

The Fall 603

Chapter 603: Monochrome

Leviaia made her way through the pathways, her mind still in turmoil from the events of the past two days. Of course, the constant pain emanating from her right eye didn't help. She knew there would be a price to meddle with the past, but she hadn't expected it to be that great. There were accounts of her ancestor doing even greater things multiple times over without being afflicted with the same curse.

But not only had she been blinded, but she could even feel how her affinities had worsened. It felt like her future had turned bleaker, and she wasn't even sure if her actions were worth it. The abyssal eyes of Zachary Atwood in his secret form had put such pressure on her that she acted hastily, when 'being captured' by him likely wouldn't have been the worst of fates.

Seeing how he not only cared for her safety but even risked his life for his people, was all that she needed to know about his character. He might be a ruthless pragmatist, but he was definitely good at heart. But such was the problem with her ability. She had a short window of connecting her mind to the past. If she had waited any longer the backlash would have killed her, and she had needed to make a decision.

Then again, knowledge was power. Her knowing his secret might not hold any value right now, but that would definitely change if she managed to lead her clan out of this place. She could set up a series of safeguards for herself and her people, guaranteeing security in return for her silence. It was a shady course of action, but their Clan was currently like a weak candle in the wind, any small shock could be what toppled them.

Now the question was what she should do next.

Her grandfather might have some ideas on how to lessen the backlash, but that wasn't the only problem she was facing. The fact that Zachary Atwood wouldn't let them out would definitely be seen as an act of war by some, but her instincts told her that letting the Second Elder and Yvian assault Port Atwood would result in massive casualties, and most likely end in defeat.

She had seen Zachary's strength all-too-clear, and what she hadn't witnessed weighed even heavier on her mind. Try as she might, but she absolutely couldn't remember what he did against the Collector. But just the thought of trying to peer back at the events with her gaze made her break out in a cold sweat, and all her instincts told her that doing so would cause the collapse of her soul.

The thought of Yvian was also a cause of concern, making her frown as she rounded another corner. The parting words of Zac repeated over and over in her head, and she had to admit they rang true. The beastmen were crafty, but not overly so. They might have realized they could use the vents as points of ingress, but Clan Cartava had done for weeks already. The paths Hevastes took should have triggered newly installed alarms, yet they reached her private gardens without issue.

Not only that, the guard response was a lot slower than what should be expected, allowing the werewolves to leave just like they came. If it wasn't for the traps and automatic defenses her family had set up, then they would have finished the job unscathed.

So it wasn't elation that gripped her heart when she encountered a group of clansmen, but rather suspicion and fear. Because it only took one glance to see that the squad of eight all belonged to the faction of the second elder.

"Young miss!" the middle-aged man in the lead exclaimed as he took a step forward. "You made it back safe. But, your eye-!"

"Velar, how come you're here?" Leviala smiled, but she wasn't as calm as she let on.

"Looking for you, of course," Velar sighed. "We've turned the whole place upside-down in search of you. Those bastards from the Lunar Clan are truly audacious to do something like this when we're at the cusp of freedom."

"It was actually the foreigners who saved me in the end," Leviala said. "They-"

"You shouldn't trust those people," Velar said with a frown. "We have it on good authority that the foreigners are working with the Lunar Clan to pilfer this place before they escape together. We were about to force open a path to them in hopes of rescuing you, but it looks like that won't be necessary. Come, let's hurry back. Your fiancé will be elated to hear you are okay."

"My what?"

"I don't know exactly what's going on either," Ogras sighed as he touched his horns.

The two horns on his head hadn't changed shape since they met last, but they no longer looked like liquid fire like the rest of the Torrid Demons. They had turned monochrome, and now rather reminded Zac of dancing shadows. His skin had lost some of its red tint as well, and the scale-like markings almost looked like they were covered in ash.

It looked like the demon was really in the process of turning into a shadow-creature.

"Can't you stop the transformation?" Zac asked with some wariness in his eyes.

"I'm slowly losing ground to Asshole," Ogras muttered, and Zac realized that the demon had renamed his contracted beast once more. "It attacked my mind while I learned the new skills. That's why I've been holed up here for a while, to shore up my defenses and stabilize the situation so to speak."

"It's attacking your mind?" Zac repeated with a frown.

"Yes, but I think I have found a solution," Ogras said. "I realized it lost some of its control after I ate race-boosting pills. I need to evolve my race within a month. Strengthening my soul would be for the best as well, but your array doesn't seem to work on me for some reason."

"You tried out the array?" Zac said some anger. "You didn't break anything, did you?"

"How can I break something by sitting down on a mat?" Ogras spat. "It wouldn't even start up."

"Well, that's fine, then," Zac sighed. "I think it only works if you have some connection to life and death. In either case, I might have a method to help you improve quickly."

“Really?” Ogras asked, his eyes lighting up. “Or wait, are you talking about pills? I’ve eaten all the pills I had by now over the past few days. I’ve built up immunity by now.”

“No,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “It should be something else. I met someone while exploring the forest.”

He then briefly recounted his experiences over the past days.

