

The First Defier

— (A.K.A. JF BRINK) —

ЛИБРА



DEFIANCE OF THE FALL

BOOK FOUR



DEFIANCE OF THE FALL

BOOK FOUR



aethonbooks.com

DEFIANCE OF THE FALL 4

©2022 JF BRINK/THEFIRSTDEFIER

This book is protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser. Any reproduction or unauthorized use of the material or artwork contained herein is prohibited without the express written permission of the authors.

Aethon Books supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact editor@aethonbooks.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Aethon Books

www.aethonbooks.com

Print and eBook formatting by Steve Beaulieu. Artwork provided by Fernando Granea.

Published by Aethon Books LLC.

Aethon Books is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead is coincidental.

All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

ALSO IN SERIES

1. Sugar Daddy
2. Karmic Ties
3. Severing Karma
4. Convergence of Fate
5. Sowing Grudges
6. Mr. Black
7. Underworld Nexus
8. Subterranean Diplomacy
9. Billionaires' Brawl
10. Captive
11. Negotiations
12. Transit Camp
13. Truths and Lies
14. New Management
15. The Underworld Council
16. Hidden Wealth
17. Ascension Breaker
18. Refined Skills
19. Profane Dominance
20. Breaking Out
21. Battleroach King
22. Battle of Attrition
23. Firmament's Edge
24. An Easy Gig
25. Priorities
26. Heretics
27. Drones
28. Heaven's Path
29. Enemies Ahead

30. Man Versus Machine
31. The Final Five
32. Despair
33. Out of Control
34. The Three Paths
35. Production Lines
36. Sortie
37. Baoqui
38. Final Stand
39. Adriel
40. Catharsis
41. Evil Stars
42. Dangers of Technology
43. An Overdue Meeting
44. Time Pressure
45. Stasis
46. Crusade
47. Lunatics
48. Manufacturing A Fortuitous Encounter
49. Playing the Part
50. Glimthain
51. Heat
52. Array Towers
53. The Floor is Lava
54. Deluge
55. Desecration
56. Dao of the Axe
57. Free Lunch
58. Impressions
59. Risk and Reward
60. Fallout
61. Fragment of the Axe
62. Coastal Incursion
63. Options

64. Enforced Balance
65. Final Hours
66. Apparitions
67. Protect Your Wallet
68. Galau
69. The Naspheyi Clan
70. Toxicity
71. Dreams
72. Balance
73. The Eight Calamities
74. Emerald Skies
75. Last Day
76. Last Opportunity
77. Prajñā Cherry
78. Aftermath
79. Elites
80. Piker
81. The Peaks
82. The Law of the Land
83. Taboo Origins
84. Whittlecreek
85. Questing
86. Remuneration
87. Floor Guardian
88. Penalties
89. Mastery
90. Creation
91. Fermentation
92. Heartless
93. War
94. Voidfire
95. Concordat
96. Ill-Gotten Gains
97. Hidden Rules

98. Beroria Goods and Treasures

Thank you for reading Defiance of the Fall, book four.

ALSO IN SERIES
DEFIANCE OF THE FALL

[BOOK ONE](#)

[BOOK TWO](#)

[BOOK THREE](#)

[BOOK FOUR](#)

Want to discuss our books with other readers and even the authors like J.F. Brink (TheFirstDefier), Shirtaloon, Zogarth, Cale Plamann, Noret Flood (Puddles4263) and so many more?

[Join our Discord](#) server today and be a part of the Aethon community.

SUGAR DADDY

Zac was still a bit muddled from getting the news that Salvation had managed to kill so many people as a final act of lunacy, and he didn't quite understand what Emily was getting at.

“Who found what?” he asked while looking around.

“Mr. Trang and his squad finally managed to set up a base camp. It took some time because they needed to finish a quest, but they succeeded because of his Kraken. When they bought the teleporter, there was already a public teleporter in range that we can't see here. It's probably the underworld,” Emily explained, the words tumbling out of her mouth.

The eyes of both Ogras and Zac lit up at the news. Getting to the underworld before the Fire Golems destroyed the whole thing was of the highest priority. For Ogras, it was about resources, while Zac also considered the humanitarian component. But the exciting news was suddenly eclipsed by a snippet of information from Emily's report.

“His WHAT?” Zac exclaimed, looking at Emily with some horror.

“His pet Kraken,” Emily said with a wide grin. “He's named it Little Bau, which apparently means treasure in Vietnamese? I heard it's crazy strong.”

Zac didn't know how to react. He was reminded that the old fisherman's class was something like a maritime Beast Master, but he hadn't expected him to snag such a scary thing. It also made him a bit leery about having an island kingdom if

Kraken were swimming about in the depths. Would they start getting harassed by Lovecraftian nightmares in the near future?

“Anyway, how’s their situation?” Zac asked.

“We still don’t know. We’ve been waiting for you,” Emily explained. “Our teleporter is hidden because of your settings, so they shouldn’t know about us. And all the strong people here were occupied, so we didn’t dare open it.”

“That’s good,” Zac said with a nod. “We can’t go right now, though. My arm is broken in multiple places, and Ogras is wounded as well. Salvation was even stronger than expected.”

“Wounded? That guy was that strong? He was only level 61, right?” Emily said with some confusion.

“Girl, he had an army of half a million puppets that exploded in our faces,” Ogras snorted. “It’s a miracle we’re even still alive. The underworld will still be there in a few days. Go punch some barghest or something.”

Emily looked disappointed at the news, but she soon nodded. Zac knew she wanted to get down there as quickly as possible, as the underworld was the last hope she had of reuniting with her siblings. Unfortunately, he simply wasn’t in any condition to battle a supposed high- or even top-tier incursion at the moment. So, for now, it was best to keep their presence hidden in case some unexpected dangers lurked on the other side of the teleporter.

“I’ll go train, then,” she said as she hurried away.

“I need money. I’m flat broke,” Ogras suddenly said from the side.

“What?” Zac asked with some skepticism as he threw the demon a glance. “I’m not your sugar daddy.”

“My what? Anyway, between the Origin Array and the temporary gate to the Mystic Realm, I barely have enough resources to even support myself,” the demon said. “Remember, we couldn’t bring Nexus Coins here either.”

“What do you need?” Zac finally said after a brief pause. “And isn’t your income from Calrin’s enough? The revenue should have exploded recently.”

Truthfully, Ogras had provided a lot of assistance not only in battle but also in management and setting a course for the force as a whole. If he needed some Nexus Coins, it wasn’t the end of the world. Zac had hundreds of millions to his name and even more in the form of treasures and Nexus Crystals.

“That money won’t arrive for a while yet,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “To begin with, I need a hundred million to upgrade the temporary array into a permanent one. It’s especially important if we want to set up the hidden outpost to research Salvation.”

Zac sighed and transferred the money to Ogras, not bothering to investigate how much was actually needed. It truly felt like a worthy investment. They still didn’t know how the Great Redeemer tracked his targeted planets. Perhaps even killing his people wasn’t enough. Throwing anything with a connection to him into the Mystic Realm felt like the best solution for the moment.

“It’ll take a day or two to get the needed components from the blue one.” Ogras nodded. “What do you want to do afterward?”

“How long until you are back to fighting condition?” Zac asked.

“Three days at the maximum. That golden light tried to drag my soul out of my body, but it didn’t cause any real lasting damage,” the demon said after thinking it over.

“We’ll head down to the underworld immediately after,” Zac said. “The other incursions aren’t critical, and it should take a while to whittle down the Zombies to a manageable number.”

“Great,” Ogras said with naked greed on his face. “Can’t let those people below us wait for too long, and they can incidentally help me with my financial situation. I’ll handle the gate immediately.”

Zac snorted as he watched the demon get swallowed by shadows before he stepped into the teleporter again to head to his cultivation cave. As he expected, he found his sister sitting with closed eyes on one of the mats he'd acquired in the hunt. She opened her eyes and smiled at him when he approached, before her eyes suddenly widened at the sight of his arm limply dangling to the side.

“You're hurt?” she said as she hurried over to him.

“My ultimate skill is pretty taxing to my body. I need to get a bit stronger.” Zac shrugged.

“At least that lunatic is dealt with. But don't take on more than you can handle,” she said and looked relieved when she realized he was in decent shape at least.

“I'm fine.” Zac smiled. “How are things on your end?”

“I'm making amazing progress in this cave!” she said, her eyes brightening up again. “I think I will enter the Level Ladder soon. And the other one I have already entered.”

“What?” Zac said with confusion as he opened up his ladder system.

The only one that made sense was the Dao Ladder since Kenzie didn't possess a lot of wealth. She didn't handle any of Port Atwood's finances or fight beasts to level up, so she shouldn't have a lot of Nexus Coins. So Zac quickly read through the ladder for her name, but he instead found another moniker.

[63 – Pretty Pretty Mega Kenzie]

Zac wryly smiled as he saw the name he hadn't heard in almost twenty years. It was the moniker Kenzie had given herself when she was four to match his Super Brother-Man alias. Her superhero costume had been a Halloween princess costume and a cape made from a blanket.

“I can't believe you chose that name,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“Well, it doesn't really matter.” Kenzie laughed. “I have already confirmed that these pseudonyms only count for

Earth's ladders, not for other things in the Multiverse.”

Zac sighed in relief when he heard that, since it had actually been a small worry of his own. He already knew there were ladders in the Tower of Eternity to both showcase historic records and the current status of trial takers. It would have been a bit embarrassing to have Super Brother-Man show up at such a place when he was looking for a strong force to join.

“What level is your Dao to get placed at the sixty-third spot?” Zac asked with some curiosity.

“I have the Seed of Tinder at the Late stage, and I recently got the Seed of Loam,” she said. “When I only had the Late-stage seed, I didn't get a placement.”

“Seed of Loam?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

“It's a basic elemental seed,” Kenzie explained. “Jarvis wants me to get seeds for the four elements before evolving. So I have earth and fire now, but I still need water and air.”

Zac nodded, feeling it made sense since her class was Elementalist. He was also a bit surprised how quickly people had advanced on the Dao Ladder. He knew he was still far ahead of the curve, but the fact that a Late-stage seed wasn't enough to enter the ladder was pretty surprising to him. Especially after hearing how hard it was for the demonkin soldiers to gain Dao Seeds back home. It was truly no surprise that the Great Redeemer wanted to get his hands on their Origin Dao.

“Loam doesn't assist me in battle at the moment, but it does improve my healing, and it helps the flower grow,” she added and nodded at the small lotus.

It hadn't been that long since Zac saw it the last time, but it had actually grown quite a bit and now had the diameter of a dinner plate. But it still emitted almost no life-attuned energy, proving it was still in an extremely early stage. Who knew how many years it would take until it possessed the supreme energies of the one that the Abbot possessed.

“Have you heard anything from the battle with the Zombies?” Zac asked.

“I get an update every evening from Adran. They have started clashing a few days ago, but no big battle has taken place yet. They are essentially nipping at the Zombies’ sides as the horde pushes forward. They’re trying to split up the horde, but that requires killing the high-grade Zombies who keep the dumber ones in line, and those creatures are hidden in the middle of the pack,” Kenzie said.

Zac nodded, feeling more confident in his plan now that he knew the situation likely wouldn’t get too out of hand in the short run.

“I’m heading to the underworld next,” Zac said. “Will you stay here?”

“I have no interest in fighting a bunch of Fire Golems,” Kenzie said with a wave of her hand. “I’d rather stay here for now. I am currently too weak. I didn’t adapt as well as I should have to the integration, so I am better off working on my foundations and finding other ways to contribute for the moment.”

“Don’t blame yourself. You could already be considered an elite by the time I found you. Are you changing to a noncombat role?” Zac asked curiously since Kenzie rarely fought since she’d arrived at Port Atwood.

“No, but I don’t need as much practical battle experience as others thanks to Jeeves,” Kenzie said. “But I think I will get a secondary job when I reach E-grade. Alchemist perhaps? It seems pretty fun.”

Zac’s eyes lit up when he heard her mention alchemy. That was one field where they were sorely lacking at the moment, and after hearing what Dao Seeds Kenzie possessed, she almost seemed perfect for the job. Fire and earth could both help in concocting pills, and the precise energy control she got with the help of her AI could boost her proficiency even further.

And no one would be happier than Zac if she focused on a noncombat profession, considering that would keep her out of harm's way. As long as she still possessed a mage-like class, she would be able to defend herself. Besides, alchemists were always extremely wealthy and had great powerhouses protecting them. It would help secure her future in case something ever happened to him since skilled alchemists were welcome no matter where they went.

"That sounds like a good idea. I did find that nice cauldron earlier; you can have it," Zac said and immediately took it out and placed it in the cave. "Just tell me if you need anything to train your skills. Port Atwood could really use a skilled alchemist."

"Are you trying to turn your poor sister into a money-printing machine?" Kenzie giggled. "In any case, it would have to wait a bit. I want to focus on my Dao while the Origin energies are still abundant in the atmosphere. Dao is the one thing that Jeeves can't directly help with, so I need to do that one myself."

"Ogras and I got our hands on something nice earlier that might come in handy," Zac said and told her about the golden fractal. "Do you think Jeeves would be able to figure out a way to extract the energy?"

"It's impossible to tell without looking at it," Kenzie said with hesitation. "I need to borrow the crystals on formations and inscriptions as well to give Jeeves a better understanding of fractals."

"Sure, just tell the Merit Exchange I gave the go-ahead to browse them," Zac agreed without hesitation.

The crystals had already been put into the Merit Exchange. But the cost of reading them could be waived for whoever Zac wished since they were his possessions. In fact, anyone could put information or Skill Crystals into the Merit Exchange, and any time the information was perused, that individual would get most of the charged Merit.

It was a way to make people share their knowledge with the others of the force instead of hoarding it. Right now, there

were essentially no information or Skill Crystals except Zac's own, but that would probably change as the years passed.

“The others will complain of nepotism,” Kenzie said with a smile.

Zac only rolled his eyes, completely uncaring what the others thought.

“Oh, by the way, the Abbot's custodian came here and asked for you while you were gone,” Kenzie said. “You should probably visit him before you leave for the underworld.”

KARMIC TIES

“Abbot Everlasting Peace is looking for me?” Zac said with some worry. “Are they under attack?”

“I have no idea, but it doesn’t seem like it,” Kenzie said with some hesitation. “But it seemed pretty important.”

Zac frowned thoughtfully as he wondered what the old monk could need from him at this juncture. If their mountain wasn’t under attack by the undead, the other most likely reason was that there was some issue related to Karma. That old man seemed to have a miraculous insight into that mysterious Dao, to the point that Zac suspected that the old man possessed an advanced Dao Fragment.

“There’s no need to be so serious. Just go over there and see what he wants. You’ll get wrinkles if you keep scrunching up your face like that,” Kenzie said with a shake of her head.

Zac snorted, but he felt what she said made sense. There was no point in guessing when he could simply check the situation himself. But he first wanted to heal his arm in case the visit would lead to a battle with the Zombies.

“I’ll go tomorrow. I want my bones to properly set first,” Zac said after some consideration. “Ogras will construct a stable gate to the Mystic Realm as soon as possible. We’ll set up an outpost inside to store sensitive materials, such as Salvation’s things. You can go over whenever you feel ready to look into things.”

“Sure,” Kenzie said with some interest. “I wanted to see that place anyway. It’s like we found an enormous space

station.”

“Stay inside the sealed area, though, and have a handful of Valkyries always accompany you. There were some odd beasts inside that were almost evolved,” Zac said with some worry.

He was afraid that his sister would do something drastic given the opportunity, and Zac would be down in the core of the planet, fighting Fire Golems.

“I’m not stupid,” Kenzie said with a roll of her eyes. “Remember, I survived both the Tutorial and living next to the Dead Zone for months.”

“It’s my job to worry,” Zac said with a smile.

Zac spent the rest of the day recuperating in the cave while consolidating his recent Dao improvements. Since he and Ogras had rushed out of the Cradle of God, he hadn’t had time to stop and get a sense of his improved seeds, but now that he was finally home, he opened up his menu to take a proper look again.

Heaviness (Peak): Strength +90, Endurance +25, Wisdom +5

Sanctuary (High): Endurance +25, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +25.

He was pretty happy with the attributes both the seeds provided. Heaviness had gained mostly Strength as expected, but Sanctuary had changed a bit from giving mainly Wisdom to providing an even split between Endurance and Wisdom instead.

The situation also made him ponder what he should do in regard to his Dao. Yrial wanted him to get the Fragments for Life and Death before evolving, which would allow him to gain a class that was centered on that concept. However, he was far closer to getting a Fragment related to the Dao of the Axe than one of Death as it stood. He still wasn’t used to Rot, and Hardness was still only at the Middle stage, making the road to get both to Peak pretty arduous.

Perhaps he could boost them if their plan with Salvation’s weird trinket worked out, but Zac was more inclined to use

that opportunity to form his first Fragment instead. Perhaps getting a Fragment of Axe would be enough to evolve both his classes, which would be for the best since he wasn't in a position to delay evolving for too long.

The problem was that he was stumbling in the dark, since the System didn't provide any hints to what the results of his actions would be. If he got a Fragment of the Axe and Life and then evolved, would he veer away from his Life-Death cycle to a simpler evolved axe-man? Would that even be a problem?

He finally gave up trying to decide on the spot what to do. He would simply have to see how things progressed and take things one step at a time. Worrying about Fragments was a bit premature. He didn't only need to improve his seeds to Peak but also master them to the point that he would be able to fuse them into something that made sense.

When Zac woke up the next day, he could move his arm again, though it was still a bit tender. Between his enormous pool of Vitality and expensive pills, he was like a troll from the old tales, regenerating at monstrous speeds.

The morning was spent on some more meditation before he got up and left for the teleporter after saying goodbye to his sister. He wasn't planning on bringing anyone to Mount Everlasting Peace, and he soon found himself at the foot of the sacred mountain. It wasn't the first time seeing the thousands of characters inscribed into the mountain walls, but he was still awed by the sight.

Not much had changed in the months since he came here last time, and the normalcy of the atmosphere was a bit surreal in and of itself. One difference was that no people were staying at the foot of the mountain like the last time. People had likely left the area when the undead horde started spreading, turning this place into an isolated pocket with death all around.

Even the monks were all but missing, leaving the fields completely untended. The only sign that the mountain was still populated was the two monks who sat in meditation a few meters away from the teleporter. They woke up from Zac's

arrival, and he nodded at them before he glanced in the direction of the core of the Dead Zone.

It felt like there was an unseen war taking place as a thick wall of Miasma rose into the skies a few kilometers away. The line of demarcation was much clearer now compared to before, making Zac believe the undead might have erected some Unholy Beacons outside to combat the purification of the runes on the mountain.

The two young monks stepped forward and told Zac that the Abbot was waiting in his courtyard and directed him toward the summit. Zac followed in tow, ascending the same set of stairs as the last time. This time, the pressure was almost negligible, perhaps since Zac had a naturally stronger grasp of his Dao.

They soon reached the peak, and Zac truly started to worry when he saw that the temple buildings were devoid of monks as well. A sense of unease crept into Zac's heart as he looked around, trying to figure out just what was going on.

"Where is everyone?" Zac asked the monks, who looked slightly troubled. "Did the undead attack?"

"The Abbot will explain everything," one of the two said. "But our disciple brothers are fine."

Zac slowly nodded as he kept walking toward the small courtyard in the back of the mountain. But he stopped in his tracks the moment he reached the square in front of Abbot Everlasting Peace's home.

Thousands of monks sat silently with closed eyes, not one of them moving a muscle. They were so still that Zac almost would have thought them statues if it wasn't for the terrifying amount of Cosmic Energy that swirled around them, infusing some enormous newly added runes on the ground.

The runes were Sanskrit just as the ones on the mountain walls, but the power they emitted was far beyond anything he sensed from those covering the mountain. Zac still couldn't read the script, but he guessed it was some Buddhist sutra functioning as an array.

Cosmic Energy wasn't the only thing that the air was ripe with. Mysterious energy that made the fractal of **[Mental Fortress]** tingle was also everywhere. It was as though the monks had combined not only their energy but also their Dao for some unknown reason.

