

The Fall 612

Chapter 612: Betrayal

Ogras was the one who had reacted quickest thanks to being outside the direct blast zone of the shockwave, and half the room was already drenched in shadows by the time that Zac got back to his feet. However, the laboratory was only so big, and Leviala was already at the door after having released the tremendous pulse.

The ground cracked beneath Zac's feet as he pushed [Loamwalker] to its limits, but he had to desperately force himself to take a sharp turn at the last moment when an enormous spatial tear appeared right in front of the gate. It completely covered the exit and a few meters next to it, and one more step would have ended with Zac lost in the void.

Zac looked on with a mix of helplessness and fury, but he had no way to make the tear close early. But the base quickly suppressed the tear, and Zac hurriedly rushed toward the closed door on the other side. The containment door didn't activate by itself this time so Zac immediately reached for the console, but nothing happened even after pushing his mother's token against it.

Only then did Zac realize that Leviala wasn't actually gone, but she had rather stopped on the other side of the two doors, looking back at them.

There was no joy or derision on her face, just exhaustion. More importantly, Zac saw how her one good eye was rapidly clouding over, her pupil and iris being replaced by another ominous fractal. It was similar to the one on her other eye, but there were also clear differences. Something told Zac that the two were still connected like they each were a half of a whole. Blood was running down her eyes and nose, and she even swayed while standing still.

Zac's instincts screamed at him that whatever Leviala had taken was a huge threat to his people, so he grabbed a groove in the sliding door in an attempt to force it open. The door was stuck, but Zac's Strength was a match for most peak E-Grade warriors by this point, and even the reinforced glass started to crack from his efforts.

Leviala's eyes widened in surprise when she saw how even the door frames started to bend, and she flashed away in a frantic escape across the recreational area. She was shockingly quick, using some sort of footwork that she had never displayed in front of Zac before, and she was through the exit in less than a second.

He wasn't too worried though as Zac knew that Leviala wouldn't be able to maintain that pace for long, especially not with the sentries lurking outside. As long as he could force this door open they would be able to catch up.

However, red lights suddenly flooded the Laboratory as previously unseen safety-shutters sprung up to reinforce the sliding doors. Zac barely had the time to witness a shocking transformation take place in the rec area before his vision was blocked by decimeter-thick plating. It looked like the whole lounge had been filled with some sort of liquid electricity or plasma, turning it into a deathly gauntlet.

The exit was blocked as well by a shield even thicker than the one that had kept them at bay with the spider balls, and there were even two series of rings that appeared. They looked just like miniature

versions of the terrifying energy turrets the Administrator used to combat the Collector in the void, and Zac's hairs stood on end when he saw that they were trained right at him.

"Stop, stop! She has done something to the security system!" Kenzie screamed as she frantically typed away on the tablet.

The blaring alarm stopped a few seconds later, and the shutters slid back into the floor. Zac could only sheepishly smile in response to the glares he got from his companions before he looked out again. The recreational area had turned back to normal, but it had been eye-opening to see just how many security-measures were hidden among the gardens and restaurants.

It was obvious; even if Zac managed to break down the door with one of his more powerful moves, that was still the least of their problems. And as for Leviala, she was long gone.

"Look at the terminal inside the containment room," Kenzie said after exhaling in relief. "She's left something there, but I can't connect to it."

Zac's eyes turned to the terminal Kenzie pointed at. A dongle Zac hadn't noticed before was attached to it, obviously something left by Leviala on her way out while the spatial tear blocked their vision.

"Good eye," Leviala's voice reached them through the dongle. "I've booby-trapped this exit. Force it open and you'll trigger a series of algorithms that will alert the Administrator, so you'll have to stay put for the time being. I'm sorry things turned out this way. I can't turn my back on my clan, not after how much my people have suffered. Even if I have to marry that bastard and go along with their schemes. Such is the burden of responsibility."

"We can still solve this peacefully," Zac said with grit teeth. "Undo what you've done here, and we'll come with you to your clan to sort everything out."

"I am sorry, I really am," Leviala sighed on the other side before the connection cut off.

A vibration rippled across the door the next moment, making Zac look over at his sister who kept typing away.

"I activated a sound-proofing function," Kenzie said as she looked down at her tablet. "She shouldn't be able to hear us any longer. But she's proven me wrong before, so who knows. I can't do anything from here. I can open this door, but it will activate the security measures just like when you force it open."

Zac growled in annoyance, and he contemplated whether he should try forcing the doors open again.

"I'm not sure brute force is the solution this time around," Ogras sighed, clearly knowing what Zac was thinking. "I don't think even you would make it out of that gauntlet in one piece. That lass fooled us. She fooled us all. She wouldn't have acted if she didn't have some confidence in keeping us here. After all, she's seen both your and your sister's means."

He turned into a puff of shadows that shot toward the door's hinges next, but he soon appeared again.

"It's completely sealed. Not even a speck of dust can get through," the demon added with annoyance.

"I'm sorry," Kenzie said as she wiped some blood running down her nose. "I scanned her for hidden weapons, but I didn't find anything. I don't understand how she accomplished all this."

Leviala's sudden shockwave had hit them all without notice, and Kenzie had been thrown into a wall as well. The same went for Thea, except she looked unscathed. She had probably managed to control her body in time thanks to her high Dexterity.

"Don't blame yourself. We were all on guard for her, but she hid her means too deeply. She never displayed any strength during all the time since I met her, to the point I almost thought she was a non-combat class. My Danger Sense didn't give me a warning either, like the attack came out of nowhere," Zac sighed.

