

The Fall 666

Chapter 666: Powerless

Zac's thoughts were a blur as he made his way back to his compound, and he spent over thirty minutes aimlessly wandering around until he stopped in front of one of his sister's workshops. Far beneath the ground was a large factory, this particular one used to create the Dao Balls meant for Kenzie's breakthrough.

A fiery ember of rage swept away the bleakness as Zac peered down at the ground, and he was more than willing to give in to the feeling. Cosmic Energy surged through his body as [Hatchetman's Rage] activated, and it felt like his soul was lit on fire. A massive hand appeared a few moments later, and it conjured an emerald array that covered half the sky. A tremendous mountain soon emerged and slammed straight into the workshop.

A few technocrat barriers sprung up, but they were no match for Zac's full furor. The ground heaved as the mountain peak pierced the building and continued deep into the ground, and it almost looked like the mountain itself was on fire as it was drenched in Zac's anger. The skill emitted a pressure far beyond what was normal as Dao, Body, and Spirit worked as one in their desire for destruction.

A creaking sound emerged from the depths, and the ground suddenly collapsed for hundreds of meters in every direction. It was the ceiling of the secret factory that had caved in, and thousands of tons of dirt crushed the machines and drones into scrap. Huge clouds of dust rose to the sky like a bomb had been set off.

It was immensely satisfying, but Zac wasn't done. He turned into an avatar of unrelenting violence, destroying one hidden Technocrat structure after another in his desperate need for an outlet. Soon half his private forest was in shambles, with pieces of Memorysteel rubble sticking up from massive fissures in the ground.

Deep scars from axe strikes crisscrossed the ground, and Zac looked at the carnage with heaving breaths for a few seconds before he turned and wordlessly walked away. A number of golems silently emerged from a shed in a corner, but it would probably take the gardener automatons weeks to even somewhat fix the destruction.

Emptiness.

That was all Zac could feel as he sat down on the pergola overlooking the ocean. He had worked so hard for years, overcoming insurmountable odds to protect those around him, yet where had that taken him?

His sister was taken away to become a pawn of their mother's schemes while his partner killed like she was an ant. And that just the latest tragedy. Ogras, his closest friend and confidant was gone, stuck in a fragment hurtling through subspace. Billy was there as well, and it was unclear if Zac would ever be able to see them again. Alea had been reduced to a Spirit Tool, and he never got to say goodbye to his father.

He was alone. So utterly alone.

He was the leader of a planet, an emperor with over a billion subjects, yet he had no one to turn to. Certainly, many of his followers remained, but his innermost circle was reduced to a party of one.

Certainly, there were old followers like Sap Trang and Joanna to turn to, but there ultimately was a leader-follower dynamic between them.

The following days passed in a blur, where he barely had the energy to lift a single finger. It quickly became apparent that Leandra's terrifying aura had been sensed all across the world, so there was no hiding the situation. Zac sent word of the tragedy to the Marshall Clan, though he modified what actually transpired.

An extremely powerful cultivator appeared out of nowhere in search of the Dimensional Seed and tried to kill all three of them. His sister and Thea had both died instantly and without leaving a body, but he had miraculously survived thanks to a special item he had gained. Lying like this submerged him in another wave of self-loathing, but there wasn't much he could do.

Firmament's Edge was probably still looking for Leandra and Jeeves, and if word of a powerful Technocrat appearing on this planet got out, then who knew what would happen.

He had said he was extremely sorry, and that he would make sure to keep the Marshall Clan safe and independent. But Zac didn't have the guts to face Henry Marshall himself, so he immediately closed the doors to his compound after sending out word that he wanted to be left alone.

Part of him wanted to set out into the multiverse in search of the Six Profundity Empire, and another part of him just wanted to jump into the deepest monster nest he could find and lose himself to slaughter. But it all felt so futile, so he ultimately just sat down and looked out across the ocean.

