risk and go ahead with his back-up plan. He had spent ten days in recuperation by now, and he was in peak condition apart from some remnant Dao that he still hadn't managed to completely route. However, he sorely needed more tools to deal with Void's Disciple, along with the High E-Grade elders who were apparently waiting for him.

He needed to break open the next floor of his Dao Repository.