“I leave for a few days and all kinds of exciting things happen. You saved the granddaughter of some Clan Elder?” Ogras muttered, and Zac’s mouth curved slightly upward when he saw the signature jealousy. “You keep encountering powerful beauties at every turn, yet you keep your hands to yourself. What a waste. So, you’re saying that the Clan Cartava has access to these greenhouses full of race-boosting natural treasures?”

“You’re lucky we’re close to the faction that has control over the race-boosting stuff,” Zac nodded.

“I guess your luck is finally starting to rub off, huh?” Ogras muttered. “Well then, let’s go.”

“Wait,” Zac said. “I got a quest to reach the Inner Labs. I’m thinking we should hit that first. If you don’t find anything useful there, we can go to the Cartava Clan. I don’t want to waste time with them unless absolutely necessary.”

“What’s in the Inner Labs?” Ogras asked hesitantly.

“Apparently the good stuff of this place, but it changes every time,” Zac said.

“Okay, new plan. I come with you to mooch off your latest windfall. I’m not going to be stuck in some Technocrat Greenhouse while you’re visiting the treasure vault of this netherblasted place,” Ogras said. “I can fight off Asshole a while longer if it will line my pockets.”

“Well, at least your intentions are pure,” Zac snorted. “I need to use the array here before we set off though.”

“Fine,” Ogras sighed. “I’ll stay here for now. Need to get used to the new skills anyway.”

Zac couldn’t help but worry as he walked out of his courtyard. The demon seemed to be fighting a losing battle at the moment. If this plan to evolve his Race didn’t pan out, then Zac would have to make some difficult decisions. That shadowcreature was a pretty sinister creature from what they had gathered, making Ogras a ticking time bomb.

He was the second most powerful person of his faction, and Zac couldn’t have him running around putting people’s lives at risk if he suddenly turned into a murderous beast. The only relief was that they weren’t exactly fighting against the clock with this new issue. They had ample time to look for treasures in both the Inner Labs and at Clan Cartava. So Zac threw the issue to the back of his mind as he reached the building housing his Life-Death array.

The building was almost as large as a soccer field, with no windows to show what was going on inside. The interiors were surprisingly similar to his cultivation cave back home though, with three circular chambers. The energy density inside was obviously worse though, as the place was powered by Miasma Crystals and Divine Crystals rather than the natural energies of his Nexus Vein and the weird Array he had taken from the Undead Incursion.

Still, his temporary arrangement for his Soul Strengthening Array was probably better than the cultivation environment of almost anyone on Earth.

Zac sat down on his prayer mat, but he didn't immediately activate the array. He rather stabilized his mind for a while as he went over the events of the past days. His first takeaway was that the Mystic Realm was a lot more dangerous than he had anticipated. He had only considered the leaders of the respective factions and the two remaining Dominators as threats going in, but dangers were lurking around every corner.

He hadn't even encountered a single one of his targets, but he had already wasted so many of his hidden aces. [Fate's Obduracy] was used up on the Lunar Wolves, and his arduously accumulated energy from the Splinter of Oblivion was expended to deal with the Collector's ghastly appendage.

The latter, in particular, was a huge blow to his plans. The Bronze Flashes of before had changed since his pathways were rewritten, and he couldn't use them as freely as he did in the Tower any longer. In return, he had gained a semblance of control and a huge boost in destructive power, but he probably wouldn't have time to recharge another blast before the showdown at the core of the Mystic Realm.

The Annihilation Sphere was the ultimate card he had set aside to kill Void's Disciple in one go, where the chaotic powers of Oblivion hopefully rendered the Dominator's odd ability of resurrection unusable.

There was still a decent chunk of Creation energy that had accumulated in his body by now, but he had only used the 'pink flash' once; when tainting the energy source of Little Bean. He still had no idea what effect it would have when used on a cultivator. It might even heal his enemy for all Zac knew.

But as one door closed another door opened. He had lost some things, but he had created new opportunities. Evolving his Fragment of the Axe was a huge and unexpected boost, but it wasn't enough to give him full confidence in the upcoming battles. Because if he could improve, then so could Void's Disciple. The next opportunity would hopefully appear in the Inner Lab, but until then he had other things to work on.

He walked over to the death-attuned side next and activated the Life-Death Array after making sure everything was in order. The familiar suction appeared, and his mental energy steadily started to enter the intricate circuitry that made up half the array.

Zac would normally relax or focus on other things while the array did its thing, but this time was different as Zac kept a constant vigil on his soul. This was the first time he used the array since gaining the three apparitions in the center of his mind, and he had to make sure that there wasn't a clash.

It only took a minute before Zac noticed a very important difference. The deathly energies seeping out from the coffin suddenly split off, with only a thin strand continuing toward his avatar in the middle. The rest joined his mental energy as it entered the array. Zac had no way to tell if this change was good or detrimental, but he decided to keep going for the time being.

The array was going to turn his mental-energy death-attuned before returning it in either case, so adding the energy from the Fragment of the Coffin shouldn't be a bad thing. Actually, incorporating his Daos into the array was one of the first things he had tried to increase the efficiency of the arrays, but until now it had proven impossible.

There was nothing to 'imbue' with his Dao when using the array, which had made it impossible for Zac to do anything except passively letting the array do its thing. One thing was certain though, adding his Dao to the procedure had increased the difficulty manifold, and Zac started to feel a strain as the minutes passed.