

The Fall 614

Chapter 614: Gifts and Reciprocation

There was no time to wonder why his second attempt at taking out a guarded item resulted in a far greater response. It felt like the whole room was closing in on him, like he had been caught in the maw of some metallic beast. Add to that the still increasing amounts of liquid electricity, which was probably the Base Power that ran everything here, and he felt like his life was on the line.

A glimmer to his side caught his attention though, and he was surprised to see that the pedestal had fallen apart, and the Gemling gem was falling toward the ground, only guarded by the omnipresent Base Power. Zac swung his axe in an arc, forcing a few Memorysteel spikes out of the way as he lunged for the gem.

Getting his hands the second opportunity was a relief, but he still needed to survive this calamity. He activated [Surging Vitality] to heal his rapidly accumulating wounds, but he soon realized that he wasn't able to fight and move around while using the healing skill. It just ended with him getting stabbed by even more spikes, creating an unsustainable loop of healing and getting hurt.

The leaves of [Nature's Barriers] were disintegrated almost as soon as they were conjured as well, utterly incapable of blocking either the Base Power or the spikes. Only [Love's Bond] was able to block out the spikes, but it only protected part of his front. Zac saw no other option; he needed to take a risk if he wanted to get through this in one piece.

A wave of miasma spread through his body as he activated his Specialty Core. The world turned blurry as the transformation took place, but his Danger Sense woke him up just in time to desperately yank his head out of the way. A spike shot right past his left cheek, drawing a wound that missed his eye by just a centimeter.

Zac managed to dodge that one even in his weakened state, but he still got stabbed by four other spikes, drenching him in his own blood. However, the blood was incinerated as soon as it left Zac's body by the energy currents rippling all around him. Burns already covered a good deal of his skin by this point too as the Base Power freely burrowed into his body.

He was too weak to keep the attacks at bay with [Verun's Bite], so Zac saw no option but to adapt his turtle stance, curling into a ball on the floor with [Love's Bond] on top of him, trying to protect as much of his body as possible.

Shocking pain assailed his legs since he had to choose between guarding his head and his extremities, and he looked down to see that one of the Memorysteel spikes had completely impaled one of his shins. Even worse, the spikes were starting to get charged by the environment, and Zac felt an unprecedented jolt of electricity coursing through his body the next moment, almost making him throw away his shield in a spasmodic twitch.

The crack in his defenses led to him being impaled three more times before he managed to transform, but he was finally able to conjure a massive fractal bulwark that covered his whole frame as his body was encapsulated by the black armor of [Vanguard of Undeath]. He even tried to activate [Profane Seal] as a safety measure, but the room was unfortunately much too small for the skill to fit.

Zac immediately moved the fractal shield of [Immutable Bulwark] to move to his back, forming a curved wall that protected him from his feet up to his head. It even covered some of his sides, with his actual shield blocking another third. Only his right side was exposed, but he was strong enough to force back most spikes with his pitch-black bardiche.

A few spikes still snuck past his defense, but the armor of [Vanguard of Undeath] provided a final layer of protection that stopped the wounds from getting too bloody. The base was unfortunately like a rabid dog, refusing to give up on its prey. Zac was forced to frantically bob and weave as the attacks grew more frantic, but he quickly started to get a hang of the tempo.

The spikes seemed random at first glance, but Zac soon learned they followed patterns that he could use to minimize his damage.

After a minute he had reached a state where he wasn't being gored at all, and Zac felt that he would be able to get out of this in one piece as long as he didn't run out of miasma. His armor protected against most of the Base Power as well, though some continuously snuck past the cracks in his armor and scorched him.

Finally, the dozens of spikes retracted, but Zac didn't have time to breathe out in relief before the whole room was absolutely flooded with Base Power, even worse than how it looked when he accidentally triggered Levala's trap. His armor held for just a second before it literally exploded, and Zac found himself utterly exposed to the terrifying currents outside.

It was like the base had an automated process; first stab the interloper to death, then incinerate the remains with a storm of Base Power.

His shield and fractal bulwark were completely useless against the thousands of currents that swam around in the small room, and Zac screamed in pain as his body was filled with more and more of it. Things were quickly spiraling out of control, but his Hidden Node finally came through for him as it activated.