Only ten days later was there a change as a series of light footsteps made Zac turn around. A young woman walked toward him, her eyes looking at the destruction around her with some fear. It was Emily, wearing a battle robe with two tomahawks attached to a belt. It was half a year since she had run away from home, but she still looked a bit like a runt.

"You've become stronger," Zac said with a weak smile.

"I'm sorry... About things. Are you okay?" Emily said with red-rimmed eyes as she sat down opposite him.

"You heard?" Zac asked.

"The Marshall Clan found me. They wanted me to check up on you," she said.

"How are they?" Zac sighed.

"I don't think most know what happened," Emily said. "Everyone only knows something big took place here. People are lying low, waiting to see what's going on. What are you going to do?"

"Do?" Zac said with a self-deprecating laugh. "What can I do? I keep working to become stronger, but that just means that the stakes keep getting bigger. I am... powerless."

Emily didn't answer, and the two sat in silence overlooking the sunset. But a sudden sense of danger warned Zac of an attack, just in time for him to block a small tomahawk with his palm. The clash caused the awnings of the pergola to blow right off, but Zac's hand didn't move an inch as it was filled with the hardness of the Fragment of the Coffin.

"If you are powerless, what does that make the rest of us?" Emily said with a glare. "Others are more powerful, but they simply started earlier. A crazy cultivator came and killed Thea and Kenzie? You cannot let that go unpunished! Get stronger, find them, and rip them apart! Make the whole multiverse shudder in fear and disgust after you're done with them!"

"I..." Zac said.

"No buts. Go cultivate or something," Emily said. "If you don't I'll start spreading even more rumors about you through Calrin."

"Even more?" Zac said, his eyes widening in realization as he woke up from his stupor. "You? It was you?"

"A-" Emily stammered, rapidly losing her momentum. "Well, just some stories, but I was just adding to the hundreds which were already out there. I was mad when you wouldn't let me go out, so I sent an anonymous crystal to the House of Myriad Eyes. They paid really well because I could provide some pictures of you, and that helped fund my Mercenary Group. Who would have expected those Stargazers would embellish so much?"

Zac's mouth opened and closed a few times until he finally let out a small wry smile.

"Thank you," Zac said.

"Always happy to help," Emily grinned. "Now, clean yourself up. There's a funeral in two hours. You should be there."

The small amount of happiness Emily's return brought was quickly suffused as Zac was brought back to reality. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, but he soon opened them again as he nodded. Half an hour later he had arrived at the other side of the world, where a somber group waited.

Rain poured down on the ancient cemetery hidden in the forest close to the Marshall Homestead, drenching the small gathering of people standing in front of the unmarked grave of Thea Marshall. In fact, only a few core members of the Marshall Clan knew that Thea had fallen. The others believed that she had set out into the Zecia Sector to further temper herself, as the challenges on Earth no longer could hold her. It was an attempt to maintain stability, though Zac doubted it would last for long.

Zac's eyes were hollow as he looked down at the beautifully crafted limestone that marked Thea Marshall's final resting place. Of course, the grave was empty since Leandra didn't as much a string of hair behind. He once more felt sick to the stomach of regret and shame as he heard the quiet sobs around him, and he had to fight the urge to just bolt.

The ceremony only lasted twenty minutes, with a priest reading a few passages before people took their final farewells. Zac walked up last, and he only stood in silence as he looked down at the headstone. Finally, he turned over to see a familiar figure looking straight at him.

"Come with me," Henry said as he walked toward the old Homestead, his previously straight back hunched over.

It looked like the old man had aged overnight, even though he had long managed to reach E-grade race and a peak F-grade cultivation. Losing Thea was not only a huge blow to his faction but also a personal

blow as she was his actual granddaughter, one of his closest blood relatives in a clan comprised of thousands of people.

Zac sighed as he followed, wondering what Henry wanted to say in private. The two walked through the ancient forest that had belonged to the Marshall Clan for over a millennium, reaching the sprawling complex that had kept growing as their family did. Henry didn't enter any of the more recent additions meant for cultivators though, but rather the oldest section of the manor.

