

## **The Fall 610**

### **Chapter 610: Looming Threat**

"What are you talking about?" Leviala asked with confusion.

"Nothing, continue. What happened next?" Zac said, not wanting to make any decisions before hearing the whole story.

Seeing the outsiders conspiring with their old enemies the Lunar Clan had, unsurprisingly, agitated the people of Clan Cartava, especially after they had extended an olive branch through the plaque. It was at moment time a man named Yvian stepped out, saying that he and Leviala were betrothed, but had kept it secret as to not distract from the more important matters at hand. He vowed to get his fiancé back, even if he had to battle both the "insidious outsiders" and the Lunar Tribe.

Apparently, Yvian was the heir of the second branch of the Clan and the second-best candidate for future Clan Leader after Leviala herself. He and his faction quickly turned the clan against Zac's people and immediately rerouted the scouting parties to search in the direction of the Lunar Forest instead. The explosions together with the video made it look like the werewolves kidnapped Leviala before escaping toward the outer world.

As for the fake engagement, it was a way to bridge the gap between the two main branches of the clan now that Leviala was gone. With Leviala gone and the Grand elder being quite old, the Second Branch would eventually become the main branch. Of course, their plans went awry the moment Leviala was accidentally found by one of the scouting parties.

Leviala had returned to her clan with the second-branch scouts even if she had misgivings, but the news she brought back were mostly discarded. They called the news of the Dominators and the Great Redeemer a fabrication meant to trick the clan into staying behind while their enemies got themselves to safety.

Some even insinuated that Leviala had been brainwashed by the enemies.

Even her own grandfather seemed hesitant about what she said, so Leviala eventually saw no other option but to turn to Zac for help. There was no way that she would be able to convince her Datamancer uncle to come along in a situation like this, so she set out alone. She was quickly discovered and she was forced to fight her way out of an encirclement.

The only reason she was still alive was that most of the clan members were in the dark about the coup, simply thinking that Leviala was under some sort of hypnosis or compulsion. So they were afraid to actually attack her too ruthlessly, which allowed her to 'escape'. Of course, that escape might just have been a ploy, a gambit by the second branch to find a secret pathway to the Lunar Forest.

Frowns adorned Zac and his group as they digested the new information. They didn't really care about the coup, even if Zac felt a bit bad for Leviala, but the implications were clear. Clan Cartava were gearing up for a war against Port Atwood at this very moment, both to get back at their old enemies and to seize a chance to escape.

The second branch already had wide support for the attack even before Leviala returned, and it sounded like that support had only increased when Leviala admitted that Zac wouldn't let them out before the Dimensional Seed matured.

"Please, come with me to Clan Cartava," Leviala entreated. "I couldn't convince the elders, but if you display your might, I'm sure they will understand that there is no point for you to play those games. We can avoid an unnecessary war, and set our sights on our true enemies instead."

Zac didn't immediately respond, but he rather went over his options in his mind.

"One thing at a time," Zac eventually said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Leviala's idea. Instead, he threw out a large bag of Springroot on the ground. "Everyone. Eat a piece of this root. Anyone who does will be allowed to return to your clan. Everyone else..."

Hesitation and skepticism were written all over the faces of the cartava soldiers, and many turned their eyes to Leviala who somewhat had taken on the role of an intermediary.

"Please. It's not that I don't trust you, but can you explain what's going on? What's the effect of this Springroot?" Leviala hesitantly asked as she looked down at the bag.

"The outside world is full of dangers," Ogras said loudly enough so that all the captives could hear. "One of those dangers is a race of shapeshifters, cultivators who can make themselves look like any race, masquerading as either a friend or a foe. Those you saw in the videos were not our people. We are already at war with the Lunar Tribe, even having killed off all those scouting units who caused trouble for you."

Ogras gave Zac a look next, but Zac blankly looked back, not sure what the demon wanted him to do.

"Throw out some of the bodies," Ogras voice whispered in his ear, projected by a small shadow.

Zac understood what the demon was looking for, and he threw out a handful of the werewolf corpses he had collected during his fights.