A deep thud rippled out from his body, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw the impact it had on the Base Power in the room. It was like the heartbeat had imposed symmetry on the chaos, and he felt he could almost discern some fractals among the lightning bolts as they were frozen in the air. [Void Heart] beat again, and it drew a huge amount of energy into its odd hidden dimension.

The energy came from the Base Power that had already snuck into his body, which unfortunately meant a vacuum was left behind. A vacuum that was almost instantly filled by more base power entering his body through his pores, causing another wave of damage before the hidden node swallowed another mouthful.

Zac would normally be elated that his hidden node found something to feast on, but he only wished that his body didn't need to be the conduit. He could only struggle to maintain his consciousness as he cycled the Fragment of the Bodhi to make some patchwork repairs on his body while [Void Heart] slowly but steadily gobbled up all the lightning in the room.

The minutes passed, each second feeling like an hour, but his hidden node actually managed to swallow all of it. Zac essentially looked like a lump of coal by that point, but he was at least alive. The door slid up by itself, displaying the three standing outside with worry and horror in their eyes.

“Are you okay?!” Thea screamed as she rushed into the room to drag Zac outside.

“I’m not sure if we should loot any more of those side rooms,” Zac said with a cracking voice, his exhalation creating a plume of smoke.

“Idiot, why couldn’t you just wait? I could have checked if I could break the security measures,” Kenzie said with red-rimmed eyes.

“No point of that,” Zac said as he arduously sat up, his body quickly shrinking. “You have your things to do, don’t worry about me. I’ll heal up quickly, go deal with that teleporter.”

“I’m multitasking, I am still doing the calculations,” Kenzie muttered, but she still walked back to the escape pod after making sure Zac was okay.

Zac suddenly swung his axe, cutting a large gash in his arms to the shock of the others. A spurt of black ichor dropped onto the floor, and Thea’s eyes widened to saucers when the ichor turned into a pool of lightning that scorched the ground for a few seconds before they fizzled out.

Zac had no time to worry about their reactions as [Void Heart] had just released a huge surge of pure energy, and he had just expelled the first round of energy run-off. Most of the energy went into his opened but not yet filled node on his Draugr-side, effortlessly pushing it to the same level as his human side.

But his Hidden Node beat again before Zac had time to figure out his next move, and he could only push it into the next node.

One beat followed another, as more and more energy was released. However, Zac frowned as he made some calculations in his mind. Each subsequent beat released a bit less power into his body, and Zac realized that he would just about manage to break open his next node if he let things continue this way.

He could sense that the others were looking at him from a short distance, but he didn’t have the luxury to split his attention at the moment. Breaking open a node at this juncture was a risk, but Kenzie had already said it would be hours before the teleporter was ready. He would be able to make quite a bit of progress on his Draugr-pathways in that time.

Besides, he would probably deal with the Cartava Clan in his human form, whose pathways were already back to normal by now.

He hesitated for just a second before he ate a mouthful of Node-Breaking pills he had lying around while also gripping a D-Grade Miasma Crystal in each hand. The efficacy of the pills was severely diminished because of his accumulated immunity, but it was enough to tip things over into his favor. A small explosion soon erupted as his right leg turned to a bloody mess.

There was still a thick blob of energy left over, but Zac didn’t use it to push his level to 85. He still had burns covering most of his body, and his organs were badly lacerated. Add to that his exploded leg, and he would need to use a huge amount of energy with [Surging Vitality]. He quickly transformed back to his human form before the energy dissipated, and he immediately pushed all the left-over energy into the skill fractal of [Surging Vitality].

Burned skin fell off all around him as the skill started to patch him up, looking like pieces of coal on the ground. Beneath was just more burned skin, but it wasn't completely destroyed. Zac kept the skill going and the second layer of skin rapidly started mending as well. It felt like he was being bitten by fire ants all over his body, but Zac could only hold on and stop himself from rolling around on the ground.

His body looked a lot better after a few more minutes, but there was still a lot of work to be done on his body. He had unfortunately run out of the left-over energy by that point, but he still had his normal reserves of Cosmic Energy. His leg was quickly patched up next along with the wounds to his insides.

