

The Fall 608

Chapter 608: Divine Guidance

"We never even touched the thing. I think it sensed us standing around and activated, causing a chain reaction," Kenzie said as she sighed. "The Werewolves must have known and simply ran straight through."

"Well, they were thankfully not too powerful," Zac said as he turned back to human. "But there might be more powerful machines further in if these things were just left behind here."

"You're full of surprises..." Thea muttered as she gave him Zac an inscrutable look.

Zac could only shrug his shoulders in response, not really in the mood to explain exactly how things worked with his undead side. She already knew some parts of it from back during the hunt though, so him using two new skills shouldn't come as too big a shock.

"We should go in case they can sense us through the wall," Kenzie said as she took out her mapper, seemingly trying to help her brother change the subject. "Let them calm down by themselves. We are just an hour away from where we're supposed to meet your new friend."

"Right, let's go," Zac nodded as he shot one last look at the gate before he started walking again.

"I can't believe you set a time and location," Ogras muttered as he stowed away his spear. "It's like you want to be ambushed."

Thea didn't say anything, but she seemed to be in agreement with the demon's sentiment.

"We could really use their expertise. Kenzie can't be expected to find out every hidden danger in this place, and we might walk into a real deathtrap sooner or later if we keep going like this," Zac said.

"Besides, they're a clan with an Ocular Bloodline, how strong can they be?"

"Famous last words," Thea muttered, but she didn't offer any alternative course of action.

The group kept a high pace through the oversized corridors, and the map held true, keeping them out of the way of any barriers or spatial tears. They were forced to pass through a second warehouse, but they had learned their lesson already and relied on Ogras to teleport them through the enormous room with three rapid jumps.

They finally reached their destination 80 minutes later, a nondescript crossing looking like any other. Zac and Leviala had chosen this place since Leviala was certain that she'd be able to get here from Clan Cartava's headquarters. However, no one was there awaiting their arrival, and neither were there any clues left behind.

"Well, the labs are further down this way, though the map becomes incomplete at the end. The werewolves either ran out of time or encountered some difficulties," Kenzie said as she pointed down the path right ahead. "What do you want to do? Wait here or keep going?"

"We're already a bit late, but she's still not here," Zac muttered as he looked around another time.

"Something might have changed on their side."

“Well, we should be able to figure it out without her,” Ogras said, clearly unwilling on giving up on a chance at the treasure. “We have the map, right? We can just go to the end, and Kenzie should be able to gather clues from there, leading us to this Inner Lab. The Cartava Clan might have become greedy, heading there before us to loot the riches.”

“Maybe we should go find those natives instead?” Thea hesitantly said. “Their base is only half a day from here, right? We can head over there and form an alliance, paving the way for our people. Then we can go to the Inner Labs after the seed has matured. Isn’t the whole plan that the defenses will be lowered then?”

“... I can’t wait that long,” Zac sighed.

“What?” Thea asked with confusion. “Is there something you haven’t told us?”

Zac hesitated for a bit before he set up an isolation array, and both Ogras and Kenzie added their own methods to obscure the area even further.

“I have a quest telling me I have to get there before the Dimensional Seed matures. It might fail if we take a detour to Clan Cartava. I didn’t find a mapper on the Werewolf squad responsible for heading there, so we don’t have any safe paths in that direction.”

“It specifically said you had to get there before the Seed Matures?” Ogras asked to confirm, a thoughtful look donning his face. “What else did it say?”

Zac deliberated for a second before he shared the quest screen, including the note at the end.

“What the hell?” Thea muttered, her eyes wide in disbelief. “What kind of quest is this? You’ve already completed 3 quests and there are 6 more? And there are punishments? Why are there punishments?”

“Just the System being an asshole again,” Zac shrugged. “The punishment was a lot worse in the beginning, but I still don’t want to risk losing one of my core skills.”

“Divine guidance... It has to be,” Ogras said with wide eyes.

“Divine guidance? What?” Kenzie said, looking at Ogras skeptically. “Isn’t it just a special quest Zac got because he’s strong?”

“All those things you described before, were they part of this quest chain?” Ogras asked.

“Yes, starting with rescuing Leviala Cartava,” Zac nodded, feeling the demon might be on to something.

After all, he only got this chain of quests after he got the [Pathstrider]-title, marking him a candidate for training. Divine Guidance sounded like something the demon might call a chain of training quests.

“So, the reason we managed to reach this place was that the System led you to the only native carrying a set of maps?” Ogras asked to confirm.

“I... guess?” Zac asked hesitantly, his suspicions only growing when he saw Ogras’ reaction. “You think that the System is leading me to the Core?”

“My grandfather once told me a story, a rumor he heard from his captain on the battlefield. About Lord Lucifer’s younger days,” Ogras said.

"Lucifer? The Devil?" Thea blurted.

"A C-Grade Demon Monarch," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "In either case, my grandpa saved the life of his captain during a war. That's how grandpa gained an opportunity to reach D-Grade. His captain turned out to be a descendant of Lord Lucifer himself, out to gain experience and battle merit as an unnamed soldier of the Horde."

"Larok, the captain, told grandpa some stories about his ancestor after they became friends, tales of bravery and such. It turns out, Lord Lucifer was accidentally sucked into a newly emerged C-Grade Mystic Realm when he was a peak E-Grade warrior, a death sentence if there ever was one. But not only did he survive, but he even emerged with one of the core treasures of that place."

"What was it?" Kenzie asked curiously.