Zac's heartbeat sped up from feeling the power that was contained in the runes as he walked toward the Abbot's courtyard. Was the monastery planning to launch some massive strike at the undead and needed his help to stabilize the situation?

Various possibilities ran through Zac's head as he pushed open the large doors to find the old monk from last time standing inside. It was the old man who had accompanied him up the stairs and given him some pointers, but he had a complicated expression when he saw Zac enter.

At first, he smiled and bowed, and it seemed as though he was about to utter a greeting. But he suddenly looked down again, and if Zac didn't know better, he would have thought that he saw shame on the old man's face.

Instead, the old man indicated for Zac to head further in, and Zac complied with some confusion in his heart. His eyes immediately turned to the pond, but to his surprise, the huge lotus was gone. He quickly looked around and saw Abbot Everlasting Peace sitting on a prayer mat under an old tree on the other side of the pond with a pot of tea by his side.

Zac flashed over to the Abbot and breathed out in relief when he saw that he was fine. The horrifying wound in his chest was gone, and the old man was brimming with vitality even though he still looked quite old.

"This penniless monk is happy to see that benefactor could arrive in time," the old man said with a kindly smile as he indicated for Zac to sit down.

"It is good to see you as well," Zac said, accepting the cup of tea the Abbot poured him.

"This is a wild tea that grew on our sister mountain before the world changed," Everlasting Peace said as he took a small

sip with contentment in his eyes. “It was gifted to this penniless monk by a Daoist who lived in seclusion there. He was a great scholar, but this one fears he fell during the Tutorial.”

Zac wasn't sure what the old man was getting at, so he simply sipped the tea while silently listening. It was unlike any tea that Zac had ever drunk before, with a heavy and bitter taste. It was still quite delicious, but Zac was mostly surprised by the fact that there was a smidgeon of Cosmic Energy in the tea.

It wasn't anywhere near what any true spiritual tea would contain, and it was impossible to gain any strength from it. But it was still pretty shocking considering it was something that came from the old Earth, and perhaps it was an indication that magic might actually have existed even before the integration.

“These cups were gifted to our mountain three hundred years ago by the local lord. He came to pray to Buddha for a son after years of being unable to conceive a child. When his wish came true, he returned with ten chests of gold and these cups that were given to him by a great scholar from the capital,” the Abbot continued.

“This monastery has lived side by side with the secular world for over a thousand years, spreading the word of Buddha and sowing seeds of karma. This poor monk hopes that we have left the world a better place than before. But just as day inevitably gives way to night, so must Karma eventually be severed.”

“Severed?” Zac repeated with a frown. “What's going on? Are the undead mounting an attack?”

“Benefactor needs not worry. This penniless monk is simply rambling, remembering a lost era. The Yin creatures are of no threat to us,” the Abbot said as he finished his cup of tea and stood up. “This penniless monk invited benefactor to witness.”

“Witness what?” Zac said, his confusion only growing as he drank the last of the tea and followed the old man, who was walking toward the exit.

The old monk had waited while the two conversed, and he silently opened the gates to let Zac and the Abbot exit. The two stopped right outside the gates, and for the first time since Zac arrived, he saw the monks open their eyes.

“Amitabha, it is time,” the Abbot said with a sad smile as he looked at the sea of monks.

No one said a word, but power immediately surged from the thousands of people, and a pillar of light suddenly shot into the sky from the runes on the ground. It almost looked like the light of an incursion, but enormous lines of Sanskrit floated in concentric circles around it.

Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing. The pillar was unlike anything he had witnessed before. Just what had these monks accomplished? It was as though they had invented their very own way of utilizing Cosmic Energy, turning it into something that Zac could only call Buddhist Energy. It gave off a holy and stable feeling, but it was clearly different from the energy of Sui or his Divine Crystals.

A golden halo suddenly erupted with boundless life force behind Abbot Everlasting Peace, and Zac actually had to take a step back with wide eyes. The power that the Abbot emitted was almost at the same level as Inevitability, though it was completely different. It was soft and elusive, and it felt as though it contained endless mysteries.

Oddly enough, the power that the old monk emitted didn't cause his danger sense to go off in the slightest. Zac could usually feel at least something unless the disparity between himself and the other party was too great. Did the Abbot's Karmic powers obscure his perception awarded by his high Luck?

His thoughts suddenly were interrupted as a silver cloud appeared inside the pillar as though it had been teleported. One moment the pillar was empty, and the next the cloud was there as though it had always been present.

Zac's heart immediately started to beat wildly as he realized that there was someone inside the cloud. He couldn't sense the slightest ripple of energy, but Zac could barely

discern the shape of a person slightly moving inside. Worse yet was that Zac's instincts screamed at him that whoever had been summoned was far beyond what he could handle.

The shocking turn of events made Zac unsure what to believe even to the point that he took out **[Verun's Bite]** to get ready for a desperate struggle. His confusion only grew when the old Abbot suddenly got down on his knees and bowed down until his forehead touched the ground toward the silver cloud.

“Disciple greets master.”

SEVERING KARMA

Zac wasn't sure what to think when seeing the old man getting down on his knees, but he knew that whoever was inside the silver cloud wasn't a simple character. However, panic started to set in when he made a horrible connection. Between the silver haze and having disciples on newly integrated planets, there was one clear contender of who hid within the haze – the Great Redeemer.

Was it possible that this secluded monastery was yet another seed planted by the Great Redeemer long ago, just like the Medhin Clan and the Dominators? Had they been biding their time all this while until they finally found the means to summon their lord?

Fury started to build in Zac's heart as he thought about the betrayal. Had these seemingly altruistic monks sacrificed the whole world for their selfish gain? The pained face of the old monk once again flashed in his mind before his eyes turned to his trusty axe in his hand.

If this truly was the arrival of the Great Redeemer, things might already be over and their planet doomed. But should he unleash [**Deforestation**] in a final act of defiance? Perhaps it would even buy time for his transfer talisman to complete its activation. The token he'd gotten from Yrial was still in his possession, and it might allow him to flee even the seemingly hopeless situation in front of him.

But he knew it took over ten seconds to activate it, so the plan felt like a long shot. But even if it worked, then what? He would be stranded god knows where, while leaving his friends

and family behind. He wouldn't be able to learn of their fates until he managed to get back to Earth, and that in and of itself would be a form of torture. But it was better to kill some traitors than simply giving up.

Strangely enough, he was unable to act on his idea. It was as though he had a mental block, making him incapable of turning thoughts into action. He wasn't restrained or under hypnosis, yet his arm was unable to swing his axe at the monks around him.

“Decisiveness can lead to greatness, but it can also lead to ruin. Decisiveness will turn to foolishness unless you first make sure your path is true,” a voice suddenly resounded in his head, making Zac immediately turn his eyes to the figure within the portal again.

The voice had spoken straight into his mind rather than out loud, but Zac breathed out in relief when he heard it. The reason for his relief was very simple; the voice didn't belong to the Great Redeemer.

It was likely that his plan had been seen through by this person and somehow stopped through unknown means. So it was both with anticipation and trepidation he saw the figure slowly emerge from the golden pillar. But reality sometimes didn't conform to imagination, and Zac couldn't stop himself from gawking in shock when he saw the true form of the mysterious powerhouse.

The same could be said about most of the monks in the square, as they threw each other small questioning glances, confusion clear on their faces. It was not a rugged warrior like Greatest who stepped out of the light, nor was it a sage monk. It was rather a fat little child only wearing a thick bead necklace and a pair of silver silk pants.

He looked mostly human apart from his earlobes, which dangled all the way down to his shoulders, and a set of mercurial silver eyes. He was also completely bald, with a thin line of silver fractals starting between his brows and going back over his head.

Zac's first thought was that something had gone wrong with the summoning, but he soon realized that wasn't the case. The child didn't seem the slightest bit surprised to be here, and the fact that he was actually floating in the air was quite telling that he wasn't some random kid ripped through space. Thea had already told him that flying was the mark of the D-grade, so the kid in front of him was at least that powerful.

Suddenly, he remembered the comforting words of Calrin when Emily had been dismayed about her youthful appearance. Was this kid some supreme existence who was so skilled that he'd embarked on the path of cultivation early? The fat child threw Zac a knowing wink when he saw the confusion on his face.

“Don't be alarmed. I simply saw the future you contemplated with the axe in your hand and removed it from the realm of possibility.” The little cherub once again spoke in his mind before turning to the Abbot.

“No need for such formalities, child,” the kid said with a sweet voice.

Oddly enough, it was the voice of an adult, though it was quite high for a male, and Zac could immediately confirm the voice in his head was the same as the one that exited the child's mouth. The Abbot hurriedly got to his feet, completely unflustered about the odd appearance of his apparent master. Zac, meanwhile, had trouble digesting the information he received mentally.

The child said that it had removed a possible future as though it was nothing special. If one was able to change the future like that, what couldn't he do? Just what kind of monster had the Abbot summoned?

“This penniless monk is called Everlasting Peace. May I ask Master's name?” the Abbot said, only increasing Zac's confusion as he stood on the sidelines. Did they not know each other?

“I am the 84th incarnation of the Lotus Emperor. Some call me 84th Fatty or Lord 84th, depending on mood and karmic

ties,” the child said with a laugh as he looked at the mountain. “How fascinating.”

The next moment, reality shifted, and everyone found themselves at the foot of the mountain, in front of the steps leading up to the summit. Zac didn’t understand how he got there, since it was instantaneous, and it felt as though he had always stood there somehow, making it seem like his past had changed.

“Spirit consecrated through faith,” the child muttered before turning away from the mountain. “In any case. Have you prepared yourself?”

“Disciple is ready,” the Abbot said with a somber expression. “Disciple’s fellow monks have been informed as well.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but just what is going on?” Zac finally interjected, unable to sit on the sidelines any longer.

The child looked over at Zac and, after a brief pause, smiled.

“When I reached the peak of my power, I decided to split my soul into one hundred thousand pieces and enter those pieces into Samsara,” the small child said. “It birthed the same number of incarnations without any recollection of their true self. Only when reaching high enough power will our memories return. I was the 84th incarnation to regain its memories.”

The explanation wasn’t the one Zac was asking for, but his brows still rose in shock when he understood the implications of what the child said. Doing such a crazy thing must require not only enormous power but also great conviction. And if this powerful person was just a small part of his true self, just how powerful was the true Lotus Emperor?

“Isn’t it risky? What if a part of you dies before regaining your memories?” Zac asked, curiosity overcoming the oddity of the situation.

“To understand the Karmic cycle is to understand all parts of life, including death. Through walking one hundred

thousand paths, I will better understand the universe, and through the universe better understand the self. If an incarnation dies, so will that part of me die,” the child explained with equanimity. “Such is the price of enlightenment.”

“It is the fault of this penniless monk. This one was not sure whether he was allowed to say anything before teacher arrived,” Abbot Everlasting Peace explained, understanding what Zac was truly asking about. “I wanted you to understand what transpired here today. Master has come to take me and my fellow monks away.”

“Take you away?” Zac dumbly repeated.

It turned out it was a farewell rather than a betrayal. But Zac suddenly realized the implications of what the old man was saying.

“You’re not staying for the battle against the undead or the other incursions?” Zac probed, some dissatisfaction creeping into his voice.

He had been working his ass off to protect Earth and needed all the help he could get if they wanted to save their planet. The Abbot was likely the strongest person amongst the humans, apart from himself, due to his high-tiered Dao, and he possessed mysterious insight into Karma that could greatly assist their efforts.

The fact that he decided to take his monks and leave Earth in the moment of its need was almost as great a blow as a true betrayal. He finally understood the look of the old monk who had given him pointers at the stairs, and a frown started forming on his face.

“You mentioned severing Karma. You’re going to cut and run when the undead hordes are destroying everything in their path like locusts, and when we face threats from all directions? I hoped you would join the efforts to protect our home when you had healed up,” Zac continued, but suddenly, he realized something and looked at the little child floating next to them.

“Don’t look at me,” the child said with a shake of his head. “I could kick out the incursions, but that would only create a worse future for your planet.”

Zac didn’t say anything, but his face must have conveyed his skepticism.

“Your friend and I have a similar interpretation of Karma, which is rare in the Multiverse. That is how we found each other. Through the boundless Dao, our paths converged, and a Karmic connection was formed. I showed him how to create this gate through that link,” Lord 84th explained. “But neither I nor my temple is without enemies. No one would reach any great heights without creating some enmities. Resources are limited, after all.

“Karmic cultivators are hard to kill because of our ability to see, and to a certain extent tamper with, the great tapestry of fate. But our weakness is that we cannot allow our Karma to get entangled with too many people.

“I can see the threat you’re facing,” the child continued, and to Zac’s surprise, a slightly hazy picture of the Great Redeemer materialized. “This one utilizes a rudimentary method to control Karmic ties to locate your planet. I could easily cut those ties, but by doing so, I would form billions of entanglements with the living beings living on this tiny planet.

“The enemies of the Sangha would eventually find out, and those people are all far stronger than this man,” the child continued. “They would capture everyone on this planet and torture your souls for eternity just to cause trouble with my cultivation, or in case this planet held some value to my temple.”

“Is there nothing to be done, Master?” Abbot Everlasting Peace suddenly interjected. “Completely severing Karma has proven troublesome for this talentless monk. Perhaps if we could provide my friend with some small assistance, this poor monk would be able to completely move forward with a pure heart.”

Zac finally realized the true reason why the Abbot had asked for his presence. He likely felt bad about leaving Earth

and wanted to get some small assistance from his master. Zac was by far the strongest person, so having him here would be the best option to improve Earth's fighting chance.

The child seemed to mull it over for a few seconds before he slowly nodded and pointed at the Abbot's forehead. The old man closed his eyes for a few seconds before his eyes opened again with some excitement as he turned toward Zac.

"If benefactor would be so kind as to lend his hand for a second?" the old man said before grabbing it.

A burst of odd energy suddenly entered Zac's body, and the sky was suddenly filled with odd lines in all kinds of colors. There were golden lines of various thickness that reached toward each of the monks, and a silver one swirled around Lord 84th like a living snake. There were also four black pillars reaching into the sky in the distance, looking like sickly tears in space.

Three of them were bunched together to the north, whereas one was off by itself far on the horizon.

"This penniless monk is temporarily sharing his vision with benefactor," the old man explained. "The lines are the ties of Karma. The four sinister lines are connections to the man master conjured. There was a fifth one, but I sense that you are responsible for its severance."

"I killed Salvation a week ago. He had somehow become the in-name disciple of the Great Redeemer," Zac said with a nod.

"Something in his possession is still calling for its master," the old man said and indicated the line by itself. "Taking it into a separate space will not work. The line will simply lead to the entrance."

Zac didn't understand how the old man could know of his plan, but he rather focused on the message.

"What should we do? Destroy everything in his possession?" Zac asked.

"That will not help either," the old man said with a shake of his head. "But this penniless monk now has a way."

CONVERGENCE OF FATE

Considering the circumstances, Zac still felt it was extremely lucky that he had gone back to the monastery in time. If they went by their original plan to simply study Salvation's belongings inside the Mystic Realm outpost, they would have entered a state of false security while the Great Redeemer was bearing down on them. However, that still left the issue of actually destroying the black pillar.

The old man suddenly produced a small fruit knife from his sleeve, and the next moment, the golden ribbons in the air started to flutter wildly. The golden light from the monks all poured into the knife, filling it with a massive amount of the unfamiliar power.

Both the monks and the Abbot himself looked extremely drained after, and a few of the younger ones even looked ready to keel over from the expenditure. The amount that the Abbot personally infused was just shocking, and Zac felt it was even more energy than what his **[Infernal Axe]** contained.

“Master imparted me with a skill that allows me to condense the will of us all into an item. It contains our hope for this planet and its people. Bring it next to the item, and the rest will become apparent,” Abbot Everlasting Peace explained. “The other three ties can be severed the same way as the last one.”

Zac looked down at the small knife that the old monk gifted him, and if it weren't for the special sight temporarily given him, he would never have guessed it contained such massive power. It truly was a simple fruit knife without a

single fractal, but if he figured out a way to turn the energy into a weapon, he might even be able to kill one of the Dominators with it.

“This one truly wishes he could do more, but the result of the last battle was largely due to this mountain, and its power is not endless.” The Abbot sighed. “This is the limit of what this penniless monk can do. I am truly ashamed.”

“Don’t be. This gift is perfect,” Zac said as he stowed away the knife. “Without this item, all our efforts might have been for nothing.”

“This old man also spent the past month divining the fate of this planet. I believe it might be of importance to benefactor,” the old monk added. “The fates of many forces on Earth have converged on the very same hidden realm that benefactor has connections to. This old monk believe—”

“That is sufficient,” the child suddenly interjected, cutting the old man short. “Exposing heaven’s secrets does not come without a price. You are yet not strong enough to divulge more than that without permanent ramifications.”

“That’s enough,” Zac hurriedly agreed, not wanting to turn the old man crippled. “I will look into it.”

The news came like lightning out of the blue. The hidden realm likely referred to the Mystic Realm. But how could any other forces have connections to that realm? And which forces?

It also begged the question of what made people so interested in that place. It was truly a very odd Mystic Realm, but the energy inside wasn’t amazing enough to indicate there being some supreme treasure inside. And even if there was something of great value inside, how would he even go about seizing it for himself?

The forces staying on Earth weren’t the only ones he would have to fight with if he entered the fray inside. There were also the natives, who were far too strong to contend with for the current Zac. If one added the Dominators and the

stronger incursions into the mix, the whole thing turned into a death trap.

“We must leave now. I should not stay in this sector for much longer,” Lord 84th said before turning to Zac. “If fate wills it, you two will meet again.”

The floating child Buddhist pointed at the mountain next, and it quickly phased out of existence. Zac looked at the empty space with wide eyes before turning back toward the mysterious expert. But not only were Lord 84th and the Abbot gone, but so were all the other monks.

“I recommend you keep my identity to yourself to avoid any ties of Karma between your planet and me,” Lord 84th’s voice echoed in his mind.

Zac didn’t even have time to react to the disappearances before finding himself standing in the middle of his courtyard, looking around with confusion. It almost felt as though everything had been a dream, but when he opened the teleportation screen, he saw that Mount Everlasting Peace was gone from the list.

A thought suddenly struck him, and he opened up the Dao Ladder to see if it had changed. Abbot Everlasting Peace was gone, as he suspected, putting him in the first position. Better yet, the change actually wasn’t only good for his vanity, but it brought real benefits. When Zac opened his status screen, he noticed that he had gotten his first Limited Title.

[Frontrunner: Maintain the first position on all three ladders in world. Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%.]

From the wording, it seemed like he would hold the title for as long as he held the first position, which meant the title was secure at least in the short run. The only way someone would pass him at the moment was if he got stalled because he aimed for high-rarity classes, allowing others to evolve much quicker than him.

The additional attribute effect pushed the efficiency to 140%. It was a huge difference compared to normal cultivators, and it made his over-tuned attributes even crazier.

The effect would easily nullify any boost wrought by cultivation manuals when he encountered experts from the Multiverse in the future.

It was still somewhat of an empty feeling to receive these gains, as he only got them because the Abbot left Earth rather than through his own effort. But Zac shook his head to snap out of it. Now was not the time to get picky about the power-ups. He hurriedly left his courtyard and teleported over to Mystic Island. Every second that the Karmic Link persisted was a threat to those around him.

Soon enough, he reached the core of the island and found Ogras standing some distance from the spatial cracks with a large chest by his side. The chest was wide open and housed dozens of metallic stakes full of fractals, likely the array flags needed to stabilize a path to the Mystic Realm.

The demon immediately noticed Zac's arrival and gave him a questioning look.

"Making sure your money gets used properly?" Ogras jested when he saw Zac hurry over.

"I wish I had that much free time." Zac sighed before retelling his experience with the Abbot, though he didn't mention the identity of Lord 84th as instructed.