It was an old house that mainly served as a memento of the founding of the Marshall Clan, but Zac wasn't too interested in looking at this piece of history in his current state. But Zac did exclaim in surprise when Henry walked up to a corner and pushed one of the stones in the wall, which triggered some mechanism that exposed a hidden pathway.

Zac wasn't too surprised that an old place like this had hidden pathways, but he was surprised that he hadn't noticed anything amiss. His senses were extremely sharp by now, and he should have been able to sense there was a hidden path. The two continued down the steps, and Zac was somewhat shocked to see how deep this place went.

They had walked well over a hundred meters down, and Zac was pretty certain that these stairs had been cut into the stone the same time the house above was built. Doing something like this must have been a huge undertaking this long ago, and Zac couldn't help but feel curious about what was waiting at the bottom.

Finally, they reached the bottom where a massive stone stele waited, over three meters tall. It was covered in text, but time had dulled the runes to the point that Zac couldn't make out the words.

"A thousand years," Henry sighed as he gazed on the enormous stele standing in front of them. "We waited for a thousand years for the prophecy to come true. Yet look at us now. We're floundering, only able to stay afloat thanks to your influence. Our biggest talent and hope fallen before she could even spread her wings."

"What is this? What's going on?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Our ancestor, the original Lord Marshall, was not of this world," Henry said. "He erected this stele and took his firstborn son to this place before he passed away, passing on a series of precepts to run the clan by. To wait. To accumulate. To prepare for the Integration."

"Much of what he said has been lost over the centuries. Not all generations of the Marshall Clan were believers. My father took me here in the 60s, mostly because he didn't wish to break a millennia-old tradition. Personally, I didn't believe in the tales of magic, but I sometimes wondered if our ancestor was an extra-terrestrial as I looked up at the stars. After all, this was during the era of the space race.

"By now I've long come to realize the truth. Our ancestor was a cultivator who encountered some sort of mishap and found himself on Earth. Perhaps he escaped from the Mystic Realm, perhaps he had some other origin, the stele never explained his place of birth. His foundation as a Cultivator managed to make him stronger and more talented than normal people even without access to Cosmic Energy, which allowed him to stand out during the Crusades and gain a footing for his descendants," Henry said.

"Did Thea know?" Zac couldn't help but ask.

"No," Henry said with a smile. "There is nothing of value here, and I didn't want to distract Thea. Only I and a few of the elders know of this place. The clan members aren't strong enough to see through the array our ancestor erected with his remaining life force, at least not for now. I have also added a few extra precautions of my own."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I immediately understood what had happened when the Integration took place, and I took action while others were floundering. I was even blessed with a granddaughter teeming with talent, a powerhouse who could act as a protective umbrella for future generations. But this world is cruel. One stroke of bad fortune, and it all came crashing down on us," Henry sighed.

"We were not the only clan. I know of at least five more families who have a similar origin as our own, most likely descendants from the mystic realm. There might be even more out there. But three of those clans fell in the months after the integration, with the other two barely being any better off than the general population," Henry said with a shake of his head.

Zac was shocked to learn that there were actually people with a cultivator foundation on Earth, people who already had general knowledge by the time the Integration took place. Of course, perhaps he shouldn't be too surprised. Billy was ample evidence of the connection between the Tsarun Experiments and Earth. However, in his case the knowledge had clearly been lost, perhaps long ago.

"I am sorry, I'm rambling. What I am trying to say is that there are no guarantees in this world. Man makes plans and heaven laughs. I know you're thinking of going after the one who murdered my poor granddaughter and your sister, but I truly wish that you won't," Henry said.

"What?" Zac said, a frown spreading across his face.

"Mr. Trask and your sister are gone, and my granddaughter is no more. You're the last human on this planet that can stand at the forefront, to protect us against what's to come. There are other powerhouses, but they are ultimately not human. If you fall as well, then only death will await the rest of us when our grace period ends. Even if The Great Redeemer has forgotten about us," Henry said.

"The Integration is just the first trial. Next comes the Assimilation."