He eventually ran out of Cosmic Energy as well, something that was almost impossible in a fight because of his massive pool of Attributes. But he was in decent shape by that point. A few hours of recuperation along with a couple of healing pills would take him the final stretch. He was lucky that there was no Dao in the Base Power, making the repairs a lot quicker and cheaper than those from a pitched fight.

There were still a lot of lightning impurities dumped into his blood though, so Zac summoned his axe and cut himself open a few times more, each time depositing a stream of electrified blood. He was only content after his sixth cut, where it looked like his blood was completely normal, and he contentedly breathed out in relief as he looked up at the others.

"Your healing capabilities are just... Monstrous," Thea finally spoke up. She had been watching from a distance all this time, making sure he was okay. "And weird."

"Cockroach, a real cockroach," Ogras muttered as he walked away with a disgusted shake of his head.

"I'm sorry, you tried to help and you got yourself hurt again," Thea sighed.

"It's okay," Zac smiled as he took out the gem from his Spatial Ring. "Getting zapped actually helped with my cultivation. Here, take it."

Thea wordlessly took the crystal, her eyes moving back and forth between the gem and Zac. He felt a bit embarrassed by the intense stare, and he could only cough a bit to hide his discomfort.

"I still need to recuperate a bit," he said.

"Of course... Thank you," Thea said softly and walked away.

He nodded before he limped over to a corner where he closed his eyes, gripping a D-Grade Nexus Crystal in each hand. He kept working on his constitution over the next hour until the cooldown of his Specialty Core was up, at which point he swapped over again.

A wave of nausea hit him when his working pathways were replaced with the mess leftover from the node-breaking. But he quickly found his bearing and activated [Spiritual Anchor]. He had thankfully been able to get the skill for both his classes, and it provided him with immense help as he rapidly started to rewrite his pathways.

The following hours went by arduously slow, with Zac spending most of his time fixing his pathways. He only occasionally stopped to check in on Kenzie's progress. Soon eight hours had passed, and Zac was mostly done with his work. There were still some small details missing in his pathways, but he felt confident he could bring out his full strength for a fight without causing a backlash, especially in his human form.

Doing so repeatedly would probably harm him though, so there was definitely a need to properly fix things later on.

In a perfect world, he would have been able to jump into some little spatial bubble and spend a week getting back to a perfect state, but time waited for no man. Kenzie had finally completed her work, or at least taken it to such a level that it would be usable. Zac cracked his neck as he got up on his feet, turning back to his human form once more.

Ogras had been holding off on taking the liquid, but Kenzie had actually managed to confirm that it was something called a [Corporeal Serum]. It would not only give him a huge push in upgrading his Race, but it would even give him some attributes since it contained pieces of E-Grade Attribute fruits.

Unfortunately, there was no mention of where the materials for the serum were sourced, and Zac could only pray he would run into a greenhouse where the fruits were grown after dealing with Void's Disciple. For now, they needed to get out of here, and they quickly got everything in order.

"So, how do we use this thing?" Ogras asked hesitantly as they looked down at the disk on the table.

"I had to make some sacrifices to make it work," Kenzie said as her eyes darted around. "It... can only take two of us at the most. If I made it any bigger, I wouldn't be able to set a direction, and it might not even make it back into proper space."

"You two siblings should use it," Thea said without hesitation, and even Ogras reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"And leave you guys here?" Zac asked with a frown. "What if some security protocol suddenly activates? I don't think Leviala was lying when she said that this place was dangerous to stay in."

"This place seems safe enough," Thea said. "You would be the one taking the real risk using that thing. Just come pick us up after you've saved our people."

"I'll go alone," Zac said after some thought. "No point risking Kenzie's life as well."

"You'll go alone? With your sense of direction?" Kenzie snorted. "How are you even going to find your way back in case you're dropped off at some unknown place? And who's going to deal with all their machines?"

Zac was full of reluctance as he looked down at the small disk, but he had to admit that Kenzie was making a good point. The two walked onto the disk, but Thea spoke up just as they were about to activate the escape pod.

"Wait," she said, making Zac look over with confusion.

The confusion quickly turned to bafflement as Thea walked up to him and grabbed him by his collar. Zac slightly opened his mouth to ask what was going on, but both words and thoughts flew out of his mind as a pair of soft lips pressed against his.