"I have never heard of such a thing, but he sounds extremely powerful. Cultivation through rebirth," Ogras mumbled before throwing Zac a weird look. "How odd that a baby planet not only birthed a monster like you but a second oddity like that old monk. I can't remember a single person from my planet ever gaining insight into the Dao of Karma, yet that old goat did it within a month of getting integrated."

Zac nodded in agreement. Stranger yet, it felt like the Abbot wasn't the only one. Salvation would have been completely unstoppable on Earth unless Zac had been there to thwart him, showcasing a power far beyond what was normal for his level. And there was Billy with his superhuman power and the primordial aura he emitted when he changed form. And those were only the ones he knew of.

Perhaps there were even more oddities that simply matured a bit slower and couldn't be found on the ladder yet.

“So what do you think about the prophecy?” Zac asked.

“We know too little to be sure what's hidden inside the Mystic Realm. But if multiple forces are currently invested in that place, it can only mean that our entrance isn't the only one. Things may get extremely chaotic soon, which may be our only chance. Perhaps we can fish in muddy waters and snatch the benefits for ourselves,” Ogras mused.

“I've been thinking about it. The underworld incursion is fire-attuned, which may be troublesome for you. It may be better if you stay here and investigate. I could bring Verana instead to test her out down there,” Zac ventured.

Ogras hesitated for a bit before he reluctantly nodded.

“You'd better not hoard all the goodies down there if I do this for you,” he muttered. “You're going to the treasure caves, and I'm stuck wandering those spooky halls where E-grade monsters might be lurking around every corner. And don't give those beast maniacs too many benefits; they have just joined and haven't contributed anything.”

“I'll set aside anything that looks like it might benefit you,” Zac said with a snort before taking out the small golden dagger. “Are you ready?”

Ogras nodded and threw out the mangled corpse of Salvation.

“I still haven't touched anything in his Cosmos Sack yet. How do you know which item is sharing our position?” Ogras asked.

“No idea,” Zac said a bit sheepishly as he held the cutter. “The Abbot said things would become apparent.”

“He wasn't messing with you, by any chance?” Ogras said as he skeptically looked at the small fruit knife in Zac's hand.

Zac was about to open the floor to suggestions when the knife suddenly burst into an almost blinding light reminiscent of the golden ribbons that Zac had seen. He had to cover his

eyes for a second while Ogras shied away as he shrouded himself in layers of shadows.

“What the—” the demon shouted, but the cascading radiance only lasted for a second before it started fading again.

A golden luster was still circling the knife as it hummed with power, and Salvation’s Cosmos Sack was actually humming with it. Zac walked over to see what was going on, and when he spread his awareness into the sack, he immediately spotted the thing that was causing the connection.

It wasn’t the golden fractal as Zac had expected, but rather a small nondescript token that seemed to be made from stone. There were no fractals on it, and no power emanated from it either when he took it out from the pouch. Zac would have thought it was a simple memento if it weren’t marked by the knife.

“What now?” Zac asked, looking over to Ogras.

“How would I know? Try stabbing it. That usually solves most of my problems.” Ogras shrugged, still keeping a respectful distance.

Zac didn’t have any better idea, so he placed the token on a stone before stabbing down at it with the fruit knife. He didn’t use a lot of his power, but the stab still contained enough force to turn a normal stone to dust. But his swing was stopped short the moment it hit the stone, and not a single mark was left on the surface, proving it was no ordinary stone.

The knife suddenly shattered, making Zac’s eyes widen in alarm, but the next moment, a flood of golden light poured into the token until it cracked with a loud snap. A hurricane of energies erupted from the tablet, throwing Zac a dozen meters away, almost pushing him into the zone with spatial tears. Zac grunted as he got to his feet, but he froze when he spotted a familiar figure within the storm of energies that the token unleashed.

It was the Great Redeemer.

Two people floated in space, seemingly unbothered by the fact that there was no oxygen to breathe. They were looking down at a planet with two massive continents separated by a vast singular ocean. But only they knew what they were seeing as their eyes sparkled with enigmatic light.

“Such a grand convergence of fate,” Lord 84th said with some wonder. “But I wonder if it is orchestrated or the will of the Heavens?”

The other monks and the mountain had already been stowed away and missed out on the spacewalk. Even the Abbot had been shocked to find that his master housed a whole world in his heart, where his other disciples already resided.

It was where he would live as well for the foreseeable future, hidden away from all pain and suffering of the mortal world, to ponder upon the mysteries of the universe. To aid him were senior monks who had walked the path for thousands of years and treasures that most could only dream of. But even though such an opportunity had presented itself, he couldn't help but feel unreconciled.

“Is there nothing this poor monk can do to help? Is severing Karma truly the only path?” Abbot Everlasting Peace sighed from the side as he looked down on the planet.

“You should understand the price of meddling with Karma by now,” Lord 84th said as he pointedly looked at the old man's arm, which was limply hanging to the side. “There is nothing you can do.”

But the Abbot looked resolute, even though divulging the path to his young friend had cost him the use of his arm.

“What is the point of enlightenment if one cannot use it for saving others?” he retorted.

Lord 84th shook his head as he looked into the distance.

“You remind me of my senior brother. He walked the path you are speaking of, taking on the world’s sorrows. That path is wrought with suffering; the sea of bitterness has no bounds. And who knows if there is even salvation at the end of the road? Is it truly worth it?” the little master said with sorrow in his eyes.

“But if this useless monk doesn’t step through the gates of hell, who will?”

SOWING GRUDGES

Even though Zac was placed face-to-face with the largest threat to Earth, he didn't panic. The reason was that the Great Redeemer was obviously not there in person. With his hazy appearance, it was clear it was a projection or a splinter of his soul like the one inside Salvation's protective talisman. He had already survived a hologram of this man before, and that was when he was far weaker than now.

But after observing the man for a second, Zac felt that the former was more likely than the latter. While the man who appeared from destroying the token was clearly the Great Redeemer, so was it also clear that he looked a lot older than the man Zac had seen during the hunt.

The version of the Redeemer that had saved Salvation had looked to be around Zac's own age or even younger, a man in the prime of his life. But the figure currently glaring at Zac and Ogras was a lot older, looking like someone in his fifties or sixties. That wasn't the only difference, as a large scar ran across his face, and the wound contained some sort of sinister energy. It seemed like the result of an extremely powerful attack, one that couldn't be easily healed.

Zac knew there was only one reason that a cultivator would look this old. There was a large difference to how aging worked with cultivators compared to mortals. Most of one's lifespan was spent looking pretty young, and when you evolved further, you gained enough control to change one's apparent age without using any skill. At the same time, you would be at peak physical capacity all the while.

It was only when one was truly closing in on the end of one's lifespan one would begin to age physically, and most races even lost attributes as the body degraded. The undead were an exception to this rule. Instead of growing infirm, they rather grew stronger as they lost their sanity due to the degradation in their minds.

That meant that the Great Redeemer was nearing the end of his life and might be dead in just a hundred years unless he managed to break through his current bottleneck and improve his race once again. It was no wonder he had concocted such a cumbersome method to harvest new worlds that took thousands of years; he was out of options and running out of time.

“The two of you are not mine, and you have broken my beacon,” the Great Redeemer said with a raspy voice as he looked back and forth between Zac and Ogras. “It looks like you know of my grand design.”

Zac was about to answer, but Ogras quickly motioned for him to be quiet as a muzzle of shadows appeared around his mouth.

“Clever child. A bit unusual for your race.” The man snickered with a sinister light in his eyes. “But it will not be enough. Those who try to cut my lifeline will inevitably be condemned to a lifetime of suffering. If I cannot find you now, then I will find you a hundred years later.”

The next moment, the projection disappeared, leaving the two alone by the Mystic Realm.

“That was close,” the demon muttered as he put away Salvation again.

“Why didn't you want me to speak with him?” Zac asked.

“A precaution, and it looks like I was right. That man was truly here in person this time; who knows what means he possesses,” the demon explained. “He obviously has some insight into Karma, and I don't think he would do something so taxing as to project himself all the way here without reason.

He was likely trying to form a new Karmic connection with us.”

Understanding dawned in Zac’s eyes, and he once again felt lucky to have the demon by his side.

“What about his threat? Do you really think he will try to find us in a hundred years?” Zac asked with some skepticism. “Even if we lose our protection from the System, we wouldn’t be that easy to find in the Multiverse.”

“Hmm,” Ogras mused. “Probably?”

“What, really? He would be that petty?” Zac blurted.

“Well, he seems to be at the end of his line. If he fails his promotion because of us, he might as well kill us as revenge before he passes on, right? And if he manages to evolve in spite of us, he might still go for us to nip any potential revenge in the bud, or just because he can,” Ogras said. “It’s pretty common. Keeping grudges in one’s heart is detrimental to concentration and can even negatively impact one’s cultivation. And he does not look like a person who will just let go of his grudges.”

Zac remembered the crystal about Galvarion he’d read in Thea’s Library. That man had been the same. The moment he broke through to the next stage, he would start a round of revenge against everyone who had slighted him while he was weak. Perhaps it was not only due to being unforgiving but also to clear his mind of any demons that might haunt him as he pushed toward new heights.

“So even if we defeat the Dominators, he will still be a threat?” Zac asked.

“There is always a threat.” Ogras laughed. “If not him, then some other bastard who either has what you need or needs what you have. That is what it is to be alive. But it would at least buy us a hundred years to get stronger. Don’t dwell too much on it.”

“You’re right.” Zac nodded. “No point in taking his words to heart when there’s a century to go.”

“Well, sure, but it might also be another ploy by him. Why would he expose his plans like that like some second-rate villain? He seems more calculating than that. Perhaps he wants us to obsess about the looming threat of his arrival to the point that we actually form a connection with him that way,” Ogras said.

“Is that even possible?” Zac asked after a brief pause.

“No idea. Karmic cultivators are pretty secretive about what they can and cannot do. It’s best to focus on the tasks at hand anyway. What will be will be,” Ogras said and walked over to the chest with the array flags. “For now, let’s squeeze that asshole’s disciple for all the benefits we can get.”

“I’ve asked my sister to look into a way of getting the Origin Dao inside the fractal. She should arrive when the gate is stabilized. If you’re in the area, help her out if you’re able to,” Zac said, drawing a surprised look from the demon.

“What does that lass know about arrays? She’s an elemental mage,” he said with confusion.

“She’s pretty good with energy control, and she has started looking into inscriptions and arrays lately. Besides, we don’t have any other experts in that area, and I trust her. Unless you want me to ask around with the Tal-Eladar?” Zac explained.

“Don’t bring those beasts into the mix. We should keep the Origin Dao for a small circle to maximize our gains,” Ogras hurriedly exhorted.

Zac snorted, knowing the demon was mostly thinking about his own benefits. However, he did agree with keeping the Dao for a small group. He did not know the effect of the Origin Dao, but he didn’t want to dilute it if it was anything like the Dao Impartment he’d gotten from Yrial.

“Well, I’ll help the girl out as best I can while I look into what might be hiding inside this place,” Ogras said as he looked at the crack in the air in the distance. “When are you leaving?”

“My arm is mostly fine, but I need at least another day to get in fighting condition,” Zac said before he left the demon to

set up the array.

Zac spent the next day catching up on everything that had happened while he had fought the incursions and Salvation while he planned his foray into the underworld. The war with the Zombie hordes was proceeding as expected, but it was clear that the Undead Empire did not care about the brain-dead Zombies they unleashed on the world.

It seemed as though there were surprisingly few elite Zombies, and foreign undead like the Corpse Golems and specters were nowhere in sight. Ilvere posited in a report that he believed that the Undead Empire was simply using the hordes as sacrifices to spread Miasma.

Every place they passed essentially turned into a Dead Zone, increasing the area that was under their control. It wouldn't surprise Zac if they started expanding in other directions as well now that the threat of the monastery with its purifying powers was gone. Zac frowned as he read the reports, once again feeling how strapped for time they were.

Emily had already caused a storm in Port Atwood to get the expedition to the underworld ready at the fastest speed, and while she held no official position, most knew that she lived in the restricted area. So many took an order from her as an order from Zac himself, apart from the true core of Port Atwood. Zac didn't bother stopping it since it was the first and only time she had borrowed his authority like this, and her orders were in line with his wishes.

Both soldiers and noncombat classes stood at the ready to quickly set up a base camp in the underworld. It would both extract the riches of the area while acting as a stronghold in the fight against the underworld incursion. Since everything was dealt with at the home front, Zac instead headed over to the Tal-Eladar to get some help.

He might be enough to conquer the incursion alone, but they didn't know exactly how strong the invaders were. Besides, it had proven extremely effective to have two powerhouses in the strike squad. Zac couldn't protect

everyone all the time, and Ogras had been instrumental in keeping casualties to a minimum.

A maid immediately led Zac to a sprawling mansion, which was Verana's private manor, when Zac arrived through the teleporter. The Beast Master sat and enjoyed the breeze, and she had Grub in her lap while Lulu lay snoozing to the side. When the fat little beast noticed Zac's arrival, it roused itself and made a gurgling sound that he supposed was meant to be threatening.

"What brings young master here today?" Verana asked as she petted Grub to calm him down. "I heard about your battle with the one called Salvation. Is that demon talking you into removing the competition before the war is even won?"

"The integration turned Salvation crazy. He killed over a million of our own people before I stopped him," Zac explained.

He still hadn't told her about the looming threat of the Great Redeemer, but he felt that it still wasn't time to divulge that. That topic would instead be broached when the situation on Earth had stabilized somewhat.

"More importantly, I require your assistance," Zac added.

"We stayed behind so as to set the foundation of a mutually beneficial cooperation between our two forces," Verana said with a frown. "We are not soldiers you can simply send to the front line."

Zac rolled his eyes before he explained the situation with the underworld, making sure to divulge the massive wealth in passing.

"While we might not be soldiers, we are also Tel-Eladar. We can't stand for innocent people getting slaughtered like that. We will join your assault on the Fire Golems." Verana nodded before quickly adding, "As for the resources that might fall under your control, we of course expect a share equal to the help we provide."

"Of course," Zac snorted.

It looked like the one thing that tied most people together was the love of shiny things. After Verana agreed to accompany Zac, she asked her maid to gather twenty soldiers to join them. Since battle would likely take place in tunnels and slightly cramped spaces, they didn't feel fielding a large army was the best option. Instead, they would stay with the tactic of utilizing small elite squads.

But the Tal-Eladar also insisted on bringing a contingent of noncombat classes to eke out their own piece of the underworld. The demons and Calrin had already prepared similarly in addition to the people Emily had gathered, so Zac didn't stop Verana from doing the same.

He would still be in control of the outpost and the teleporter aboveground, and he could easily have it act as a toll booth for any and all resources that flowed from the underworld back to this continent.

Besides ironing out the details of their cooperation, Zac also had Verana sign the same type of agreement that all the others of the strike force had already agreed upon. He had already decided that he would take this trip in his undead form unless the underworld incursion proved too powerful. He wanted to be as time efficient as possible, and he needed to gain some levels in his Undying Bulwark class.

He had already planned a few things out since it would be too troublesome to force everyone to sign an agreement. Instead of using the easily recognizable [**Verun's Bite**], he would use the unassuming Spirit Tool sword from the hunt along with his shield while changing his appearance with [**Thousand Faces**].

Only the core people who went would know his real identity, while the rest would know him as another alien expert that he'd taken under his wing. Between the different skills, face, and aura, there should be no one who was able to glean his true identity.

Divulging his second class after Verana was sworn to secrecy went about as expected, with her almost keeling over

in shock. Interestingly enough, she seemed as equally annoyed as Ogras about his unique advantages.

“No wonder Tylia has looked constipated since returning. She hates keeping secrets,” Verana muttered. “I can’t believe you possess two races. Teaming up with you might be my biggest contribution to the family ever.”

“That’s nice, I guess.” Zac shrugged.

“So what should we call you when you play undead?” Verana asked, pulling herself together.

“Uh...” Zac said, blanking out.

“Why not something simple, like Mr. Black?” Verana proposed.

MR. BLACK

Zac grimaced at the suggestion, but he couldn't think of anything better to call himself.

“Fine, Mr. Black it is,” Zac said with some resignation.

He had heard that many cultivators in the Multiverse went by a self-chosen Dao name rather than their real name while they traveled or visited Mystic Realms. Perhaps he should start looking for a good one so that he didn't find himself in this position all the time.

The two waited for another twenty minutes before the maid arrived once again to inform them that the required people had been assembled. The two got up, and after Verana inspected the group and made some small personnel adjustments, they left for Port Atwood.

Soon they found themselves in the large lobby of the official teleportation array, and the Tal-Eladar looked around in surprise, some praising the architecture. For all their other differences, Zac felt the two had pretty similar tastes in buildings after visiting the Tal-Eladar town. Both seemed to enjoy integrating nature into their homes, making their buildings living and ever-changing.

Verana only briefly looked around the building before her eyes found the large sign by the exit.

“What's the Towers of Myriad Dao?” she immediately asked with a small frown.

“It's a Dao Repository.” Zac sighed, inwardly cursing Brazla for his insistence on keeping that sign up.

“How does a baby world possess a Dao Repository?” Verana said with confusion. “And why would you choose to broadcast it like that? It seems like a way to invite trouble.”

“The System gives out all kinds of things as rewards to quests.” Zac shrugged. “And we have our reasons for putting it there.”

“The Tir’Emarel Clan would be willing to pay a large number of Nexus Coins or Crystals for the opportunity to peruse it, and you can name your price for taking one of the eight named inheritances,” Verana said.

“I am afraid the things inside are not for sale, but some are available through merit. We can talk about that at a later date,” Zac said, ending the conversation on that topic.

The Tal-Eladar had been quite accommodating so far, and it was true that they were stuck here on Earth for better or worse. But they had just joined his force last week, and Zac wasn’t about to give them the keys to the kingdom. They would have to prove themselves before they could dream of even seeing the inside of the Towers.

Verana and Tylia threw each other a glance before following in tow. They quickly exited the teleportation structure, and they were soon met with a contingent of demon warriors and Valkyries, both of whom glared at the Tal-Eladar behind Zac.

“What dense energy,” Verana muttered as she looked at the town still undergoing rapid construction, ignoring the squads who had likely come over to intimidate her. “Did you choose this spot due to proximity to a Nexus Vein?”

“I guess you could say this spot chose me,” Zac responded with a sardonic smile, nodding at Joanna, who hurried toward them.

“You remember the people from the Tir’Emarel Clan. Settle them for the day. They will join us tomorrow when we head to the new continent,” Zac explained. “And please come to my courtyard later.”

Joanna nodded and was about to respond but turned toward the sound of a rapid tapping on the ground.

“Honorable Beast Masters!” a voice suddenly resounded from the distance, and Zac saw Calrin run over with as much speed as his short legs allowed him. “You honor Port Atwood with your presence. This humble one is Calrin Thayer, merchant by trade. I was quite delighted to hear that the great Tal-Eladar has chosen to align itself with Port Atwood. Please don’t hesitate to peruse our humble wares before heading to battle. You can’t bring money with you to the afterlife, so better spend it on our great armor and weaponry!”

Zac rolled his eyes and dragged the Sky Gnome over to the side.

“What’s with the show?” Zac questioned. “We are about to head to the underworld.”

“A great businessman will always make time for making money, even when facing death. And who knows what dangers lurk down there? Better if I get friendly with these people so I can use their dumb beasts as shields,” Calrin said with a shrewd look. “Besides, who knows if they will find treasure down there? We want it spent or traded with us rather than taken home for their clan to inspect.”

Zac gave the Sky Gnome a small thumbs-up before heading back to his courtyard, leaving the merchant to make some inroads with the Tal-Eladar. He wasn’t interested in the logistics, and Verana had expressed interest in touring the city, so he let Joanna handle that.

This time, his place was already occupied, as Kenzie sat under the shade of a tree with a crystal in her hand. Zac noticed that it was the same crystal on formations that he had perused himself during the time he was trapped at the entrance to Anzonil’s array in the hunt. Zac didn’t interrupt her and instead started to go through the Merit Exchange for things to use while under the guise of Mr. Black.