"That's Hevastes!" one of the ocular cultivators exclaimed, drawing a round of murmurs.

"These shapeshifters have caused a lot of trouble on the outside, and we know they entered this realm long before we did," Ogras said as he glanced at Leviala. "These roots are our weapon against them. For most people, including you humans, they are harmless. A tasty snack. For those damn shapeshifters, they are deadly poison."

Zac bent down and ate a root to prove Ogras' words before he turned to the soldiers. Leviala soon followed suit, though a sheen of nervous perspiration covered her face. She was obviously not taking Ogras' words at face value, but rather stepping forward for her clan members.

"Now, your turn. Come forward, one at a time," Zac said after confirming that Leviala wasn't a shapeshifter.

The soldiers looked at each other hesitantly, until one of the stronger warriors grit his teeth and stepped forward. However, just as he was about to pick a root up, another one stood up with a fierce look.

"This is a trap!" he shouted. "We saw the young miss returning with all kinds of delusions. Fighting the Collector? The Base actively protecting them? I bet the source are these poisonous roots!"

"Force-feed him," Zac said without hesitation, and a storm of shadows immediately trapped the raging man.

He didn't even have a chance to take his life before Ogras appeared right in front of him, cramming a handful of roots down his throat. He struggled for a few seconds before the life left his eyes. His body started to transform a second later, turning into the all-too-familiar lizard-like humanoids. The soldiers around him scrambled out of the way, looking at the transformation with horror.

"Vatos!" one of the soldiers exclaimed with horror.

"Sorry, Vatos is long dead, most likely. Replaced by the shapeshifters. Now eat or you can all join Vatos in the netherworld," Ogras snorted as his and Zac's killing intent drenched the squad.

Soon enough everyone had eaten a piece of Springroot, even the unconscious soldiers had some stuffed down their throat. There weren't any more shapeshifters though, which was a relief to Zac. It hopefully meant that Clan Cartava wasn't too infiltrated already. But it also meant that their gearing for war was an idea mostly of their own making, as Zac doubted the cultists were strong enough to take out all the elders without causing a ruckus.

"Who are these aliens?" a soldier muttered as he looked down at the lizardman corpse.

"Members of the Church of Everlasting Dao. They're an extremely powerful faction, their presence in the Zecia sector is just a small branch. They are religious fanatics, purging planets of all life to appease the Heavens. Their goal was to do that to my home planet, but their goal changed when they learned about the Dimensional Treasure in this place," Zac explained.

"We've really been infiltrated," Leviala sighed. "You were right."

"I'm afraid so," Zac nodded. "You people have nothing to gain from fighting our faction, but our enemy is fanning the flames. After all, I have already agreed to letting your clan out as soon as we've dealt with the threats to our world. The only thing that would happen if you attack us is our guards closing the spatial tunnel permanently, locking us both inside."

"But how haven't we noticed anything?" Leviala muttered. "We're clansmen, we know each other. How can someone just blend in without arousing suspicion? And we haven't seen any other outsiders apart from you. Our neighbors are dealing with Humans as well."

"The werewolves," Ogras said without hesitation. "They must be infiltrated. Shapeshifters came with the scouting parties, some stayed behind to infiltrate you as well."

Zac felt a headache coming on as he tried to figure out what to do. There were thousands of elite Zhix rearing for war just outside the gate leading to Clan Cartava, and disaster was just around the corner if the Church of Everlasting Dao was manipulating things behind the scene. This battle had almost been a joke, but the Zhix wouldn't have his strength nor Kenzie's ability to disable their strongest offensive tools, the Technocrat weaponry.

There was a decent chance both sides would suffer massive casualties, and the only winners would be the Dominators and the cultists.

"I've already sent a warning back to our people," Kenzie said, clearly understanding what was going through Zac's head.

"What do you want to do?" Ogras asked.

Zac's eyes flickered between Leviala and the soldiers, who all shied away from his gaze.

