

The Fall 600

Chapter 600: Mapper

Zac looked down at the rough tablet in his hands like it was a priceless treasure, and he immediately infused it with some Base Energy as he kept Leandra's token hidden in his palm. It hummed a second later as the screen lit up, making Zac feel a surge of success. No matter what the true intentions of his mother were, it was undeniable that she had provided him with a huge advantage by leaving behind the token.

It was starting to look like it was some sort of ghost key in this place, working on almost everything. Of course, the thing was clearly not infallible as the walls held no compunctions about attacking him, and neither did it remove the barriers in the corridors.

"It's unlocked!" Leviala said with wide eyes, and it almost looked she would drag the tablet out of his hands. "How could this intelligence be unsecured?! This is top-secret information for a faction. Look, this! It's their route through the Wastelands. And these paths, they're completely new! They're taking advantage of the spatial expansion to find new routes through vents and even some pipes."

Zac let her keep talking as it helped him a lot as well. The maps Leviala browsed through almost looked like schematics for circuitry to him, and he had a hard time understanding all of them. His sister or the scientists would probably be able to figure the thing out, but learning from a native would save a lot of time and effort.

"Look at these ones! They're circumventing so many natural blockades. A few of them even might even be able to reach the Inner Labs! Just what is the Lunar Tribe planning?" Leviala added with grudging respect mixed with a hint of confusion. "And why are they going in that direction? All the pathways out of here seem to be at the edges of the realm. Aren't they trying to escape?"

Zac was about to ask a few questions, but he froze as the dreaded prompt had appeared once again. He threw Leviala an exasperated look even though he knew it wasn't really her fault before he focused on the blue screens that had appeared this time.

[Man Versus Nature (Training (4/10)): Reach the core of the Wasteland before Dimensional Seed matures. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)]

[Man Versus Machine (Training (4/9)): Enter 'Inner Lab 16' before Dimensional Seed matures. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)]

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of one random skill and 4 levels. Choosing second option will disqualify trainee from highest reward tier.]

It turned out that Zac had been given a branching quest this time, likely based on the large number of maps in his new mapper. Zac was about to immediately discard the one that would lead him into the Wasteland, but he stopped himself. At first glance it felt like the first option was suicidal, but perhaps that wasn't the case.

As long as the Collector had been pushed back from the direct vicinity of the base, then he had everything he needed to succeed. He had the map and a lot of Base power, and the ability to discern

Spatial Tears before they appeared. Meanwhile, the second quest indicated that he might come in direct conflict with the base itself, which could complicate things when trying to deal with the Dominators.

It wasn't that Zac wanted to enter a place like the Wasteland, but the note at the end gave him pause. Judging by the difficulty of the training session so far, the reward would probably be at the level of the 8th floor of the Tower of Eternity or even higher. Getting a customized top-tier reward at this stage would be huge, considering that all Zac's greatest assets, from [Love's Bond] to the Creator Shipyard and the Dao Repository, came from these kinds of rewards.

This difference was further exemplified by the fact that the Man Versus Machine-quest decreased the quest chain to 9 total quests. The punishment had decreased as well, and it looked like completing 6 quests essentially was a 'passing grade', with every subsequent quest improving the reward.

Stopping at the 9th quest instead of the 10th might be a massive blow, like how huge Zac's loss would have been if he had stopped at the 7th floor instead of the 8th in the Tower of Eternity.

But Zac also had to think of the big picture. He wasn't here to gain rewards, but to complete a specific task. He wasn't sure whether passing through the Wasteland or heading to these Laboratories was the best course of action to deal with the Dominators.

"What's the inner labs?" Zac asked, turning to the Cartava descendant for guidance.

"What? Well, that's..." Leviala said, hesitation clearly written all over her face.

"I should tell you that Port Atwood controls more than half of the world outside, including almost all top-quality cultivation sites and high-value resources. If Clan Cartava wants a good domain to rebuild your clan on the outside you need to give something in return," Zac said.

Jonas and the other scout that weren't from Port Atwood looked a bit miffed at the domineering proclamation, but they held their tongues. Zac's words were a bit boastful, but they were essentially true if you counted the whole second continent as his own. There were certainly a lot of Nexus Crystal Mines and other resources strewn across the planet, but most of the really valuable deposits received an Incursion next to it, meaning they now belonged to him.

"Well, it's not really secret knowledge among the people in here," Leviala said after some hesitation. "Each faction in here has managed to take control of some laboratories or unique technology in their area, and each of them provides something valuable. For example, Clan Cartava owns a series of unique greenhouses with various valuable fruits for Race Upgrades and even upgrading your constitution."

Zac's eyes lit up when he heard about race upgrades. Perhaps they even had some herb that worked on his undead constitution, allowing him to keep working on his Draugr Race now that he had almost run out of [Bone-Forging Dust].

"The most valuable of the outer laboratories are arguably controlled by the gemlings on the opposite side of the base," Leviala continued after some thought. "They contain something called bloodline vats. I hear that bathing in that stuff can help forcibly awaken a bloodline. The bloodlines of the gemlings are apparently notoriously hard to awaken naturally, but thanks to these vats they are able to have as many bloodline warriors as the rest of us."