The Merit Exchange tokens that all Port Atwood citizens carried had the extremely convenient option of opening a screen to display all the available items at any time. However,

it was impossible to buy or reserve any items, so one could only browse. The golems had explained it as a motivational tool. If people kept browsing for treasures they desired, then they would work harder to gather merit.

Joanna later arrived as instructed, and Zac filled her in on his plan. He didn't need to worry about her or any of the other Valkyries since they were all bound to him, so he freely told her about how he would pretend to be Mr. Black. Kenzie had stopped reading by this point and had instead chosen to listen in on the conversation.

"I have the perfect thing for your disguise," Kenzie said with some excitement after Joanna left to handle things for tomorrow.

Zac skeptically looked at her as she took out a demonic face mask made from some metal, reminding Zac of a Japanese Oni. It was mostly black but had some red details, while a few simple fractals covered the inside. Zac took it with some interest and looked it over.

"Where did you get this thing?" he asked curiously.

"It's Ogras', but I don't think he will mind. It was meant to be worn by one of the villains in his movie," Kenzie explained. "It's a prop."

"His WHAT?" Zac blurted, almost dropping the demonic mask.

"Oh, he hasn't told you?" Kenzie giggled. "He's trying to make an action movie about cultivation. He has essentially stolen what happened to you and made some alterations. I think this particular mask was made for one of the generals in the incursion that the main character would battle before a final fight with the big boss."

Zac blankly looked at Kenzie for a few seconds before sighing and shaking his head.

"He actually did it. I'd better get some royalties if he is using my story to make money," he said before suddenly looking up at his sister. "Wait, why do you have that thing if it's Ogras' movie?"

Kenzie looked a bit startled for a second before rolling her eyes.

“I’ve attached myself as a consultant and liaison between his actors and the human engineers he has scrounged up for CGI,” she explained. “So I have access to all kinds of things. Did you know that Zakarith has been made the love interest for the main character?”

Zac’s thoughts went to the diminutive demoness he had captured for information back in the day, and could imagine how Ogras had bullied the poor girl into joining the production. It was distracting enough that he lost his train of thought, and soon he was back to finding things that would go well with the mask.

The next morning, four distinct groups streamed toward the teleporter to transport over to Westbound Harbor, the name Mr. Trang had chosen for the outpost on the desert continent. One by one, the people stepped inside the circle and disappeared.

The smallest contingent were the fourteen Sky Gnomes decked from top to bottom in defensive treasures and Cosmos Sacks. Next was a squad led by the Valkyries, who guarded around 150 noncombat personnel who would be responsible for setting up camp in the underworld.

Finally were the demonic and Tal-Eladar groups. The demons were a bit subdued because all their leaders were occupied elsewhere, but it didn’t stop them from glaring at their old enemies with all they had. The newest additions to Port Atwood wouldn’t be outdone in the death-stare department, and if glares could kill, the whole area would have run red with blood by now.

Zac looked on at the proceedings from the sidelines, having already changed his appearance before appearing this morning. The Spirit Tool sword named **[Hunger]** hung by his waist, still radiating boundless killing intent. He had chosen not to bind it with a drop of blood because he would probably return it after the incursion into the underworld.

Not binding the weapon would essentially cut the power the sword could exhibit in half, but a weapon wasn't too important to his fighting style as an undead in any case. His power rather came through his shield. As for his robes, he had found a pitch-black warrior's robe in his gains during the hunt that possessed at least the basic cleaning and resizing fractals. It was nowhere near as good as the real Spirit Tool he'd gotten from Yrial, but defense was the last thing he lacked in his current form.

The official story was that Ogras and Zac both were occupied with an important mission, and they had instead summoned Verana and Mr. Black to hold down the fort while testing them out with a hard mission. Mr. Black's true identity was unknown, but he was only said to be extremely strong and ruthless.

A few demons had seemed interested in testing the veracity of the rumors, swaggering over with some bloodlust in their eyes. But after Zac released a deadly aura teeming with killing intent and the Dao of Rot, they quickly changed their minds and hurried away, leaving him to his own devices while the groups teleported over to the other continent.

At least it showed that no one could recognize who he truly was, and Zac wasn't surprised. He had completely changed every part of his appearance, and even if he didn't wear the mask, he didn't believe anyone could tell who he truly was. He had even taken it off a few times in passing in front of others to quell any unwanted rumors of his identity.

Zac was one of the last to step through the teleporter. After a few minutes of darkness, he stepped out into a scorching hot atmosphere. It had to be at least 45 degrees from what Zac could tell, and if this had been him from before the integration, he would have been incapacitated in no time from the billowing heat.

Now it barely registered for him, and only the weakest noncombat personnel were sweating a bit from the sun's rays. He took a look around and he had to say that Mr. Trang had found a pretty nice place for himself. It was a secluded bay protected from the winds, and tropical trees lined the sandy

beach. The familiar face of the old fisherman hurried over when he saw Zac standing and taking in the view.

“Mr.... uh... Black?” Mr. Trang hesitantly said as he looked Zac up and down.

Zac had already instructed Joanna to inform Mr. Trang of his true identity, because just like during the auction, Mr. Trang would be representative of Port Atwood’s human faction in the underworld. So Zac simply nodded in response before he was led to a recently erected structure where Joanna, Calrin, and Verana waited.

With them was also Harvath, one of the E-grade demons who was part of Zac’s strike squad against the incursions. It looked like he had been chosen to represent the demons’ interest in this venture. Zac looked around the room and took off his mask before sitting down.

“It’s good to see you again, Mr. Trang.” Zac smiled, causing the old man to flinch a bit.

Zac knew Mr. Trang was a bit thrown by the pitch-black eyes, but he pretended not to notice.

“Has something happened? I can’t see the mentioned town in the teleportation menu,” Zac continued.

“It only opens two times a day at random times, and it stays open for just a few minutes. We believe it is a security measure,” Mr. Trang explained. “It was through dumb luck that we noticed it the first time. But it opened five hours ago, so it should open again within five to six hours.”

“Great,” Zac said. “I want everyone ready. We’re immediately heading down the next time it opens.”

UNDERWORLD NEXUS

“Who’s going first through the teleporter?” Mr. Trang suddenly asked.

Zac was about to say that he would enter first, but he suddenly froze when he saw the old man imperceptibly glance at the new addition to Port Atwood’s forces. Only at that point did he realize the problem.

If he went first, Verana would become the strongest person aboveground, and she could easily destroy the teleporter, effectively trapping Zac in the underworld. He didn’t know what she would gain from doing something like that, but he also wasn’t willing to take the risk with so many things riding on him. This place was the only link to the surface, and if it were that easy to reach it by foot, the people of the underworld would already have left.

“Verana, Joanna, Mr. Trang, and I will all go down together. When the situation is secured, Joanna will return to get the rest,” Zac said, quickly adjusting his plan.

Verana looked a bit surprised at being included in the advance group, but a small smile suddenly crept up on her face, and she simply nodded in agreement.

“I want to go as well,” Emily said as she burst through the door, clearly having eavesdropped on them. “You promised.”

“No, you’ll join the second group,” Zac finally rejected after some hesitation.

Things might get a bit crazy when they arrived unprompted, especially when they brought an alien, so

bringing Emily in the earliest group was without benefit. He was also worried she would act hastily when she got down there, so he wanted to stabilize the situation first.

“My goal is to make whoever is on the other side open the teleporter within an hour to let the rest of you through,” Zac then added when he saw Emily’s face scrunch up. “If that doesn’t happen, something might have gone wrong. But don’t enter the teleporter before Joanna has come out, even if it opens again.”

The others quickly nodded in agreement before they ironed out the finer details of the expedition. The name of the teleportation destination was Underworld Nexus, and it hinted at what sort of place they were heading into. Since the teleporter opened to the public every day, there should be some strong people holding down the fort, and there might also be quite some foot traffic.

If it was possible, they would avoid causing any commotion since it might be more convenient to get a better understanding of the underground if their true identities weren’t exposed yet. The fact that Verana would join them would make that a bit harder, but she said she possessed a treasure that would allow her to accompany them without her origins being exposed.

There was also the risk that the place was like the Cradle of God, a death trap that tried to swallow everyone foolish enough to enter, which was another reason why Zac was hesitant to bring Emily. Better the small group of elites go first and sound out the situation.

In the end, there was only so much that could be done when they had no idea what they were dealing with, so soon enough, everyone retreated to their respective groups to sit down and meditate while waiting.

Zac briefly pondered on the Dao of Rot until one of Mr. Trang’s men let him know that the teleporter was open on the other side. Zac only grunted in affirmation as he got to his feet, and was soon joined by the other three who would go with him as the advance group.

Zac was interested to note that Lulu and Grub were nowhere to be seen, replaced with a rocklike snake that circled her left arm like a bracer. The Beast Master noticed Zac's look and smiled as she scratched the head of the snake, eliciting an odd purring sound.

"This is Slither," she introduced. "Lulu and Grub may be out of their element in the underworld, considering their size. Slither is much more accustomed to subterranean fighting and scouting."

Zac nodded in understanding, feeling that Beast Master was a pretty convenient class. One could simply shore up any weakness by capturing another beast, and you stayed out of harm's way while your beasts battled for you.

Then again, Zac knew things weren't that simple. It took both time and a large number of resources to rear a battle beast. And just capturing it was not enough, since if there was no connection, it might refuse to fight for you, or even betray you at a critical juncture. Zac didn't like the concept of relying on others for keeping himself safe. He would rather depend on his own two fists for protection than some familiar.

Time was of the essence, so the small group immediately headed over to the teleportation array. Zac donned his mask, making him look like a human hiding his identity. Verana instead wore a white cowl to obscure her features, and it completely hid her nonhuman features.

More interestingly, the cowl seemed to possess some magical feature that made Verana less conspicuous, and Zac had a hard time focusing on her, even though he knew about it. It was as though he got distracted by stray thoughts any time he looked in her direction, and soon his eyes drifted away.

"How curious," Mr. Trang muttered with some interest, clearly having realized the magical feature of the cowl as well.

Since it looked like Verana wouldn't be a problem, Zac immediately activated the array, and in short order, all four had stepped through and disappeared.

After a brief stint in the darkness, the foursome found themselves in a large vaulted cavern teeming with people. They stood on a platform that was raised around a meter into the air, and as he looked over the sea of people, he noted that most were streaming toward two large exits on the opposite side of the cave.

The cave itself didn't feel as stuffy as Zac had feared, and the ceiling reached almost twenty meters in the air. The area was also pretty well lit by a combination of large inlaid crystals in the walls and the ever-present glowing moss. The air was a bit stale, though, and the lack of any natural light was a bit uncomfortable. But Zac easily adjusted his state of mind, since he had been in a similar place for weeks during the hunt.

A quick estimation would put the number of people in the cave above a thousand, and he noted that this place was far more integrated between the races than how it was on the surface. Humans made up almost half of the people, which wasn't surprising considering how populous the old Earth was compared to the other planets that got smashed together.

But there were representatives from all three of the other races in the streams of pedestrians, and many groups consisted of a mix of human, Ishiate, and the Molemen. Even a handful of Zhix walked along without causing any trouble, though it looked like the Zhix always only walked with their own kind.

“Hey, stop dawdling! Present your tokens and make way for the next group,” a gruff voice said, making Zac look over at a guard who glared at them from beneath the platform.

Zac realized that over twenty guards were standing there, and apart from three who inspected a group in front of them, they all looked in their direction. The one who had spoken to them was a muscular Ishiate, but all four races, apart from the Zhix, were represented among the guards.

He could also breathe out in relief when he realized that neither his nor Verana's hidden features had caused any alarm amongst the guards. Actually, quite a few of the people in the area had obscured their features to varying degrees.

In the end, Sap Trang stepped forward after shooting a brief glance at Zac and Verana.

“We do not possess any tokens,” he explained with a smile. “It is our first time coming here.”

“You cannot enter the Underworld Nexus without a token,” the beastman said with a shake of his head. “Are you members of the Union or the council?”

“The Union? Council? We are not part of either,” Sap Trang said with some confusion.

“Fresh meat?” the Ishiate interrupted with some surprise. “You’re the first in a while, must be from a pretty secluded sector. Come with me, and I’ll explain things.”

The man seemed pretty eager, and Zac noted that the other guards looked at the beastman who had spoken up with some envy as he ushered them away from the teleportation platform.

He wasn’t worried that this place was a trap, since the people who were continuously streaming out of the teleporter seemed aware of the rules here, and they hurriedly presented the same sort of token upon arrival. At the same time, there was a smaller stream of people leaving as well, walking against the stream to use another teleportation array to return to wherever they came from.

“The Underworld Nexus is a neutral town meant as a gathering place for all the native factions of the underworld. Most of those you see coming and going either belong to the Union or the Underworld Council. The Union is led by a group of merchants,” the guard started explaining as they entered the side passage.

“A notable name among you humans from the Union is Little Treasure, who is one of the eight top figures. The Union controls most of the high-grade mines and many other lucrative resources, so they are extremely wealthy. That’s why many elite cultivators have joined them to enjoy great benefits.

“The council is a group of extremely strong warriors. They are on the front line in the fight against the incursions, but they also control a lot of the best training grounds. They aren’t as

wealthy as the Union, but they make up for it with military might.”

“The incursions? What does that mean?” Zac asked, thankful his voice didn’t change too much in his Draugr form.

Zac, of course, knew what the beastman was talking about. But from how he explained it, it sounded like there was more than one incursion in the underworld.

“You are truly lucky if you haven’t been impacted by those alien cultivators in all this time,” the Ishiate guard muttered as he led the group to a guarded side exit of the cave. “When the integration took place, it also opened portals to other worlds, and foreign invaders have come through those gates. The main goal of the council is to close those gates, and the Union is generally helping the war effort with resources.”

“How many gates are there?” Mr. Trang asked, understanding what Zac wanted to know.

“There are four that we know of, and the worst of them are the Fire Golems. They have killed millions of people.” The Ishiate sighed. “I moved here after they flooded my hometown with lava. Only a fraction of us survived, our ancestral halls turned to cinders.”

Zac was truthfully not too surprised that there were multiple incursions. The underworld spanned a huge area, and hundreds of millions of humans had been teleported here. In fact, he felt it was pretty good news to hear there was more than one. If the System only sent one incursion to test the whole underworld, it would likely have meant that particular incursion was terrifyingly strong.

“So where are we headed?” Sap Trang finally asked after they had walked the empty passage for some time.

“We need to issue you tokens if you wish to enter this place. Please be aware, these tokens are not free, as they require inscriptions to work. Each one costs 50,000 Nexus Coins,” the guard explained as he finally stopped in front of a door. “In here.”

The group entered and saw a human sitting with an engraving kit in his hands, with a small mountain of tokens behind him. The process of acquiring tokens was pretty simple, with only a drop of blood being needed to bind the token while the inscriber activated it. But Zac suspected the tokens contained a tracking array just like the one in Westfort.

“If you want my advice, you should join one of the forces as quickly as possible. There is some semblance of order in the Nexus, but truthfully, it is quite dangerous for a small unaffiliated group to walk the streets. You might get robbed of your treasures, or even killed,” the guard suddenly said as they got their tokens. “As luck would have it, I know a few people in the Union, and I could introduce you.”

“Are the two forces the only ones around?” Mr. Trang asked, sidestepping the offer.

The guard looked a bit irritated at getting his pitch derailed, but he quickly controlled his mood.

“Well, there are some smaller groups and towns that are not directly affiliated with the Union or the Underworld Council, but at least 60% of those who walk the streets here are part of either of them. So what do you say, do you want to head over to my friends in the Union? It’s a pretty rare opportunity, and I wouldn’t offer if I hadn’t felt that you guys are pretty strong,” the Ishiate explained.

Some disdain flashed in the eyes of the inscriber as he worked on the final token, but it quickly disappeared a moment later as the man refocused on his work. But both Zac and Verana had noted it, and they threw each other a look.

It seemed to Zac that the great opportunity was nothing more than a scam. Perhaps joining the Union would mean something like joining the New World Government, getting an overlord taking control of your hometown. It was most likely not very hard to join on one’s own, and the guard in front of them perhaps even got a commission for leading new blood to the slaughter.

“Is it the council or the Union that controls this place?” Zac suddenly asked, as he never heard the guard mention it.

“Actually, neither,” the Ishiate said as he scratched his chin.

At this time, the inscriber spoke up for the first time, briefly shooting Zac a glance.

“This place is under the control of the richest man in the underworld, Lord Smaug himself.”

SUBTERRANEAN DIPLOMACY

“He controls this town by himself? How is that possible? He is not even on the Power Ladder,” Mr. Trang said with some suspicion after hearing the inscriber’s proclamation.

“Wealth trumps power,” the inscriber said. “Anyone who tries to cause trouble will get blasted by his various treasures or arrays. I doubt even Super Brother-Man would dare to cause a ruckus in the Underworld Nexus.”

Zac slowly nodded, remembering Ogras’ words. With enough wealth, it was possible to completely ensconce yourself within your sphere of influence, buying layer after layer of defensive and offensive structures. Of course, while it was entirely possible to smash your enemies with piles of money, it was also true that wealth couldn’t trump supreme power.

“So he’s not part of any force?” Mr. Trang asked curiously. “Seems like he would be better off joining this Union.”

“He has his own company, Dragonwing Enterprises, and many underlings here in the city. I work for Dragonwing Enterprises, for example,” the inscriber explained, drawing a glare from the guard.

“They only recruit locally, though,” the Ishiate hurriedly added. “So how about it? Shall we head to the Union? Or if fighting is more your style, I actually have some friends working for the council as well.”

Zac didn’t immediately answer but instead went over what they had learned. He knew they might only have scratched the

surface, but it still felt like they had a good enough understanding of the underworld to get to work.

The splintered forces had generally clumped together into larger groups, but it seemed there were no individuals strong enough to become sole leaders. Instead, councils were formed where power was shared. The only exception was this Smaug character, who seemed solely to control this town by virtue of wealth rather than strength.

Now that they knew who the players were and what kind of place they had arrived at, there was no longer any need for subterfuge. Zac never meant for them to keep their anonymity forever, as there was no point in doing so. They needed to speak with Smaug, and the quickest way to do this was to explain who they were. Mr. Trang seemed to be of the same idea, as he shot a glance at Zac, who made a small signal with his hand.

“I am afraid that we do not plan to join any force,” Mr. Trang said with a smile at the Ishiate before turning toward the inscriber. “We would like to meet your boss.”

Both the Ishiate and the inscriber looked a bit startled at the quick change in demeanor before the beastman let out a guffaw.

“Are you crazy? Do you think just anyone can just walk in here and act as they please?” The guard laughed derisively. “I am being nice enough to help you out, but you’d better smarten up before something bad happens.”

But the inscriber’s eyes thinned as he glanced at Zac’s party, and he seemed to take the situation seriously, even though all of their auras were completely restrained.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“We come from the surface, and we represent Super Brother-Man,” Mr. Trang said, hiding nothing. “The forces of the surface world all tried to reach this place the moment the hunt ended, but currently, it is only Super Brother-Man who possesses the capabilities needed to reach this place.”

“Oh, Super Brother-Man, is it?” The Ishiate laughed even harder. “I forgot to introduce myself. I am Starlight’s long-lost brother, and this inscriber here is the cousin of Thea Marshall.”

“That’s enough, Terre—” the inscriber said, but his words got caught in his throat as an aura as heavy as a mountain spread out, suffused with killing intent.

The whole cavernous room started shaking, and the two men were unable to move. The Ishiate had fallen down on his belly and was crawling toward the door with horror in his eyes. The inscriber was not much better off, as he had fallen back into the pile of empty tokens, his face as white as a sheet.

It wasn’t Zac, but rather the snake who peeked out of Verana’s sleeve that was emitting the dense aura, proving that it was another E-grade beast under her command. In fact, the aura it emitted was even stronger than those of Grub and Lulu, making Zac wonder if Verana had held back during their fight.