"You've proved that your words are true," Leviala added from the side. "Let's go back to the clan and bring the body. We have fifty clan members to testify the veracity of your claims, all of them of the Second Elder's faction. So if we both have our factions take a step back, then we'll-"

"Our people came to this place for an important mission," Zac interjected. "Besides, you clearly don't have the ability to make your clan take a step back. A few infiltrators shouldn't be able to completely turn your clan against us in just a few days. There should already have been some plans on dealing with us, with the cultists simply silencing dissent and urging on the warmongers."

"That's-" Leviala muttered, looking down with shame. "Still, if we go back..."

"How much time left?" Zac asked, turning to Kenzie.

"A bit over two days?" Kenzie said after some thought. "We should reach the Inner Lab in around five hours. We can't return the same way we came from, but we should be able to make it back to our people well over a day before the treasure matures. It depends on how long the Cartava Clan is willing to wait if they're aiming to break out."

Zac understood what Kenzie meant. Zac's plans were based on waiting for the seed to mature, but the Cartava Clan was the opposite. They needed to escape before the time was up, and it took around between eight and twelve hours to get from the gate in the Lunar Forest to the Spatial Tunnel for an F-Grade warrior who knew the path.

Add to that civilians and some extra time for safe measure, and Clan Cartava would probably not want to wait until the last minute if they really decided to attack. They might already be ready for battle as they were standing there. Kenzie's defensive measures at the gate could probably buy them some time, but there was no way that a native clan didn't have some last-ditch methods to force their way through the base.

The only consolation was that large-scale destruction seemed to attract the active attention of the defensive AI, and the Cartava Clan probably didn't want to use those last-ditch methods unless everything else had failed already.

"The inner Lab? Are you still talking about that?" Leviala exclaimed incredulously as she stared at Kenzie. "Our people are about to be tricked into a war, who knows how many casualties that would result in? Let me be clear. This fight was lopsided, but our armies aren't any pushovers, especially not inside this Mystic Realm. We need to turn back right now."

However, no one in Zac's group cared about Leviala's opinions, all instead turning toward Zac. He turned toward the subdued captain who had already woken up by now with the help of a few zaps from

Kenzie's drones. His eyes were a bit glazed over after Zac's punch, but he seemed to have been able to follow what was going on.

"You can all return to your clan. Take that body and these roots with you, it's the proof of what I've said is true. But tell your elders this; We didn't come to this godforsaken place for fun. We came here to save our planet, and we are willing to lay our lives on the line to do so. Force our hands, and we will walk over the ruins of your clan to get the job done," Zac said, his killing intent almost dense enough to become corporeal. "I know the allure of the outside world is strong, but don't lose it all by acting hastily. I'm coming back to get our people soon enough."

The soldiers looked extremely unwilling, but no one offered any rebuttal, instead looking down with their fists clenched. Zac could only pray that his threat would cause make the elders hesitate about their plans, slowing any plans to break out. He couldn't turn back now. His instincts told him to push forward, and Ogras' words of warning about Divine Guidance were the last push he needed to make his decision.

"We'll keep going," Zac said as he turned to his group.

"What... What about me?" Leviala hesitantly asked.

"You're coming with us," Zac said as he formed the same chair made out of chains as before. "I know that you're not happy with how things turned out. But the quicker you help us get where we need to go, the quicker we'll be able to return and prevent any bloodshed."

"Fine," Leviala sighed as she dragged herself onto the chair, the links quickly turning red from a few wounds reopening.

"Let's hurry," Zac said as he left the soldiers where they were, the other three silently following in tow. "We'll speed up. I'll deal with any spatial tears."

"Spatial Tears are the least of our worries where we're going. If it was just that we'd long have looted the Inner Layer. There are alarms, sentries, mechanized guards, traps, and who knows what else," Leviala warned.

"Good thing we brought you then, girl," Ogras grinned.

"The last stretch is through a long stretch of tubing according to the maps. Surely the base wouldn't have any alarms there," Kenzie added.

"You... How did you do that before? You simply took all our drones like they were yours," Leviala asked with a slightly fearful look.

"Well, they are mine now," Kenzie smiled, ignoring the question. "Spoils of war and all that."