"Some sort of Natural Treasure that helped him form a supreme Cultivator's Core. He used his newfound power to wage a 1000-year campaign, utterly stomping out various threats to the Azh'Kir'Khat Horde," Ogras said. "The contribution points he accumulated from that war set him up for life, and he's now standing tall as one of the supreme Warchiefs of the Horde."

"What's this got to do with us?" Thea asked with an exasperated tone.

"Patience, girl," Ogras snorted. "Apparently, Lord Lucifer was surrounded by terrifying beasts in that Mystic Realm, but he refused to give up. So he hid beneath the ground and cultivated, planning to form a Cultivation Core prematurely before making a mad dash to escape. But he was suddenly given a task by The Ruthless Heavens and he saw a chance at survival even without breaking through with shaky foundations. One task followed another, unknowingly leading him to the treasure, and then to a hidden exit of the realm."

"The System guided him through a chain of quests, not only to become stronger but also to help him achieve his goals. You think the same is happening here?" Zac muttered.

"Exactly. The Ruthless Heavens put its fingers on the scales for its chosen few. We already know you are blessed with monstrous Luck, drawing the attention of The Ruthless Heavens over and over. It knows what you need, and the threats you face. If we don't kill the Dominators, the Great Redeemer will track you down and harvest your soul. It is creating a path of survival for you, a way to beat the odds," Ogras said.

"We can still do all that even without completing some quests though," Thea countered.

"Can we? Can we guarantee it?" Ogras said with a sharp glance. "We believe the Dimensional Treasure to be C-Grade Treasure for it to attract the zealots and the Dominators to this extent. A treasure of that level has a spirituality, a sense of self-perseverance. It might knock out the security of this place, but it might also bolster it. What if our only way to reach the Core or the other side is to reach the Inner Lab before it's too late? And if we stay outside, we'll be locked out forever?"

"Divine Guidance," Zac muttered. "And you're not just saying all this because you want the treasures inside?"

"There are no conflicts of interest here," Ogras smiled. "We all win if we head for the Inner Lab. This was our plan from the start. Why question it now?"

"Alright let's just go," Zac agreed, and the group set out again.

However, they only kept going for another hour before they encountered a bloody sight; Leviala, lying on the ground in a pool of dried blood, her face haggard and pale. Judging by the trail of blood on the walls she had come here through an air duct, but she had stopped moving after falling down the fifty meters to the ground.

"I'm sorry," Leviala weakly said as she looked up at Zac. "I meant to go to our meeting point, but I guess I dozed off."

"What's the matter with you?" Zac sighed as he threw a set of healing pills at the girl. "How do you keep ending up in a state like this?"

"Do you think I enjoy this?" Leviala said with a glare as she ate the healing pills. "You were right. Things are bad back home."

"Bad how?" Zac said, but there was no time to hear an explanation as he suddenly sensed people to his left.

He quickly swirled as his axe appeared in his hand, and the others quickly prepared themselves as well as over fifty people had appeared out of nowhere a hundred meters away. There was no way for so many people to sneak up on a group like theirs that easily, making Zac believe they had some high-tiered cloaking technology from this base.

They were definitely humans, but their appearance gave Zac some pause. They looked a lot like the Technocrats Zac had fought when closing the incursion as they all carried various energy-weapons while having shields formed from the same red barriers as the base.

There were also hundreds of flying machines that looked a bit like Kenzie's drones, though their design was fundamentally different. They rather looked like small airplanes, with barrels attached to the wings. They definitely were tools of war rather than scouting judging by the attachments, and even Zac felt some pressure from being the target of that many weapons.

"Technocrats?" Ogras muttered with hesitation.

"Interesting designs," Kenzie whispered as she looked at the drones with gleaming eyes, and Zac inwardly groaned when he realized that his sister's Drone Swarm was about to grow in size once more.

Ogras only snickered, clearly having realized what was about to happen as well. He didn't know about Jeeves, but he did know that this base was built by Zac's and Kenzie's ancestors, and their unique advantages had been put on ample display over the past weeks. Trying to use this base's weaponry against them was foolhardy at best.

"Traitors of my family," Leviala sighed, sadness written all over her face. "I'm sorry, I thought I shook them off."

Zac was a bit surprised that the soldiers of the Cartava Clan had gone in this direction, but on further thought, it was perhaps to be expected. Technology had become an integrated part of their lives over the past millennia, and their bloodlines weren't that useful for battle from what Leviala had explained.

Meanwhile, there was the Lunar Tribe with their superior constitutions and the gemlings who could create powerful weapons and armor. The Cartava Clan was at a clear disadvantage there, and it looked like they had turned to technology to bridge that gap and secure their place in the Mystic Realm.

"This is proof. Leviala Cartava has betrayed her clan, consorting with outsiders to bring doom upon our clan," a middle-aged man said. "Capture her and leave at least one of the outsiders alive. They know the composition of their armies and the means of escaping this wretched place."

"Wait! Please don't hurt them!" Leviala said, causing the man to sneer disdainfully. However, his face froze when he heard her next sentence. "They're still people from my clan. Please don't kill them!"

"Attack!" the man immediately shouted as he reached for his gun, clearly having understood that his numerical advantage was just for show.

The whole corridor lit up in red as the soldiers fired their weapons, but a storm of leaves appeared to block out the first barrage. Zac sighed and turned to his sister.

"Don't ruin my new toys," she only said, confirming Zac's suspicions.

"Men make plans and the Heavens laugh," Ogras snickered to the side with a bloodthirsty gleam in his eyes. "I guess it's war."