“Super Brother-Man has closed multiple incursions in the past week, but there is far more to do. He sent his right-hand man and a general to close the incursions down here and help the people stuck here,” Joanna explained when the snake finally crawled back inside Verana’s sleeve and restrained its aura.

“Are you... truly from the surface?” the inscriber said, clearly starting to believe their words. “Then why have only you arrived and no one else? We have waited for so long for assistance. And do you have any proof you’re with Super Brother-Man?”

“It is simple. Most of the people on the surface believe that our new world consists of one huge continent, but that isn’t true. There is, in fact, a second continent, but it is separated by a vast ocean. Super Brother-Man is the only one with a fleet powerful enough to cross the ocean and survive the leviathans of the sea,” Sap Trang explained.

“Shortly after we set up our outpost, we noticed this place appearing now and then on the teleportation panel,” Joanna

added. “And as for proof? The force of Super Brother-Man is Port Atwood, which you should know after the hunt.”

The next moment, both her alignment from her status screen appeared, and her current position on the ladder.

“Atwood Valkyrie... a Ranker!” the inscriber said with shock. “Are you his right-hand man? Or general?”

“No, I am not strong enough for that yet,” Joanna said, looking a bit pained before gesturing at Zac and Verana. “It’s those two.”

The implication was clear, and the inscriber immediately understood what she was getting at. Not even low Rankers were strong enough to become generals under Super Brother-Man.

“So, can you take us to Smaug now?” Mr. Trang asked.

“Well... it’s not that simple,” the inscriber said with a grimace before turning to the Ishiate, who was still on the ground. “Terrek, you can leave. I will take it from here.”

The Ishiate had been frozen by the door, too afraid to either speak up or leave. When he heard the inscriber’s words, it was as though he was granted a pardon, and after giving Zac’s party a deep bow, he scrambled out the door.

“Why can’t we meet him?” Joanna pressured, her eyes thinning.

“I don’t know where he is. No one does,” the inscriber hurriedly explained. “We don’t know what Smaug looks like or where he lives. He’s only communicating through the network he has set up here, and the few times he appeared, he has been disguised.”

“So what now?” Joanna asked with some displeasure.

“I can take your party to the headquarters of Dragonwing Enterprises. I am only middle management, so I can’t contact the Lord, but someone there should be able to,” the inscriber said and got up from his seat.

The group nodded since it seemed as good a plan as any. They might have been able to force the man out by wreaking

havoc on the town, but they had come to help people, not cause trouble. The inscriber, who introduced himself as Farid, led them out of the passageways into the town proper. A few scared faces peeked out through doors along the way, but hurriedly shied away when they passed.

The Underworld Nexus was completely different from what Zac had expected. It was still a cave, but it was just massive, likely even larger than Port Atwood. It was at least a hundred meters to the roof, helping quite a bit with the claustrophobic feeling. There was even some wind being generated by a massive waterfall that fell into a lake, where Zac clearly could spot a large number of fishing vessels.

The structures were simple but sturdy, mainly created from a mix of metal and stone. Many rooms didn't have roofs or walls, instead opting for open architecture. Perhaps people felt closed-in enough as it was, and didn't want to box themselves in even further. Besides, it was not like there was going to be any bad weather down here.

The oddest thing was that the whole thing was brightly lit up as though it were the middle of the day on the surface. The whole cave was illuminated by a couple of massive crystals placed on top of sturdy metal towers.

"We call them Day Crystals and use them instead of sunlight," Farid explained when he saw the group's looks. "Smaug owns a mine where they extract them. These crystals are lit up eighteen hours a day, with the first and last hour being at half power. We also sell smaller versions to add to your home because electricity is limited."

Zac nodded, quite impressed by how quickly these people had adapted to life underground. But even with these pretty optimal conditions for a subterranean town, it was impossible to forget they were stuck under miles of rock. The town sharply ended where it reached the wall, and a few barricaded gates led out into the wild.

As they walked, it seemed to become more apparent that the explanation of the guard wasn't completely accurate. It was true that the Union and the Underworld Council were the

two most powerful forces along with Hive Arbak, the strongest Zhix hive in the underworld. In truth, their numbers only made up around 10 to 15% of the people in the Underworld Nexus rather than the 60%.

But their influence reached far and wide in the underworld, and it was obvious by how they could so overtly bribe the Underground Nexus guards to do their bidding. As Zac suspected, the guard did get a commission for enlisting new towns into these forces, which was why he made them sound grander than they truly were.

But Farid explained how there was a large number of varying forces and independent warlords who controlled their respective sectors, making the underworld almost as chaotic as the surface. The towns were far more integrated between species, though, mainly since the surface species had been dropped off together at the same place when the randomization of the planet took place.

But there was also a large number of refugees, as the things Zac had heard about the fire incursion were all too real. Every day, more refugees streamed through the teleporter, and by now, there was no more room to house them in the Underworld Nexus. Luckily, there was no lack of crystals, meaning the refugees could be teleported away to reinforce other towns in the underworld network.

“So why has none of you come to the surface?” Joanna asked as they walked toward the Dragonwing headquarters. “You’ve had half a year to dig your way out.”

“We tried,” Farid said with a sigh. “We all tried the first months. But something is odd with the stone; most of it is incredibly hard. Unless you’re at least level 30, you can forget about even cutting out a chip from the walls, and even the stronger people have trouble making way. Not even the Geomancers are any good. Perhaps when people start reaching E-grade, they will be strong enough.”

“Just like there are mines with minerals and crystals, there are also mines with softer stone that can be extracted,” the inscriber explained. “Most settlements are made by the

Molemen, though. The Underworld Nexus is almost unique in the fact that it is completely made from scratch. The cave was discovered by Lord Smaug, and he founded the Nexus by the shore.”

The group soon enough reached the Dragonwing headquarters, a vast complex next to the lake. As they passed through the gate, Zac couldn't help but notice there were multiple layers of arrays around the building. He wasn't worried now that they had already been let through, but if he read the energy fluctuations right, he guessed that even he would have trouble cracking this place open.

After Farid explained their identities and the snake once again exhibited its might, things proceeded quite quickly from there. The group was led to an open-air conference room while the manager sent an emergency transmission to their boss. The manager kept them company as they waited, assuring them that Smaug never took longer than twenty minutes to respond to a message.

The minutes passed, and refreshments were brought in as they waited. The manager was extremely curious about the state of the surface and was elated when he heard that Super Brother-Man was going around closing one incursion after another. The fact that he had started eyeing the underworld wasn't met with suspicion at all by the stocky, middle-aged man, but rather, delight. The Fire Golems had truly pushed people to their limits, and it looked like there wasn't a single person who hadn't lost someone to their attacks.

But Zac suddenly got a bad feeling as a gust made his black cloak flutter. He immediately looked around and spotted an odd sphere beneath the table that he knew hadn't been there before. It didn't emit any energy, but the feeling only got worse by the second, and Zac knew he couldn't tarry any longer.

“Behind me!” he growled as a field of death expanded around him from **[Fields of Despair]** while his defensive layers were erected one by one.

The large fractal shield was the last to materialize, and Zac placed it square between the rapidly enlarging ball and the group. The manager was held by his neck by a furious Joanna, but he was clearly not part of what was happening since he was screaming in fear, looking completely shocked by the change in atmosphere.

Suddenly, it sounded like a piece of glass cracking, and then the world turned white.

BILLIONAIRES' BRAWL

A massive wave of electricity slammed into Zac's shield as he imbued himself with the Dao of Hardness. The ball had been something similar to his own [**Thunder Punishment**], though the energies were far more concentrated. It gave up the massive area of [**Thunder Punishment**] but instead gained a far greater intensity.

A scream from behind told Zac that his shield wasn't able to properly block out the energies as it was, and he tried imbuing [**Immutable Bulwark**] with the Dao of Sanctuary to see if it would change anything. The shield quickly started transforming, turning into something that looked like a wall that circled his group.

The Dao imbuelement apparently changed the way the shield worked, where it gave up some of its strength to instead be able to protect from all directions. Luckily, the durability of the shield was still enough, even though it was spread out over a wider area. The problem was that the Miasmatic consumption drastically increased, though he would be able to keep it up for some time before he started to run out of energy.

But Zac didn't want to wait for his attacker to tire him or herself out, and he looked in all directions for the source of the attack. But it was impossible to see a thing through the storm of lightning outside the protective shield, and he could only growl in frustration. Joanna meanwhile looked ready to rip the Dragonwing manager into pieces as she threw him down on the ground and pointed her spear at him.

“What’s going on?” she spat out through gritted teeth. “Who’s attacking us?”

“I swear I do not know! We have had some friction with the Union lately; perhaps it’s them?” the manager frantically said, trying to keep his head as far away from the spearhead as possible.

Soon enough, the lightning storm abated, but Zac barely had time to glance around before a dozen more spheres flew toward them, releasing an inferno of flames that tried to eat through his protective layers.

Zac sighed as he realized that whoever was attacking them was unwittingly a pretty good counter to his undead class. He had activated [**Deathwish**] the moment he realized they were under attack, but he sensed that it hadn’t been used even once. It meant the skill didn’t work against treasures, allowing their attacker to go on as he pleased without receiving any retribution.

“Do you want me to help out?” Verana suddenly asked from behind, not sounding alarmed in the slightest, even though flames raged all around them.

“No need,” Zac said after a brief pause. “Protect the others while I deal with this.”

Verana would likely not have too much trouble dealing with this attacker, but Zac wanted to gain some experience in fighting in his undead form. He had only fought dumb animals when using Undying Bulwark, most of them turned even more rabid and irrational from the Darkness in the caverns beneath the Eastern Trigram Sect. Fighting a person in disadvantageous conditions felt like a pretty good way to find the limitations and strengths of his current class.

Finally, Zac managed to spot a hooded figure in the distance, and he immediately activated [**Inquisitive Eye**] to get some idea about their attacker. But either the man possessed tremendous Intelligence, or more likely, he owned a protective treasure because Zac could not even get the man’s name from the skill.

The limits of the ocular skill were once again shining through, and Zac was starting to wonder if it was even worth it that he'd relearned and evolved the skill for his undead form. But he was still unable to get his hands on a better option, as the only ancillary skill that the lowest floor of his Dao Repository contained was [**Thousand Faces**]. Hopefully, there would be some more options for supportive skills on the next floor, as those were the only skills that seemed to work for both his classes.

It looked like the man in the distance was imbuing yet another ball with Cosmic Energy, though this one shuddered with another type of energy than electricity. Zac didn't want to give him time to lob yet another of those things at him, and slammed his shield into the ground with a roar.

A huge shockwave of spikes ripped out of the ground and pushed toward the masked man with great speed, destroying anything in its path. It was the attack engraved into the shield itself, and its effect was even better than Zac had expected. The attacker looked up in alarm, but before he could move, the wave of spikes was upon him.

A green shimmer appeared around the masked attacker, and the spikes immediately turned into a murky liquid and formed a corrosive pool on the ground. Zac tsked in annoyance and pushed forward, inwardly annoyed with the lack of movement options in his undead class.

But he was still extraordinarily fast due to his massive pool of Dexterity, and Zac was upon the man before he could finish fueling the next offensive array. But the masked attacker seemed to possess an almost endless bag of tricks, and two of his rings lit up when Zac swung his sword down with furious momentum.

The man disappeared in the blink of an eye, replaced with a large head of a humanoid skeleton that radiated extremely sinister energies. Zac's brows rose in surprise, but before he had time to create any distance, the skeleton spewed out a large gust of a gray haze, covering every inch of his body.

Zac froze for a second, but he soon realized the odd attack simply had no effect on him. He once again thanked the cheat-like constitution of a Draugr, realizing that the mist was likely some poison his undead body was immune to. He swung his huge tower shield with a grunt, creating a gust that blew the mists away, and he immediately spotted the man in the distance.

“Smaug?” Zac ventured, and the man stopped moving before once again starting to prepare for his next wave of assaults, pretty much confirming his hunch. “Why are you attacking us? Port Atwood and Super Brother-Man have no enmity with you or your faction.”

“It does not matter,” Smaug answered with a flat voice, taking out a smaller crystal this time. “Sometimes we’re just leaves drifting in the wind.”

The crystal released a shockwave before a blue fractal appeared in the sky above him. Zac wouldn’t have been alarmed if that was all it did, but he looked on in trepidation as another fractal hundreds of meters across also appeared in the air above the lake.

Strong winds that had no place in the underworld buffeted the whole cave as waves rose over ten meters in the air from the disturbance caused by the huge fractal. Zac was even having some trouble keeping his footing from the torrential winds, and he finally punched the shield into the ground to get a proper footing.

Zac was unsure what to do as five enormous streams rose from the lake, causing dozens of fishing vessels to capsize. The streams melded together into an enormous leviathan that reached the ceiling of the cave before falling toward him. He wasn’t sure if Verana could handle an attack of this magnitude, but she gave a signal that they were fine when he looked back at them.

The others had moved far away from the battle, and a sturdy-looking red barrier shone around them. It gave Zac some confidence as he turned back to face the incoming attack

of the array. His muscles swelled to almost ridiculous proportions as he empowered his arms with **[Unholy Strike]**.

The last moment before the humongous water creature slammed into the ground, he infused his shield with the Dao of Heaviness and swung it forward with a punching motion. Between his massive pool of Strength and the multiplicative boost of **[Unholy Strike]**, the shield contained terrifying force, and the moment it hit the water creature, they both froze for a fraction of a second.

The next moment, a massive shockwave exploded from the point of impact, shooting water and hurricane-like gusts across half the cave. The massive energies ripped the whole complex of Dragonwing Enterprises to pieces, and quite a few of the surrounding structures were toppled, even though they were made from stone and metal.

One small relief was that he got no streams of energy from any kills, meaning that people in the vicinity had managed to evacuate in time before the battle reached a crescendo. It had been a worry in the back of his head since the battle started. He didn't want any innocent bystanders to lose their lives due to Smaug's crazed assault.

Zac's whole body hurt from being right next to the impact, but he ignored the pain as he looked around with wild eyes. He was tired of all the nasty things Smaug seemed to have up his sleeves, and he wanted to end this now. He quickly spotted a bedraggled Smaug currently scrambling to his feet, his clothes ripped and in disarray. He hadn't been unscathed from the shockwave either, and blood was running down his forehead.

The true appearance of the wealthiest man of the underworld was finally exposed, and it was not what Zac expected. He was a young man who might be from India or the Middle East, with a pair of emerald-green eyes. He had olive-colored skin and short black hair, and pretty fine features. Zac would guess he was around twenty if he went by the standards of the old world.

Smaug's eyes widened in alarm when he noted Zac's glare, and he quickly took out a heavily inscribed rapier as Zac

barreled toward him like an angry bull. The rapier slightly reminded Zac of the terrible array that Hannah had stabbed him with once upon a time, and rage flared up in his heart when remembering the betrayal.

Zac pushed his speed to his limit as he swung [**Hunger**] with ferocious force straight at Smaug himself. The man desperately tried to defend with his weapon, but a snap could be heard as soon as the two weapons collided. It was Smaug's wrist not being able to withstand the power in Zac's swing, immediately shattering from the force.

Smaug wailed in pain, but the scream was quickly cut short as Zac's boot slammed into his chest with the force of a truck, launching him like a rag doll into the ruins of what might once have been an office building. Zac was right behind him, and before he could get up, Smaug found [**Hunger**] against his throat, the sword actually shivering with excitement.

Zac's boot was firmly pressed on the man's chest, and his shield was slammed into the ground right next to Smaug's head. His hands were shaking with barely contained killing intent, and he breathed heavily, even though there was no need for it in his current body. Bloodlust had almost completely clouded his mind when he saw the rapier, but he finally managed to calm down before he killed his captive in a fit of rage.

"Why?" Zac growled as he looked down at the man who had attacked them with a storm of treasures.

The man didn't answer, instead looking back and forth to the sides with some panic. Zac frowned and looked around, but they were in the middle of a pile of rubble, and sight was obscured in every direction. A thought struck Zac, and he took out one of the mobile array disks with his free hand and threw it down on the ground next to them. It quickly shuddered before a small shield encapsulated the two.

"This area has been obscured by an array," Zac said with a frosty voice, his foot still on Smaug's chest. "Now tell me what the hell is going on, or I'll skewer you."

“Please save my sister,” Smaug coughed out with a pitiful voice, his demeanor completely changed. “I was forced to attack you by those bastards of the Union. Why the hell would I want to attack monsters like you people, only to drag your boss here on the off chance I survived?”

CAPTIVE

Zac looked down at Smaug, who was still being kept at sword-point, unsure what to think about the rapid change in his demeanor. It looked like he was truly telling the truth about his sister, but it wouldn't be surprising if the second-place holder on the Wealth Ladder was someone adept at deception.

Besides, even if he was telling the truth, did it even matter? Zac, if anyone, could sympathize with the desire to save and protect one's sister, but the fact remained that Smaug had launched a terrifying barrage of attacks on them. If Zac hadn't been strong enough, he and his people would have been blasted to pieces by the offensive arrays.

But Zac finally decided it was worth it to keep asking questions before deciding what to do about this man.

"Why would the Union want to attack us?" Zac finally asked.

"They are working with the invaders," Smaug said, looking relieved Zac held off on skewering him. "Not the Flame Golem one, but the others. They are trying to take all of Earth's natural resources for themselves. The invaders provide the Union with pills and other items that are hard to get down here, and the Union provides them with raw resources and slaves."

"Slaves?" Zac repeated with a frown, though it couldn't be seen through his mask.

"I have been investigating them for months. Some settlements that were said to be eradicated by the golems were

actually captured by the Union's people and sold to the invaders for forced labor," Smaug wheezed. "They don't want you here because they are afraid their profiteering will be cut short."

"You should know that if we fell, Super Brother-Man would just come here in person," Zac retorted.

"By that time, they would have been able to turn black to white, pinning all the blame on me." Smaug sighed.

"Still, it's quite the coincidence that they managed to kidnap your sister just when we arrived, and immediately had you attack us?" Zac said. "We haven't even been in the underworld for an hour."

"I don't know how, but they must have known her identity for some time. I had bodyguards around her, but more than half turned out to be the Union's men. They acted just five minutes after you left with Farid," he said.

Zac was about to continue the line of questions, but the sound of disturbed rubble from behind stopped him in his tracks. He turned around to see it was Joanna, who had come over, her spear at the ready. Zac quickly deactivated the array, making her almost launch an attack at him in shock.

"Get the others, but just our people," Zac said.

Joanna nodded. "No problem. The manager started running for his life the moment the fighting subsided."

"Wait, help me disarm this guy first," Zac said.

Joanna understood what he meant, and she quickly took off every piece of equipment on Smaug that might have been a treasure. Soon enough, a small mound of jewelry lay to the side of the man, and Joanna had even found a few talisman papers stuck to his inner thighs. He was truly a walking arsenal, decked head to toe with treasures. Even Calrin would likely have to admit defeat against that kind of collection.

A minute later, the whole Port Atwood party stood hidden within an array, and Zac recounted his exchange with Smaug, whose real name turned out to be Hassan. He was originally from Syria, but had lived in Europe the past years with his

sister. However, it looked like Hassan had completely discarded his old identity, and insisted on being called Smaug.

“What forces do the four incursions contain?” Mr. Trang asked.

“One looks like humans, though they have vertical pupils,” Smaug quickly said, still stressed, even though Zac no longer pointed a sword at him.

Verana’s snake had instead scuttled over to his shoulder and was seemingly napping with its head against his throat. But Smaug was obviously aware of the snake’s power, since he had turned extremely pale the moment the snake moved over to him. After that, he became even more cooperative, and it felt like he couldn’t spill all the secrets of the underworld quick enough.

“One has literal demons; it’s pretty crazy. Horns and everything. These two are the ones who have bought the most slaves. They keep mostly to themselves, relentlessly mining. The third has some odd walking fish or something; they look pretty scary. I don’t think the Union works with them; they attack everything,” Smaug explained. “The fourth is the Fire Golems, and they are the strongest. But there is actually a fifth incursion.”

“A fifth?” Zac asked with surprise. “The guard earlier said there was only four.”