"What did she take?" Thea asked with a frown as she looked away from the exit, turning toward the empty table. "I honestly don't think she planned this until she saw that item. That machine must have been something extremely important if it made her ready to risk her life to betray us all."

They hurried over to the table where Kenzie plugged her tablet into a control panel as the rest looked for clues. They couldn't find anything though, forcing them to wait for Kenzie's findings.

"It's actually some sort of spatial drill," Kenzie said with surprise. "Researching its technology was commissioned by some Head Researcher twenty years ago, but it was just finished two weeks ago. It can drill a tunnel through chaotic space, and it seems even better than the array we used to force open the path to the mystic realm."

"Head Researcher?" Thea repeated with confusion. "Who's that? The Cartava Clan?"

"I don't know?" Kenzie said as she hesitantly turned toward Zac. "Did she say anything like that?"

"It's hard to trust anything she's said until now, but I doubt it," Zac said. "If they had the means to order the base to this degree, then they would probably have been able to escape long ago."

"Then who?"

"Perhaps the base itself?" Ogras muttered. "Didn't you mention some Administrator before?"

"That's just the name of the computer system controlling this base. Would it really order itself to research something?" Zac hesitantly said. "If it was able to do that, it could just have done it, right?"

"More importantly, can the natives use that item to force their way outside?" Thea interjected.

"Possibly," Kenzie nodded. "But I'm not sure how well it would work, it's an experimental technology. And they would have to use it at least close to our portal. Drilling anywhere else won't do them any good. They would probably just end up in outer space."

"So, she has the key to escape this prison?" Ogras spat. "No wonder the lass took the risk. With all of us stuck in this place, our force is severely weakened. If they figure out some way to ambush our people, we're screwed."

"Can you warn them?" Zac asked as he turned to Kenzie.

"It looks like we are jammed, we can only pray that they are prepared. I don't get it... Just how did she figure out how to take this thing?" Kenzie muttered. "If they had any knowledge of an item like this, wouldn't they have fought harder to come here themselves? Long before we arrived?"

"Her eyes... Time," Zac muttered, finally putting two and two together. "Her ability doesn't allow her to peer into the future. It allows her to go back in time. We were probably the ones to tell her in an alternate future. Shit, she's been misdirecting me with half-truths since the start."

"That's heaven-defying if true," Ogras exclaimed with shock. "The backlash has to be immense."

"You saw her eyes. Her second eye got a curse as well," Zac said. "I think she crippled herself to bring that item to her clan. If she can even make it back alive."

"I don't think she would have taken the risk if she believed she wouldn't make it," Thea said. "She would have had a better chance of saving her people by staying with us if that was the case. She might just have been playing weak, or she has some special method to at least temporarily withstand the backlash."

"Are there any other exits to this place?" Zac asked.

"I can't see from this terminal," Kenzie said with a shake of her head.

"Quickly, look around," Zac sighed.

The group immediately spread out, entering the side chambers one by one. But it only took them a minute to confirm that they really were trapped. The only exit was the way they came from, and attacking any surface of the lab seemed to trigger the massive security response.

"Well, it looks like we're stuck. What do we do?" Thea eventually sighed. "Leviala Cartava will be back with her clan in a few hours, and I think they will immediately set out afterward. There's no way they won't seize this opportunity. Our people might be attacked in less than ten hours."

"Can you see if any of these machines can help us out?" Zac asked as he turned to Kenzie. "They were made by the base, so they might not trigger the alarms?"

"I'll try to figure out some way to escape this place," Kenzie nodded and immediately walked over to the closest item and started tapping away on her tablet.

"Well, that's my cue," Ogras muttered and disappeared, leaving a confused Zac behind.

"If it comes down to it I'll use my escape skill. I'll only lose a few levels," Thea said as she walked over to him.

"Doesn't it send you in a completely random direction?" Zac asked hesitantly.

"Well, yes," Thea admitted with a grimace.

"Let's see what Kenzie can come up with first. No point in you risking your life if there's a better solution out there," Zac said. "You'd probably end up in the void around us or some random section where you couldn't get back. And teleportation in this environment..."

"I guess there's not much I can change even if I manage to get out of here by myself," Thea said with a helpless expression.

"I'm sorry about all this," Zac said with a sigh. "I underestimated her too much. Now both our people might be hurt because of me."

"It's not your fault. No one is working harder than you to protect our planet. You simply can't control everything," Thea said. "It's an important lesson for us all. Besides, we all knew that the stakes were high going in. Let's just see if we can turn things around."

"I'll see what Ogras is up to. The look in his eyes made me a bit worried," Zac wryly smiled before he gave Thea one last look. "Thank you."

He walked over to the storeroom he saw Ogras slink toward before and a frown spread across his face when he saw what the demon was up to. Ogras was trying to snatch the stored treasure, a vial containing some unknown liquid. The only problem was that it was behind a containment field that looked a lot like the liquid electricity that had flooded the area outside just a minute ago.

"What are you doing?" Zac frowned. "We have bigger fish to fry, and you might trigger the alarms."

"I'm no help when it comes to taboo technology, I'll leave that to your sister," Ogras shrugged without taking his eyes off the vial on the other side of the electricity wall. "I figure that if we're stuck here for the moment we might as well take the good things left behind. Isn't that why we came anyway? Besides, I've already confirmed that these things aren't connected to whatever that lass did."

A dozen shadow spears slammed into the barrier the next moment to prove his point, and Zac only breathed out a few seconds later when there was no retaliation from the Administrator. He was about to retort, but he stopped in his track when a new prompt appeared; the fifth quest in his training chain had been doled out.

[The Benevolent Ruler (Training (5/9)): Seize at least 2 opportunities for your followers. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/2)]

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of 4 levels.]