"Then what about the inner laboratories?" Zac asked curiously.

“The outer laboratories contain great things, but they were ultimately used for large-scale experiments. The materials are helpful, but not without limits or side-effects. However, the inner laboratories were made for more valuable experiments. The number of resources that can be found there is much scarcer, but their quality is conversely higher. Quite a few skirmishes have erupted for the things that can be found there over the past millennia,” Leviala sighed.

“Who controls the inner laboratories now then?” Zac asked.

“No one. Or perhaps the Administrator,” Leviala said. “The inner laboratories are normally not accessible, but every few decades a lot of the barriers in this place disappears. We believe it’s the base that shuts down some functions for routine maintenance or energy conservation. That always gave us a brief window to rush to the inner areas and loot the valuables.

“However, no one who has chosen to stay behind when the barriers reappeared has ever been found alive again. We think the Administrator kills them when it wakes up,” she continued. “But it usually gave us a month of searching for opportunities and trading or fighting with the other factions.”

“So the lunar tribe wants to snatch the good things in this base before escaping,” Zac muttered. “What can be found in the inner labs that the werewolves have targeted here?”

“I don’t know,” Leviala said. “It’s actually random. The core of the base is running as though it was never abandoned by the Builders. The Administrator prepares all kinds of experiments and scenarios, completely changing the layouts of the inner labs between gatherings. I... managed to enhance my Bloodline at an inner lab fifteen years ago.”

Zac’s eyes lit up at the piece of news. His mouth was almost frothing at the mention of bloodline vats and race upgrades, but it sounded like there were even more valuable things waiting in the inner labs. He was first a bit hesitant when the System mentioned better rewards by heading to the Wasteland, but it sounded like these labs provided a different set of opportunities instead.

Of course, he understood that the quest wasn’t a complete freebie, and he had just been given a glimpse of the Administrator’s powers just a few hours ago. Still, the second quest seemed to take him in the direction he needed to go, whereas going through the Wasteland was a gamble.

“When is the next time the base will enter maintenance mode or whatever?” Zac asked after some thought.

“Not for a few years at least, unless something changes due to the dimensional treasure,” Leviala said. “I guess that’s why the Lunar Clan has been working so hard to find an alternative route.”

Zac nodded and made his decision, causing the prompt about the Wasteland to disappear. He didn’t immediately set out though, but rather stayed and rested with the others. There was no timer for this quest, and he planned on taking his people back to the glasshouse before setting out again. Judging by the maps he would have a few days to spare even if he returned, and he wanted to use that time to recuperate and deal with any matters waiting back at the base.

The group rested for another two hours, and even Leviala could walk by herself by that point. They didn’t enter the forest though out of fear of running into the wolf pack. However, they didn’t walk along

the wall either, as the walls sometimes malfunctioned according to the Leviala. They could suddenly launch an attack out of nowhere.

That's why they traveled just at the edge of the forest just like the werewolves did, taking the long route back.

"We crossed parts of the forest to save some time," Jonas Marshall ventured, clearly anxious to get back. "The werewolves burned some sort of herb with an acrid smell as we moved. I think it was a beast deterrent."

"This stuff?" Zac asked after rummaging about in one of the backpacks he had looted.

"Exactly," Jonas nodded.

"We'll still go around," Zac muttered. "I don't want to risk running into the wolf pack inside again. I'm not sure I can protect you all if these things don't work."

"Again?" Leviala asked with surprise, turning toward Zac. "You fought the lunar wolves?"

"Yeah," Zac nodded as he stowed away the herbs. "They're pretty tough, they only relented after I killed their alphas."

Leviala looked at Zac for a few seconds, her mouth forming words but no sounds coming out. She eventually just released a resigned sigh and turned away, not prying into the subject any longer. Zac smiled a bit before he turned toward the scouts. It wasn't just a random comment of his, but rather a conscious decision to tell Leviala.

He needed to build up an image of Strength in her mind, which would hopefully result in easier negotiations with the elders of the Cartava Clan down the road. Meanwhile, there were some other things Zac wanted to know.

"Do you know why the werewolves kidnapped you?" Zac asked.

"They took us because they wanted intelligence on how to get out of this place. Apparently, they had visited our biospheres multiple times before, but there were no spatial anomalies back then. They thought we had some sort of tool or technology to open a passage," Jonas added. "I think their plan was to steal that machine and then take it to their town. They didn't believe us when we said that was impossible."

Zac frowned a bit, but he didn't comment on it. Their theory was wrong, but not overly so. Zac guessed that it was the System that cracked open the pathways during the Integration. Before the pathways had been blocked or hidden, either because of the Tsarun Clan or the Dimensional Seed wanting to protect itself.

It was a problem if the werewolves thought that he or the other leaders of his coalition carried a teleporter on their person though. That meant they might get in the way during the battle for the Dimensional Seed.