“I only know about them because of a leak in the Union. They have never appeared, and they are even more holed up than the first two incursions. I have no idea what they are up to, but I guess they’re busy mining as well.” Smaug shrugged.

Zac didn’t care too much about there being a fifth incursion. The fact that they kept to themselves hopefully meant that they didn’t feel confident in their strength to expand, and instead opted to gather as many resources as possible from their area.

“Do the Underworld Council work with the invaders as well?” Joanna asked next.

“Not really, though they are indirectly benefitting from them. They buy things from the Union that they, in turn, have gotten from the invaders. And they almost exclusively fight with the Fishmen and the Fire Golems, so I’m pretty sure they know about the dealings with the other incursions,” Smaug explained. “It’s all pretty muddy down here, no clear black and white.”

Zac slowly nodded, not feeling the actions of the council were too big a deal. They had their hands full as it was, and if they could get resources from the one incursion to fight another, it was making the best of a bad situation. It wouldn’t be too late to turn their attention toward the demons and invading humans after the more dangerous invaders were dealt with.

He felt the actions of the Union to be far more troublesome. He had seen the treatment of slaves on the surface, and he knew that almost no force would treat them as well as Verana had. To profiteer from something like that in a time of crisis was beyond reprehensible.

He could have looked the other way if the Union just traded normally with the invaders, but since they’d decided to use their own people as currency, he knew he would have to act. If it was true that the Union sold people as slaves to the invaders, they didn’t need to continue existing.

When they had gotten all out of Smaug that they could, Zac suddenly flashed forward and knocked Smaug out cold, giving the rest some privacy.

“So what do you guys think?” he asked.

“That Union seems even shadier than the New World Government,” Joanna said with disgust. “If they have stooped so low as to set up a slave trade in half a year, I’m sure they’re doing all kinds of other evil stuff as well.”

“I think it’s a good target for a takeover,” Verana said, drawing skeptical glances from the others.

“Let’s not kid ourselves,” the Beast Master said with a roll of her eyes. “Getting our hand on the resources for our war

efforts is one of the main objectives of this expedition. If we kill the leaders of this merchant organization and put our own people there, we'll have a working infrastructure for everything from teleportation arrays to mines to personnel. We will even gain their intelligence, which is likely invaluable."

"Will their people even work for us?" Zac asked hesitantly.

"The rabbits in the forest do not care which wolf leads the pack. They just want to survive," Verana said with a shrug. "We can simply cleanse the arm of the organization that dealt in slavery if it bothers you, and claim the rest."

"I agree. You have so much to deal with as it is," Joanna said. "This will save a lot of time, allowing us to focus on what's important."

Mr. Trang nodded in agreement as well, essentially meaning the matter was decided since Zac felt it was the most convenient method as well. But there was still one issue remaining.

"Fine. We'll confirm what Smaug said about the slave trade. If what he says is true, we'll take control of the Union, taking out everyone at the top," Zac said before motioning at the unconscious man on the ground. "What do we do about this guy, though?"

"I say keep him," Joanna said. "He might seem like a helpless victim, but he must be hiding some secrets. He has been on the top of the Wealth Ladder all this time, even eclipsing people like Thea Marshall and Billy, who both have closed incursions. Besides, he attacked us, so he owes us restitution, but there is no way his real wealth is on his person."

"I think we should help the sister if possible," Mr. Trang added. "The child was captured because of our arrival, after all. She's innocent in all this."

"Fair enough," Zac agreed. "Wake him up."

Joanna took out a bottle of water and poured it over his face, making him wake up sputtering and disoriented.

“We will help save your sister,” Joanna said. “And we’ll also take care of the Union if what you’ve said is true. Of course, if it turns out that you’ve been lying, we’ll remove you and Dragonwing Enterprises from the underworld.”

“My words are as true as gold!” the man hurriedly said. “But the Union must know something is wrong by now. We’ve been here for a while; they must wonder what’s going on. I have an idea, but you must trust me.”

“Trust you?” Zac snorted, but the next moment, his eyes widened in alarm as Smaug produced another crystal from nowhere.

Zac’s mind blanked out for a second when he saw the pitch-black ball in Smaug’s hand. The first thing Joanna had looked for on his body was a Cosmos Sack, but there was nothing like that on him. They had assumed he simply left it behind before going into battle because he was afraid of losing his wealth. But they were obviously wrong, since he still was able to produce objects from nowhere.

If it were just another fire-spewing crystal, Zac wouldn’t be too worried, but he was actually quite familiar with the thing in Smaug’s hand. It was a **[Void Ball]**, identical to the one Zac had found during the hunt, and something he still kept on his person as an ace. If that thing went off in this close proximity, then even he would perish, since it would release an onslaught of spatial tears, destroying everything in the area.

Verana seemed to realize the danger as well, and energy blasted out from her as she started to activate some protective treasure. Zac was much more straightforward and aimed to kill Smaug before he could set the thing off. But before Zac’s swing could reach the man, the world lurched, making Zac lose his balance and fall to the ground.

He sprang right back up, but he froze when he realized that the surroundings had completely changed. Everyone was there, but they clearly were no longer in the ruins of the Dragonwing complex. Instead, they found themselves in some hidden chamber illuminated by a few Day Crystals.

Zac's eyes immediately snapped to Smaug, and he was relieved to see that the **[Void Ball]** was nowhere in sight. But he was still infuriated by that brush with death, and he immediately resumed his advance on him as killing intent started leaking.

“Wait! I needed to make the Union think you were dead, or at least unsure what happened! Otherwise, they might have harmed my sister!” Smaug hurriedly explained as he scrambled away from Zac. “So I activated the bomb and used a teleportation treasure to move us to my predesignated spot.”

“And you are aware that a **[Void Ball]** disrupts space, making teleportation an extremely dangerous venture even before it sets off?” Verana said with a voice that could turn water to ice. “We were lucky to not arrive here in a dozen pieces.”

“Uh...” was all that Smaug said in response, a sheepish smile spreading on his face as he shrank further back from the four murderous stares. “Well, there was no instruction manual when I got that thing. My bad, truly.

“The bomb should have destroyed everything in the area where we stood. Hopefully, the Union thinks I took most of you out before escaping. This place is my hidden compartment beneath the Underworld Nexus. I have a private teleportation array here,” Smaug continued, clearly wanting to change the subject.

A minute later, the group arrived at the hidden teleportation array, with Smaug sporting swollen lips, a crooked nose, and two black eyes, giving him the fabled panda look. Joanna and Mr. Trang immediately stepped through the teleporter after shooting a last glare at the man, leaving the trio of Zac, Verana, and Smaug behind.

Just moments later, battle-hardened warriors of three races started to stream through the teleporter, filling the spacious hall that the teleporter was placed in.

“What is going on?” Smaug stammered as his swollen eyes stared at the demons and the Tal-Eladar all emitting powerful auras. “Those are invaders!”

“They were invaders,” Zac corrected him. “Now they fight for Super Brother-Man.”

“Shit, that guy must be a real monster,” Smaug muttered with some awe in his voice. “If he can even make those bloodthirsty demons fight for him.”

“You have no idea.”

NEGOTIATIONS

As Zac oversaw his people streaming out through the teleporter, a thought suddenly struck him, and he motioned for Harvath to join him. The demon captain walked over, throwing a curious glance at Smaug and his wretched appearance.

“We’ve learned that there is a second demonkin incursion in the underworld,” Zac explained after covering them in a sound-isolating array. “Will it be a problem for you?”

Harvath thoughtfully furrowed his brows before he looked at Smaug.

“Does this one possess information about our cousins?” he asked, getting a nod from Zac.

Smaug himself gaped when he stood in front of the demon, making Zac realize the man had never stood face-to-face with one of the invaders before. It looked like he was hovering between fear of being eaten and fascination with the unknown.

“Do these demons look like us?” Harvath asked, pointing at his face.

“N-No, not really,” Smaug stammered. “Well, they have horns, but I am told that they look a lot bulkier and don’t have hair.”

“Big black horns?” Harvath probed. “And they are over two meters tall?”

“Yes!” Smaug hurriedly nodded. “And tails.”

“Abyssal Demons,” Harvath said with a grimace before turning to Zac. “Can we speak privately?”

Zac nodded and had Verana take over the task of keeping watch on Smaug. He still didn't understand how he could take out items when he was stripped of his possessions, and Zac didn't want him to take out something else and cause even more trouble.

“What's going on?” Zac asked when the two were alone.

Harvath hesitated a bit before speaking up.

“Do you know how demon society works?” he asked.

“Isn't it a feudal society? Your former clan controls a certain area, but you are part of a larger kingdom. That kingdom ultimately reports to the planet's leader, though they are largely independent,” Zac asked with some confusion.

“That's true for our planet, but our planet is just a backwater member of something larger,” Harvath said.

“The Azh'Kir'Khat Horde?” Zac ventured, remembering Verana mentioning the odd name.

“Exactly.” Harvath nodded. “I am not too sure about all the details since Clan Azh'Rezak was the lowest rung of what could be called a noble clan, and our information was somewhat limited. But the horde consists of hundreds of demonic species.”

Zac nodded, still not sure what he was getting at.

“The position of the races in the horde depends on their respective powerhouses at the top. The Abyssal Demons have a terrifying leader who controls one of the top ten clans, making them one of the most prominent demonic species in the horde. These Abyssal Demons are likely not part of that clan, but they still hold some sway back home. I fear that if we rout them, it may have dire implications for Clan Azh'Rezak,” Harvath said with some hesitation.

Zac nodded with a sigh. It was as Zac had feared. He hadn't expected to run into a second demonkin incursion on

Earth, and he knew it might cause trouble for the demons of Port Atwood, or rather their former clan.

Even if they'd left their clan behind, many still had people they cared for back home. Even Ogras had his grandfather. Everyone had friends or relatives who were still part of the clan, and while they chose to cut ties to forge their own path, they didn't want to bring trouble down on the head of Azh'Rezak.

"So what do you think we should do?" Zac finally asked.

"I cannot make this decision for our people," Harvath finally said. "I think we should call the young master."

Zac agreed with the demon's assessment. Exploring the Mystic Realm was important, but they had other pressing matters. It would be for the best to call Ogras over now that it turned out that there were four other incursions in the underworld that weren't fire-attuned.

"Fine, I'll have someone get Ogras," Zac agreed.

Zac had one of the Valkyries head over to the Mystic Realm to look for Ogras. Most people still didn't know that the realm was already being explored, though scattered rumors had started to spread about its existence. But he wanted to keep the details vague, so only the Valkyries and a few other core personnel were allowed close to the center of Mystic Island. It had turned into a restricted area just like his own zone in Port Atwood.

Since he knew it would take some time before Ogras arrived, he decided to deal with some other matters. First, he went over to Calrin, who seemed extremely impatient to get going.

"I hear we're taking over a rival business?" Calrin said with excitement in his eyes. "It's quite exhilarating, all that free money. It's a lot harder to do something like this when Mercantile Licenses are involved. We truly should consolidate all budding enterprises before people manage to get their hands on licenses."

Zac understood what Calrin meant. His own consortium was targeted by a mighty C-grade clan, but even they had been forced to use trickery and bribes to steadily whittle down the Thayer Consortium for an eventual takeover. Brute force was not an option when Mercantile Licenses were involved. You could kill everyone in the clan, but that would just end up with the license being revoked, along with the offender getting punished by the System.

“I’ll consider it,” Zac said with a smile. “Do you know if Cosmos Sacks can take different shapes than actual sacks?”

“High-grade spatial tools can look like rings or other jewelry, or anything for that matter,” Calrin said. “But it’s usually not worth the trouble unless you’re a magnate. Those kinds of spatial tools require actual insight into the Dao of Space to create, making them over a thousand times more expensive. Why do you ask?”

“That guy over there managed to take out an item from thin air. I am trying to figure out how,” Zac said as he glanced at Smaug.

“Oh,” Calrin said thoughtfully before a small dagger suddenly appeared in his hand from nowhere, without touching one of his Cosmos Sacks. “Like this?”

“Yes, exactly like that,” Zac said with surprise. “How did you do it?”

“He has a mercantile class or at least a hybrid class. We get actual skills that work like Cosmos Sacks, allowing us to hide and protect our wares as we travel. A Cosmos Sack can be stolen, but our personal space can’t.”

“Makes sense. He’s the second-place holder on the Wealth Ladder.” Zac nodded. “Is there any way to prevent it?”

“Sure, if you have energy shackles.” Calrin nodded. “If he can’t circulate his energy, he won’t be able to activate his skill.”

Zac’s eyes lit up, and he immediately produced the chain that he’d stowed away when he saved Thea from the Medhin Clan.

“Will this work?” Zac asked as he handed it over to Calrin.

Calrin nodded. “It’s not a high-quality restraint, but it should suffice against someone like him. I’ll handle it. I am a bit curious about him anyway.”

Zac nodded and let Calrin walk away with the chain. Soon enough, everyone had entered the underworld, but Zac chose to wait for Ogras to arrive before deciding on the next course of action. He instead erected an array and sat down to absorb a few Miasma Crystals to restore his energy reserves and rest.

He didn’t know how long he had rested when he sensed a person close by, and he saw the familiar form of Ogras when he opened his eyes. He temporarily deactivated the array and let the demon enter. Ogras looked annoyed for some reason, making Zac look at him curiously.

“Not making headway with the Mystic Realm? It’s only been a day,” Zac said.

“I can’t believe those Abyssal assholes got placed in the middle of a mountain of resources with no enemies in sight while I got stuck with you,” Ogras muttered, obviously having been apprised of the situation in the underworld. “The Ruthless Heavens is truly playing favorites. I say we take down that incursion first.”

“And that is your unbiased opinion?” Zac snorted.

“Not really, but it makes sense. The sooner we kick those people out of here, the sooner the demons will be able to act in the open. Most demons would be hesitant to show their faces with them lurking in the area.” Ogras shrugged.

“Agreed. We’ll keep the demons hidden while we deal with the Union,” Zac said.

“How will we split the profits?” Ogras asked.

This was something that Zac had thought about earlier. He was currently the de-facto owner of pretty much everything in Port Atwood, but that wasn’t a long-term solution. He didn’t plan on becoming a tyrant with people toiling under his hegemony.

“All matters related to the underworld will be considered a separate company from Port Atwood and the Thayer Consortium. Port Atwood will own half, and the Academy will own 10% to become self-sustaining,” Zac said. “You, Verana, and Calrin can figure out what to do with the rest.”

“Isn’t it a bit early to start giving those people a bunch of benefits?” Ogras said with a frown as he nodded at a clump of Tal-Eladar close by. “Furthermore, Calrin should be a trading partner rather than a shareholder.”

“As I thought, you are up to no good the moment you arrive,” a frosty voice said as Verana walked straight through the array.

“No manners, spying on a private conversation,” Ogras retorted with a straight face.

“Wait, where’s Smaug?” Zac said with a frown.

“I knocked him out when I saw this demon approach you with greed in his eyes and deceit in his heart,” Verana said. “I had no choice but to listen in to make sure he didn’t do anything stupid.”

“Be careful. I don’t want to turn the guy into a vegetable. I’ve already knocked him out once; it can’t be good for you for that to happen over and over,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “What’s your proposal?”

“Twenty percent to my clan, ten each to the demons and the merchant,” Verana said.

“Negotiation comes from a place of power. You’re barely bringing anything to the table and want twenty percent?” Ogras snorted.

“Do you?” Verana retorted. “Your people won’t fight against the demons. My people are arguing about who gets to be the vanguard.”

“But the beasts of your soldiers will be limited in the underworld. Besides, this isn’t just about how much effort each party exerts in the underworld. The citizens of Port Atwood have slaved away for months with hundreds dying.

The resources of this place will be used to repay those who have bled for our force,” Ogras retorted.

Zac sighed as he listened to the two bicker, and things only got more chaotic when the Sky Gnome joined in. In the end, the demons went victorious from the battle, largely thanks to Zac’s support. They would get 25% of the shares, with Verana getting 10% and Calrin 5%.

Calrin wasn’t happy, but he would still make a lot of money from the underworld since he would become the sole trading partner for the Underworld Venture, while also setting up a network of Thayer Consortium shops through the underworld to rid all the wealthy cultivators of their crystals and coins.

Verana was less than enthused with the results as well, but what Ogras said was true. The demons had risked their lives for Port Atwood over and over without any payment apart from getting to pick a skill. They were long overdue to reap some benefits for their work.

“So what’s the plan? Are we heading straight to this Union?” Verana asked.

“Get Smaug first,” Zac said.

Soon the merchant was dragged over, and he sat down opposite Zac after throwing Verana a sullen look.

“Isn’t it a bunch of merchants without a license to protect them?” Ogras said after throwing Smaug a dismissive glance. “Just kick down the front door and kill everyone who disagrees with the change in management.”

“No! They might kill my sister if you storm their headquarters like that!” Smaug shouted with worry. “Their arrays will be able to hinder you for a minute or two; who knows what they will do in the meantime?”

“Fine. I’ll save the girl first, then Mr. Black and snake girl will kick in the front door,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

“Snake girl?” Verana said with a frosty tone. “Just keep it up.”

“We need proof what you’ve said is true,” Joanna cut in before the two leaders started bickering again. “Do you know where they keep the slaves, and where your sister is kept?”

“Yes to both!” Smaug nodded enthusiastically. “I have created a private network. I can bring us within an hour’s travel from one of their transit camps where they keep slaves before they are sold off. My sister is likely kept at their headquarters.”

“Fine, we’ll take a look at the camp before taking down their headquarters. This group is enough for that; no need to bring the soldiers. They’ll be sent to stabilize the various mines and subsidiaries after we’ve made our move,” Zac said. “Agreed?”

The others nodded in agreement, with Ogras and Verana adding a few suggestions. Zac closed down the array, and the group immediately walked toward the teleportation array. Suddenly, their group grew with three people as Emily and two helpless Valkyries joined in. He looked down at the teenager for a second, and only got a stubborn look in return. He sighed and nodded slightly, drawing a wide grin from the girl.

Less than an hour later, the group stood in a cave mouth, overlooking a large encampment twenty meters below them. An illusion array had already been installed by the exit, obscuring it from the people walking along the streets in the transit camp.

“Animals,” Joanna growled as she looked at the scene with wide eyes.

Zac slightly nodded in agreement, anger burning in his heart as he listened to the cries from the shackled people below.

“We proceed. The Union will cease to exist today.”

TRANSIT CAMP

The scene below was even worse than Zac had feared when he first heard Smaug mention the slave trade. There were long rows of people kept in place by fetters, placed like cattle in small enclosures. All four races could be spotted amongst the slaves, though humans were by far the most common.

Groups of slavers patrolled the area, and there were robust fortifications at all the exits to prevent any slaves from escaping from the cave. There was also a pile of corpses lying in plain view in the encampment, just a few meters from the pens where the slaves were kept. Perhaps they were left there as a deterrent, or perhaps they simply hadn't had time to throw the corpses out to the beasts in the open underworld.

The underworld was quite different from how Zac had imagined it, and it was only after traveling for the last hour that he realized the underworld wasn't an intricate network of tunnels and caverns. Most of the underworld was actually an open expanse.

The prevalent belief amongst those who were teleported here was that the underworld was between two layers of tectonic plates or just between two rock sediments. It created a continuous subterranean landscape that sometimes had a ceiling height of thousands of meters, and sometimes it was so narrow that one had to crouch to move forward.

There were even forests and arable farmland, though the things that could be grown were generally different types of edible moss or mushrooms. Rivers ran across the hilly grounds, and it if weren't for the utter lack of sunlight, one

might have forgotten they were thousands of meters underground. Instead, everything was illuminated by luminescent plants, creating a mesmerizing display of colorful spots that lit up the boundless darkness.

Most towns were constructed in caves like the one they were spectating through, as the open world was quite dangerous for most people. Enormous packs of mutated bats roved in the sky, and all kinds of subterranean beasts walked the ground.

Even the insects had mutated and turned into monstrous creatures in the underworld, perhaps due to the massive number of Nexus Crystals boosting the energy in the atmosphere. Getting caught in ten-meter-tall spiderwebs or skewered by a scorpion pincer were both real risks in the underworld.

The extremely solid rock walls of the caverns made for a natural defense against the horrors of the underworld, and people only had to fortify the cave exits to create a safe space. Top-tier caves were the ones that possessed a natural ecosystem to sustain them, like the cave the Underworld Nexus was built inside, with its own lake.

It was this reliance on caves that the Flame Golems exploited with their ruthless tactics. They simply blocked up the few exits in the town before flooding it with lava. A few of the citizens had time to rush to a teleportation array, but most towns didn't possess one and could only helplessly wait to get swallowed.

The tunnel they stood in was something that Smaug himself had created to spy on the slaving activities of the Union. It ran for hundreds of meters from a hidden spot in the open underworld, with both sides hidden by arrays. The walls of the tunnel looked oddly melted, and Zac guessed that Smaug had used some treasure to somehow melt the extremely hard stones.

Being reminded that the mysterious fellow might be useful during the fight, Zac released the energy restraints that

shackled Smaug. Of course only after giving him a stern warning not to mess around.

But any interest in finding out Smaug's hidden means was long pushed to the back of Zac's head as he looked down at the misery beneath them. He was just about to jump down and start a rampage when the energy in the camp started to fluctuate.

"The teleportation array just activated," Ogras commented as he looked down with curiosity.

This transit camp was located close to the human incursion since the invaders they traded with weren't able to use teleportation arrays. This also meant that whoever was arriving was not an invader, but rather someone from the Union. The fluctuations soon ended, and a small group of people emerged from a building not too far away.

"Here, use this," Smaug suddenly said, producing yet another ball from nowhere.

"A temporal destabilizer?" Ogras said with surprise. "Where did you get your hands on this?"

"A what?" Zac asked with confusion as he looked down on the thing in Smaug's hand.

"The teleporters transport people through subspace or whatever the fantasy equivalent is," Smaug said. "If you crush this ball within fifty meters of the teleporter, subspace will be made unstable, and safeguards in the array will make it impossible to activate for ten minutes."

Zac shot a glance at Ogras, who nodded in confirmation.

"Can you get your hands on more of these?" Zac asked.

It was an extremely convenient item that could change the course of a battle. It would make sure that his target wasn't able to escape, or that his activities wouldn't leak.

"This is my last one. I got it as a reward for a quest," Smaug said with a shake of his head.

Zac looked into Smaug's eyes for a few seconds, but he couldn't tell if the man was lying or not. In any case, there

would be time to find out more after the situation in the underworld was stabilized. So he grabbed the ball with a nod, and Zac leaped straight out from their hiding spot immediately after, with Emily throwing a fiery axe into his back.

Zac soared straight toward the large stone building the group of people emerged from. It was likely the place that housed the teleportation array, as it was guarded by a squad of soldiers armed to the teeth. With Zac's power, he had no problem jumping all the way to the structure, and he ripped through the air toward the soldiers like a falling star.

"Attack!" one of the guards shouted with panic in his eyes as he spotted Zac in the air, but the next moment, he was crushed by the massive weight of Zac's shield as it slammed straight into him.

Zac's landing killed three of the guards and threw the others in the air from the kinetic energy in his landing. He immediately crushed the orb in his hand before taking out his sword. **[Hunger]** keened as it turned into a gray streak, dismembering the remaining seven guards in a flash.

With his attributes, it didn't matter that he barely possessed any offensive skills in his current class. Against random warriors on Earth, he was essentially an unkillable monster. The commotion alerted the soldiers stationed in the camp, and they streamed toward his location. There were actually over a hundred of them, most having stayed out of sight.

Zac didn't mind that as he instead turned his attention toward the group who had just arrived. It was two middle-aged men dressed in some sort of defensive gear, but it was clear they were not warriors. They had no weapons, and they did not emit any dangerous aura, making Zac believe they were businessmen from the Union.

This belief was only strengthened by the four bodyguards who accompanied the two. The moment Zac had arrived, they created a protective barrier in front of the merchants, and they didn't care in the slightest that Zac dismembered their presumptive allies. They were only interested in protecting the two VIPs.

“Yet another idealistic fool trying to rescue these wretched people?” one of the merchants sneered.

Zac didn't answer, instead unleashing both his aura and **[Fields of Despair]**. The insidious energies from the splinter in his mind were already magnifying the rage in his heart, and it somehow entered his aura as well. It made his killing intent almost palpable, and a few soldiers actually started to bleed from their noses or ears when they were buffeted by his aura.

The soldiers were obviously not part of some elite force, and the hastily erected line the warriors just formed immediately collapsed, with over half heedlessly fleeing from the towering killing intent that radiated from Zac. The four bodyguards were better off, but they still slowly backed away, likely looking for an opportunity to escape as well.

“Activate the array!” one of the merchants screamed in fright, the arrogant demeanor replaced with abject horror.

An immense weight immediately descended upon Zac, but how could some random restrictive array stop his onslaught? He had ripped through even stronger arrays when he was looting summit palaces during the hunt, and since then, he had only grown even more monstrous.

He took a step forward with a grunt, and a loud snapping sound could be heard as a shockwave was released from his body. The sound came from the array collapsing from brute force, and the sight was so shocking that one of the merchants fell to his knees in despair.

“Wait!” the still standing merchant screamed when Zac started to approach them. “We can pay you! One hundred million Nexus Coins! Just let us leave with our lives!”

Zac was completely indifferent to the pleas, and he steadily took step after step toward the group. The stationed soldiers of the town had given up any idea of sticking their noses into the battle, and one after another, they started to flee toward the various exits.

But long before anyone managed to escape through one of the tunnels, they fell over with large holes in their bodies,

caused by some unseen attacks. Zac noted the shadowy spears that appeared and quickly disappeared, and he realized that Ogras and the others were containing everyone.

He didn't care that Ogras killed these soldiers at all since they had been complicit in the horrors of this place. If he had been in his human form, he would have already mowed down that rabble with a few fractal edges. But he was currently out of ranged attacks since his shield's spike attack still hadn't recharged.

"Two hundred million! And precious cultivation pills!" the merchant screamed when Zac ignored him.

"You forfeited your lives the moment you betrayed humanity," Zac said in a hollow voice. "I do not need your blood money."

The four guards disappeared the moment Zac finished his sentence, but they immediately appeared all around him. Their weapons were already sailing toward his body the moment they reappeared, and it looked like they were trying a surprise attack as a last-ditch effort.

The four guards were likely around level 40 to 45 from their auras, just a handful of levels shy from entering the ladder. But Zac also sensed that their auras were, for lack of a better word, hollow. He hadn't sensed anything like it before, but he had learned from Alyn that it likely meant their levels were mostly propped up by pills and crystals rather than battle.

All four of them were sword wielders, and it even looked like they possessed the same skill. The swords lit up in blue flames as they sailed toward Zac's body from four different directions, but Zac opted not to even respond to the attacks, instead only activating the Dao of Hardness across his body.

Four specters appeared and launched attacks the moment the swords landed on his body. It was **[Deathwish]** that activated, starting the dance of death. Zac could easily have intercepted the attacks with his sword, but he wanted to see the effect of his skill against cultivators since he hadn't sensed any real danger from the attacks.

The results were surprisingly different, even though each attack was the same. One of the guards was taken completely by surprise and didn't even react when a spectral sword slit his throat open. He fell down on the ground, and Zac knew the man would bleed out in less than a minute unless he got immediate medical attention.

The second guard managed to react in time and angled his body as he was being attacked, changing the trajectory of the blade as it entered his body. Instead of getting his heart pierced, he only got a lung punctured. It was still a pretty bad wound, but not lethal with the existence of healing pills.

A golden shield appeared around the last two warriors, completely blocking the reflected attack. The shield came from a bracer they both wore. They originally had four crystals inlaid, but one of them cracked when the shield blocked the attack.

Pleased with the result of **[Deathwish]**, Zac killed the man on the ground with a stomp as he decapitated the wounded guard with a swing of **[Hunger]**. His own wounds were negligible, and he only needed to pat his robe a few times to snuff out the flames. A small amount of black ichor ran down his throat from one of the swords hitting his neck, but the swing had barely managed to break his skin.

The remaining two guards looked at Zac with despair, knowing that they never would be able to kill Zac even if he didn't put up any resistance. Zac's body was already far sturdier than that of the Corpselord he'd fought during the beast waves, and only the strongest warriors on Earth would be able to wound him by now.

The two immediately started to run away; they were soon rebuffed by two lightning-quick stabs from a long spear. It was Joanna who had joined the battle, and Nenotheop's spear was a blur in her hands as she unleashed a barrage of attacks at the two guards.

Zac stopped in his tracks when he saw the Valkyrie take over, and he looked with interest at how deftly she handled her weapon. The two bodyguards assaulted her like rabid dogs

since she was standing in the way of their escape, and flames danced around them as they tried everything to cut her down. However, she was like an impenetrable spear wall, not budging an inch.

The remaining defensive charges on the guards' bracers were expended in less than twenty seconds, and a few seconds later, the last guard fell, his throat torn open by a quick stab from Joanna. The Valkyrie's skills weren't flashy, but they were direct and lethal, without any frills or unnecessary motion. Every move she performed was to kill or maim with as little energy expenditure as possible.

When the last of the elite guards fell, a suffocated silence spread through the camp, with no one daring to speak up. There was a small group of soldiers who stood rooted to the spot, neither daring to retreat or advance, and the merchants looked like their souls had left their bodies, blankly staring at their downed bodyguards. Even the slaves were completely silent, peeking at the proceedings with sunken eyes.

But suddenly, the silence was broken by a shocked scream from Emily.

“Millie!”

TRUTHS AND LIES

Zac, who was about to head over to interrogate the two terrified merchants, stopped in his tracks when he heard Emily's cry. He turned over with confusion to see the teenager clawing at the manacles binding a malnourished teenager.

"Don't let those two move," Zac said to Joanna, who nodded in confirmation.

He walked over to Emily, and with a tug, ripped the chains apart, freeing the young woman.

"What's going on?" he asked as he turned to Emily.

"This is Millie, Camilla. She went to the same school as me. She's from Allentown!" she said with some panic in her eyes.

Zac understood the thoughts running through her head. If one of her schoolmates had found herself captured by the Union, then it wasn't a great sign for the well-being of her siblings. They might even be in the large pile of corpses.

"Calm down. We'll get to the bottom of things," Zac said as he took out a healing pill.

Millie wasn't truly wounded, but she was clearly malnourished, and it looked like she had been whipped, judging by the tears in her tunic's back. But mostly, she seemed to have shut down from trauma. She looked at Zac with a blank stare and only took the pill when he directly put it in her hands.

“This is a healing pill,” Zac said before taking a step back, aware of the immense pressure he had just released across the whole town.

“Millie, it’s me, Emily Larkin from Southfield High,” she said as she handed Millie a canteen. “Hurry and take the pill to regain your strength.”

The mention of the school seemed to wake the girl from her stupor, and she rapidly blinked at Emily.

“Emily? From class B? I never saw you in the Tutorial. What’s going on?” the girl asked, making some of the close-by slaves surreptitiously look over.

“I was too young to enter the Tutorial. We come from the surface,” Emily explained after receiving a nod from Zac. “We work for Super Brother-Man, and we have come to close the incursions in the underworld. But when we arrived, we heard about the Union capturing people and selling them to the invaders, so we came here first to free you.”

The words were like a match igniting a fire, and a wave of clamors for help rose from the captives. The situation felt a bit annoying, but when Zac looked around, he couldn’t find the demon or Verana anywhere. Both were keeping a low profile so as not to spread any rumors about invaders before their position was completely solidified.

“What about the other cultivators of Allentown? Where are they?” Emily pressed on. “Do you know where my siblings are? Oscar and Johanna.”

“The town we were dropped off in was destroyed by the Flame Golems four months ago,” Millie said with a sigh. “But most of us managed to flee since it had so many exits. Some of us settled in various towns; others joined the Union or the council. I think your sister joined the council to fight the invaders.”

“And my brother? Do you know what happened to Oscar, Oscar Larkin?” Emily hurriedly asked.

“He... died...” Millie said, looking down at the ground. “He joined the town guard after the Tutorial ended. The Flame

Golems killed all the guards to cause chaos and slow our response.”

Emily slumped down on the ground when she heard the news, a blank stare on her face. Zac sighed with a pang of sadness in his heart. He knew that had been the most likely outcome from the start with how few were still alive after the integration.

“Let’s find your sister. She’ll know what happened for sure,” Zac said as he crouched down next to Emily.

The teenager quickly perked up, desperately grasping on to his words.

“You’re right! Millie, you never saw Oscar die, right?” she said, getting a hesitant nod in response. “He might have survived!”

Zac personally wasn’t so sure, especially considering the actions of her sister. Joining the council to fight the invaders sounded like something a person looking for revenge would do. But he didn’t say anything, not wanting to dash her hopes. After giving the teenager a comforting pat, he walked over to Joanna, who still kept guard over the terrified merchants.

Emily’s words had been heard by quite a few people in the camp, and the clamors from the slaves were getting louder and louder. Conversely, the guards had turned even more subdued, looking like they wished they could simply sink into the ground.

“Can you handle this?” Zac asked with a wave toward the ruckus when he came back.

“Sure, but could you silence them first?” Joanna said.

Zac nodded, and another burst of his aura erupted through the camp, immediately cutting all conversations short. Joanna winked at him before jumping up on a rooftop, making her visible to all the captured slaves.

“I am Joanna Thompson, ranked at the ninety-sixth spot of the Power Ladder,” she said, her voice echoing across the camp. “As some of you heard, we come from the surface. Zachary Atwood, also known as Super Brother-Man, is

currently busy closing the incursions on the surface, leading humanity in the battle against the invaders. But after hearing of the plight of the underworld, he spared no expense to find a way to reach this place. We have come to liberate you all and rebuff the underworld invaders.”

Another wave of exclamations immediately erupted in the crowd. Some were jubilant while others were confused. There were also a decent number of people who suspiciously looked at the proceedings, perhaps not trusting such a fantastical tale.

“You might be skeptical, but let me show you something,” Joanna said, and the next moment, a System screen appeared in front of her.

It was the quest that she and the other Valkyries received after closing three incursions, where they were supposed to assist in closing as many incursions as possible within a month. It already showed the progress of four, meaning that the golem incursion she’d assisted in closing before she received the quest was counted as well.

“As you can see, I have personally assisted the forces of Port Atwood in closing four incursions, just one shy of the total number of incursions in the underworld. Super Brother-Man has closed even more, sometimes only relying on his own power,” she explained. “I only show you this to prove the truth of my words.

“However, when we finally arrived at the underworld, we quickly learned of the despicable acts of the Union, enslaving our people and siding with our enemies. Super Brother-Man wouldn’t stand for such a thing, so from today forth, the Union will cease to exist,” Joanna said, looking like a heroic general with the spear in her hand.

“So please be patient. We will help everyone here, but it will take some time,” she finished.

Zac felt a bit embarrassed by the grandiose speech, and he didn’t really know what to say when the Valkyrie jumped back down on the ground.

“Lord Atwood works so hard, but never claims any credit,” Joanna said as she pointedly looked at Zac. “Someone needed to speak up for him.”

He coughed and nodded in thanks before turning to the merchants.

“You – the Union are no traitors! We have worked hard to protect the people in the underworld!” one of the men said, but his eyes were skittering, and the fear was clear on his face.

Zac didn’t bother responding, only taking a pointed glance at the rows upon rows of captured slaves.

“We are facing an extinction event,” the merchant said. “If we didn’t provide people to the incursions, they would start raiding our settlements, resulting in a far larger loss of life. Besides, these people are convicted criminals!”

“Lies!” one of the slaves roared in anger. “We were only too poor to pay the protection fees of the Union.”

After calling over Smaug and questioning both the merchants and a few of the slaves, Zac finally got a full understanding of the situation. In the beginning, the Union truly only sold murderers, rapists, and other heinous criminals to the incursions. It was a simple solution to get rid of dangerous people while also appeasing a very strong enemy.

But the incursion’s demands for slaves were insatiable, and the Union ran out of criminals soon enough. So eventually, they started to capture anyone who didn’t provide any benefits to them or was unable to pay the fees to live within their cities, convicting them with fabricated charges.

When that wasn’t enough, they started to target whole settlements that wanted to relocate to the Union for safety. The slaves in the transit camp, including Emily’s schoolmate, were almost all of the latter type, with a few enemies of the Union thrown in.

Both of the merchants were just middle-management sent to inspect the latest batch of slaves before delivery, and they knew nothing of the inner workings of the Union or the

situation of Smaug's sister. They were also only level 35, their strength completely propped up by crystals.

Zac knew just how many crystals were needed to reach such a high level. The Nexus Crystals were a good boost for recovery, but they were only really useful for leveling right at the beginning of a stage. Even the E-grade crystals he got his hands on were only enough for a scant few levels, and Zac had already confirmed that E-grade crystals were still quite rare in the underworld as well. They were not something that these two people could get their hands on.

Soon enough, there was nothing else the two merchants could divulge, and Zac ended their lives with two quick swipes of his sword before turning to Smaug. The merchants had already been doomed the moment they started to dabble in slavery, and the kills didn't even register in Zac's mind.

"How do we get to New London?" Zac asked Smaug, who looked down at the two lifeless bodies with some shock.

"I own another hidden outpost an hour's travel away," Smaug quickly explained after he roused himself. "We should hurry. They have likely already realized that this place has been conquered. Hopefully, they'll assume the invaders got tired of paying for the slaves and raided the place."

"Couldn't you have placed your teleporters closer?" Zac muttered with some complaint.

"It's not possible, don't you know? If I placed it any closer, a quest would start where only one town could remain within a month," Smaug said with a shake of his head. "Towns of competing factions can't be too close."

"Oh, there's such a thing?" Zac said with some surprise.

"It's true, and the distance only increases as the rank of the town is upgraded," Verana said as she walked over. "Lower-ranked towns can be pretty close, but capitals require vast distances between each other, limiting the number of kingdoms on a planet."

Zac nodded in understanding before dragging Smaug over to the building with the teleporter. The spatial disruption had

already dissipated, which allowed Zac to bring a squad of soldiers over to handle the situation in the camp. Of course, the demons still stayed behind so as not to expose their identities.

The slaves would be transported to the Underworld Nexus for now, since staying at the transit camp wasn't an option. The camp was placed extremely close to the incursion, and the invaders could come knocking at any moment. Zac felt there was no need to expend resources to defend it either, since it held no strategic value.

The group of Ogras, Verana, Joanna, Smaug, and Emily once again joined Zac and left through the teleporter after the soldiers had taken charge of the slaves, quickly freeing them and sending them away. And thanks to Smaug, they managed to quickly and effortlessly infiltrate New London. Smaug clearly had all kinds of contacts and confidants, as they entered the large city through a hidden passageway that led into the cellar of a bar. When the owner noticed the group walking up the stairs, he pretended to see nothing and simply went about his day.

Soon the group stood in an alley some distance from the sprawling headquarters of the Union. It was actually the Admiralty House of London that had been randomized to the underworld along with a large section of downtown London.

New London was the central hub of the Union, and it was one of the few large settlements that were placed in the open underworld rather than in a town cave. This had benefited the Union quite a bit when the Flame Golems went on the offensive, flooding one cave after another. Hundreds of thousands of settlers had wanted to relocate to New London, braving the underworld beasts rather than the Fire Golems.

The large conglomerate had claimed a large number of former government buildings and turned them into their own. The old world government itself had quickly fallen with the return of the cultivators, and after a couple of tumultuous weeks, the Union became the premier force in the town. And with the help of the resources they got from the slave trade, their grasp on the town was rock solid.

“I’ll go fetch the girl,” Ogras said without any preamble, holding a picture of a young girl in his hand.

“Are you sure you can do this?” Smaug said with worry as he took out a handful of things from his hidden space. “I have a few items—”

Ogras immediately snatched all of the treasures, though Zac suspected that the demon wouldn’t need help to infiltrate some old-world structure with no real powerhouses standing guard. And just as Zac suspected, the demon was back just twenty minutes later, with a squirming sack over his shoulder. Smaug immediately ran over to release his sister, but Ogras suddenly summoned his black spear and used it to keep the man at bay.

“We need to have a little chat. This brat has been a captive for weeks, not a few hours as you said.”

NEW MANAGEMENT

“We’ve been used as a tool from the start,” Ogras snorted as he glared at Smaug, some killing intent leaking from his body. “I knew something was off about this brat.”

Zac glared at the young man as well, quickly putting two and two together. Smaug had mixed truths and lies in order to push Zac and his group into a collision course with the Union. The fact that the conglomerate sold people as slaves to the invaders had already been proven, but whether they’d ever pressured Smaug to attack his party was another matter entirely.

“Why?” was all that Zac said with a cold voice, somewhat regretting they had removed his shackles so that he would be able to keep up with them as they traveled.

“My sister is innocent in this. I saw an opportunity. I couldn’t be sure how you would act in the underworld, so I needed to create a conflict with these assholes. But they deserve to be run to the ground,” Smaug said, some ruthlessness flashing in his eyes before his face returned to that of a hapless youngster.

“You asshole!” a muffled voice came from within the sack. “You’ve been tricking people again? You’ve already got me kidnapped; now you’re going to get me killed.”

Ogras glanced at the sack with some humor before putting the girl down on the ground and untying her cover. A beautiful girl in her teens emerged, and her energetic emerald eyes were an obvious sign she was related to Smaug. She had long black

hair with a thin braid running down her side, and she wore a hipster ensemble from the old world. A glance with **[Inquisitive Eye]** showed that her name was Rima and that she was level 25.

She was a completely different sight from the dirty and bedraggled slaves they had just emancipated, and it looked like she hadn't suffered any injustice in captivity. She glared at Smaug for a second before pushing closer to a bemused Ogras.

"I'm sorry about my useless brother, Mr. Knight. He's an idiot and a liar, but he's a good guy," she said, looking up at the demon with adoring eyes.

"Mr. Knight?" the demon echoed with confusion.

"Well, you're my handsome knight in shining armor. You broke into the stronghold of the bad guys and saved me," she explained, showing no inclination to walk over to her brother.

"Sorry, girl, you're a bit young for my taste," Ogras said with a snort but, after a brief pause, looked her up and down once more. "Come back in five years."

"Animal," Joanna and Verana echoed in unison, but the demon was completely unaffected by their ire.

"Rima, don't be like that," Smaug entreated, looking a bit embarrassed. "I did what I had to do to keep us safe."

"Stop using me to justify your shady business practices," Rima said with a roll of her eyes. "Do you know how it feels to be mentioned as the reason for you turning into a drug lord?"

"You're a drug dealer?" Zac said with a frown. "Is that why you're so rich?"

"I worked in, uh, pain management before the integration," Smaug said with a cough. "I haven't dabbled in that since the world turned crazy though, even though there is a massive demand from people who want to escape reality."

"Mr. Mask, is it true you work for Super Brother-Man?" Rima said, looking at Zac with interest. "I heard from Mr. Knight."

“I’m Mr. Black,” Zac said. “And yes.”

“Mr. Black? How is that any better?” Rima muttered before perking up again. “Is Super Brother-Man handsome? How old is he? Is he single?”

“Already abandoning me, girl?” Ogras grunted, though he clearly was just messing around.

“Enough,” Zac said and knocked the girl unconscious with a burst of his aura before taking out [**Hunger**]. “You attacked us using arrays that would kill most people. I was already considering what punishment you deserved when I thought you acted under duress. Why shouldn’t I kill you right now?”

“I am useful!” Smaug hurriedly said, some fear appearing on his face. “I can provide all sorts of information on the underworld. I possess riches and know where to find more.”

“We can get information from the Union and the council, and we already possess more wealth than you.” Ogras laughed. “Try again.”

“I... I’ll work for Super Brother-Man as well!” Smaug said. “You should understand I’m good with money from my ladder ranking.”

“People willing to work for Super Brother-Man would be able to fill a country. Why should we risk letting a shady person like you close to our business interests?” Joanna asked.

“I’ll sign a contract of servitude! I’ll make you money to the best of my abilities for fifty years!” he said, finally starting to panic.

“Sounds annoying to have you around. Who knows what hidden troubles you would cause.” Zac shrugged, lifting his sword as if he wanted to decapitate him just like the two merchants.

“Wait! I have an incomplete license with a limited product line!” Smaug screamed as he backed away.

“Five hundred years,” Zac said, the sword frozen mid-swing.

“Wh—” Smaug was about to exclaim, but forcibly stopped himself. “Five hundred, happy to be on board.”

“Good. Joanna will be your handler,” Zac said. “She is under a contract of servitude as well, so signing with her will be like signing with Super Brother-Man.”

Smaug sighed, and soon enough, he had entered a five-hundred-year contract with Joanna. Smaug clearly had a complicated relationship with the truth, and Zac didn’t want the man to know of his real identity. Having Joanna sign the contract still counted toward his contract limit, and with all the Valkyries, he only had four spots remaining.

Luckily, the contracts to keep silent about his identity were simple agreements between two parties, and those one could enter as many as one pleased. However, since it was a contract of reciprocity, he needed to give something in return, which in his case was a monthly stipend for as long as the contract was active.

Zac looked at Smaug’s forlorn figure with some humor, knowing things were not really as they seemed. It might have appeared as though the man was forced to sign the contract, but that was simply impossible.

Unless the man wanted to form a contract and work for him, the contract wouldn’t even materialize, proving that it was all a ploy. Zac guessed that the only thing that Smaug hadn’t planned was to share the fact that he had an incomplete license.

In the end, he got his hand on a helper that he sorely needed. He had wanted to find someone to manage his business interests while he focused on cultivation. As time passed, his ventures only got more numerous, and someone needed to take charge. Zac himself didn’t know exactly what he owned any longer, as his empire kept expanding through conquest and development.

“What’s an incomplete license?” Zac asked when the contract was signed.

“I have a mercantile class, as you already know.” Smaug shrugged, his sad demeanor already gone. “I got a quest to rise as high as possible on the Wealth Ladder, and the license was the reward. I think I would have gotten a real license if it weren’t for your boss keeping the first spot for himself. Uh, our boss.”

“What’s the difference?” Zac asked, and even Ogras perked up in interest.

Calrin had been pretty fleeting in his explanations about the Mercantile System since the start, likely wanting to keep details vague so that others wouldn’t know when he was scamming them. Ogras had no idea either, only knowing it enabled intergalactic trade as long as you fulfilled certain criteria.

“The Mercantile System is like a hidden website where you need to unlock every ware one by one. A Mercantile License is your login to the main website, but it is only the start, from what I understand. You still need to perform various tasks to upgrade the license to give access to better wares and rates. My license is limited, meaning that it only lasts for one hundred years, and I can only buy wares from a corporation called [**Stumpbugle Bombs**],” Smaug explained.

“That’s some name.” Ogras whistled.

“It’s a goblin company, and they make weird arrays, like the ones I... presented to you earlier.” Smaug coughed. “They only sell consumable weapons, from simple arrays to weapons of mass destruction. I can’t access those, though.”

“We’ll find some work for you. Remember, if we find you’re working against the interest of Port Atwood...” Zac said, lifting [**Hunger**] again.

“I know, I know,” Smaug said with a disarming smile.

Zac would look further into what Smaug could bring to the table at a later date, but for now, he wanted to focus on the Union. He saw no reason to change his plan just because Smaug had been lying. The Union still needed to be stopped.

Ogras had already done some preliminary reconnaissance while scouring the Union headquarters for Rima, and as luck would have it, the top brass of the Union was holding an emergency meeting in response to suddenly losing the transit camp.

Since the hostage had been saved, Zac felt there to be no need for any subversion as he walked toward the main gate of the newly erected wall that ran around the headquarters. It was guarded by over twenty cultivators, and the Union had even gotten their hands on some nasty-looking turrets placed upon the wall walk.

“Halt! This is a restricted area,” a guard shouted as the large mounted weapons turned toward Zac.

“Super Brother-Man has judged the Union to be working with the foreign invaders. Stand down, and you will not be hurt. We are only interested in the leaders,” Zac said as his aura billowed out.

The guards were shocked by the unexpected turn and looked at Zac like he was a primordial beast. It was no surprise since the strongest warriors of Earth could barely release an aura by now, whereas Zac’s aura was heavy enough to almost feel like solid matter. Worse yet, it was rife with killing intent he had accumulated through his constant battles.

A few of the cultivators immediately ran away, not giving their companions a second look. But a few stood still with indecision on their faces. Seeing the guards not stand down, Zac rolled his eyes and took out two metal balls from his Cosmos Sack and threw them at the two turrets in quick succession. The balls ripped through the air, and the weapons instantly turned to scrap metal.

The display of might was all that was needed to sway the last few guards who remained, and Zac was able to push open the gate without having to kill anyone. But a shimmering wall suddenly stopped him in his tracks, and Zac frowned when he realized someone had activated a defensive array.

Zac quickly realized it was just a standard array bought from the Town Shop, and his right arm started swelling from

infusing it with **[Unholy Strike]**. He didn't even deign to push the skill to its limit before he punched with enough force to make the air distort around his fist.

The barrier shuddered, and large cracks started to spread, but the barrier held fast. However, Zac only snorted and punched again, making the shield completely crumble this time. Ogras, now completely shrouded in shadows, and the others walked through as if this were the most normal thing in the world, leaving a shocked Smaug behind.

“Monster,” Smaug muttered from behind as he carried his unconscious sister.

The group ripped through the building without any resistance. Any time a guard or an employee saw their approach, they needlessly ran away, no one even pretending to muster any resistance. It proved how fragile a force like the Union was in the face of true power. There were many weaker forces around, but many would put up a far fiercer resistance against invaders.

Zac followed Ogras' directions, but it was barely needed, as he could sense a clump of weak auras gathered together at the same spot. With their superhuman speeds, it took them less than twenty seconds before they barged into a large hall, where almost forty people were seated.

These were the leaders of the Union, and behind them stood just as many warriors with somewhat impressive auras. But both hesitation and unwillingness to act was clear on their faces as Zac, Verana, and Ogras all released their auras. It submerged the whole building in oppressive might, and most immediately threw their weapons on the ground in hopes of being spared.

A few tried to unleash desperate attacks on Zac's group, perhaps knowing their sins were too heavy to be spared if they were captured. But they were quickly and ruthlessly dealt with, leaving a dozen corpses on the ground.

Some of the seated leaders tried to flee in the commotion, but between Ogras' shadow spears and Zac's oppressive aura, they found themselves trapped. Zac looked over the group of

fearful people, noticing that people from all races apart from Zhix were represented.

“Is this them?” Zac asked with a sigh as he turned to Smaug.

“Yes, a few people are missing, like Little Treasure and Copperfield, the Ishiate at the eleventh spot of the Wealth Ladder,” Smaug said as he looked across the room. “But this is over 80% of the top brass of the Union.”

It was a bit disheartening to Zac to see this diverse ensemble. This group represented some of the best and the brightest of the underworld, bringing together not only strong warriors but skilled noncombat cultivators. The group even transcended the racial barriers, something the surface still hadn't accomplished. But instead of working together to rebuff the invaders, they had sold their souls for riches.

“Starting today, the Union and all its subsidiaries are under new management.”

THE UNDERWORLD COUNCIL

Things went quite smoothly after the bodyguards were subdued. The leaders of the Union were swiftly captured and imprisoned as the forces of Port Atwood were called over. Ogras wanted to summarily execute everyone to make an example, but Zac decided on a proper investigation and trial.

The Union was a huge enterprise, and it soon became obvious that not everyone was aware of the slave trade, even at the top. In fact, in the meeting that Zac interrupted, it wasn't obvious that it was a slave camp they lost, but it was rather called a mining camp. Everyone had known about the trade with the invaders, but many thought they were using raw materials rather than people as a currency.

When Zac explained the situation with the slaves, everyone professed their ignorance of the matter, staunchly arguing that they only dealt with traditional business ventures. But as the days passed, Calrin and his gnomes easily unraveled who was guilty and benefitted through the revenue streams, and with the interrogations that a shrouded Ogras led, they soon had a full picture of what was going on.

As for the normal employees of the Union, things went even smoother than Zac could ever have expected. Verana had been proven right. The moment they started to release the news that they only wanted to deal with the brass because of the slave trade, the normal workers quickly calmed down.

There were a few who fled and disappeared among the large population, either for fear of the unknown, or perhaps because they had done something they were afraid would be

unearthed. But most happily went about their days, especially after Zac increased the general salaries by 25%.

But taking charge of the sprawling entity that was the Union wouldn't take just a day or two. There were so many businesses with complicated relationships, and dozens of strategic resources to inspect. Luckily, they had the whole network in their hands already.

The Union had used the same type of system as the New World Government, with one Lord creating a hub for all the mayors in the network. It wasn't clear who the true Lord was, but many believed it to be Little Treasure, who had fled before Zac made his entrance. And since he didn't even stay behind to defend his domain when their headquarters was assaulted, the whole system was immediately awarded to Zac as the assaulting Lord.

Zac himself was mostly uninterested in the practical proceedings and rather focused on the massive archives of intelligence that the Union had gathered during the past months. Their secret intelligence dossiers on the demonkin and human incursions were probably even more thorough than the council's due to their frequent encounters.

He knew he had to deal with the demon incursion as quickly as possible, but he was a bit unsure of what to do. The reason he came here in his undead form was to level up his undead class, but after his recent battles, he felt there were some clear limitations to his Undying Bulwark class as it currently stood.

Most of his skills were aimed at keeping himself alive, with **[Deathwish]** being his only offensive skill along with his learned skill **[Unholy Strike]**. He still kept training his utilization of the Dao every day with the trinket, but it would be some time until he could activate **[Cyclic Strike]**.

The lack of offensive and movement skills made his impact on a battlefield limited. It was not like a video game; he didn't have any taunt skills that forced all enemies to attack him. The moment the invaders realized he was a tough nut to crack, they could simply assault his allies, completely

circumventing both [**Deathwish**] and [**Immutable Bulwark**]. His whole plan was for naught if his gained levels came at the cost of the lives of his friends.

But as he read through the stacks of intelligence of the underworld, he found a possible solution to his problem in one of the scouting reports. But before he had time to send for the person who submitted this report, a Valkyrie knocked on the door to the office he had commandeered for himself.

“I am sorry to disturb you,” the Valkyrie said after entering. “Some ambassadors from the Underworld Council are here. What do you want to do?”

“So they came after all. Took them longer than we expected. Have Joanna and Sap Trang join me in conference room C,” Zac said as he donned his mask.

He had kept his modified appearance throughout the visit, but he only wore the mask when in public. As he walked through the richly decorated halls, he sighed in wonder. Most of the original interiors remained, but lamps requiring electricity had been swapped out with Day Crystals. It was an interesting mix of the old world and the post-integration era, and it actually meshed quite well.

The old fisherman and Joanna joined him soon after he sat down at the ornate table, and just minutes later, three warriors entered the room. It was two humans and one of the Molemen, each of them radiating even stronger auras than the bodyguards of the Union. Furthermore, it was clear that this power came from battle rather than absorbing crystals and eating pills.

The female Moleman especially gave off the aura of a powerhouse, and Zac realized that she might be at the same level as someone like Thea. It was to the point that he was a bit tempted to use [**Inquisitive Eye**], but he knew that it would likely fail or even backfire. The other two were likely Rankers as well, or at worst, just shy of making the cut.

One of the humans was a middle-aged man who was built like a bear, with a large sword on his back. With his large bushy beard, he gave off the aura of a brute, but an intelligent

light in his eyes indicated he wasn't all brawn. The other human was an old lady with graying hair. She didn't have any distinguishing items on her, but two snowballs slowly rotated around her, meaning she was likely some sort of ice mage.

The Moleman had two large daggers fastened to her waist, and from the aura they emitted, Zac realized they were actually one Spirit Tool. Spirit Tools that were split into dual items were far harder to create, from what Zac understood, making them as rare as defensive Spirit Tools, or perhaps even rarer.

That this rogue had gotten her hands on such a good item proved once more she had survived some trials and found her lucky encounters, just like him. The only way she could have gotten such a good item was if she'd completed some harsh quest from the System.

It was clear that the Underworld Council hadn't sent some middlemen to meet with him, but rather some of their core warriors.

"Welcome," Sap Trang said with a kindly smile. "I am Sap Trang, ambassador of Port Atwood. This is Joanna, leader of the Valkyries, and lastly, Mr. Black. We apologize for not getting in contact with the Underworld Council sooner; our time down here has been a bit hectic."

"I'd say," the large man said with a wry smile. "I am—"

"Wait," the Moleman interjected, looking at Zac with animosity. "You are no human. You are not one of the four founding races. You reek of death, and not like a warrior."

Zac was a bit surprised that his origin was immediately exposed by the Moleman. Not even the people of Port Atwood knew he wasn't human. They just thought he had gotten some odd class like Death Knight, which gave him such a spooky aura.

After hesitating for a second, he removed his mask, exposing his deathly pale skin and pitch-black eyes. The burly man couldn't stop himself from twitching when he saw the

eyes that seemingly led into an endless abyss, and the old woman frowned in consternation.

“Your senses are sharp,” Zac said, not surprised about the reactions. “I am undead.”

“So Super Brother-Man gobbles up the Union because they work with the invaders, while himself is working with invaders,” the Moleman said, some anger burning in her eyes.

“Lara—” the man said, but was stopped by a glare.

Zac smiled slightly at the accusation, not angry at the questioning. If anything, it proved that at least the council hadn’t gotten their priorities mixed up, and had truly tried to stop the invaders.

“Lord Atwood recognizes that the world is not black or white,” Sap Trang explained. “The incursions are a problem that needs to be dealt with, but it doesn’t mean he can’t recruit talents from the various factions that have invaded our planet. It helps us to gain all sorts of information, allowing us to adapt to this new reality much faster. Just like the council have benefited from the Union’s trade with the invaders.”

“But what we’re doing is different from the Union. The aliens working for Lord Atwood have already had their incursions closed, making them dependent on Port Atwood. Lord Atwood would also never sell or sacrifice our own people,” Joanna added. “You should understand, the moment an invader uses a teleportation array, it means they have truly given up on invading Earth, meaning everyone here works for Lord Atwood.”

The Moleman didn’t seem completely satisfied with the explanation, but she didn’t press the issue further as she sat down with a harrumph.

“I am sorry about the questioning,” the man said with a smile. “We have been isolated down here, constantly fighting the invaders for months. I am Gregor, and these two are Oksana and Lararia. We are three of the eleven seats of the Underworld Council.”

“What brings the Underworld Council here today?” Joanna asked.

“First, we simply wanted to make your acquaintance, but we also wish to inquire about your future plans,” Gregor said.

“We cannot divulge any specifics, but suffice to say our goal is to close the incursions of the underworld, which would allow us to focus on the real enemies of Earth,” Joanna said.

“Real enemies?” Gregor said with confusion. “Who would that be?”

“You should have heard of two of them. Inevitability and Harbinger, the two top positions on the ladder for the hunt,” Joanna said. “But what you might not know is that those two are under command of someone far more dangerous.”

From there, Joanna proceeded to explain the situation about the Great Redeemer and the impending threat he posed. The trio mostly listened silently, sometimes interjecting with incisive questions.

“We learned about the existence of these people from the Zhix down here even before the hunt,” Gregor said with a frown. “And we have heard about the Dominators from their old world as well. But who would have thought that was just the beginning of the conspiracy?”

“Not even Lord Atwood is ready to fight against the Dominators just yet. They are monstrously strong and possess hidden means provided by their master. But he’s desperately cultivating to gain the power to stop them, and we hope the council will join us in that battle when the time comes,” Joanna said.

“This topic is far beyond our expectations, and we cannot speak for the whole council on this matter. But I joined the battle to protect Earth and secure a position in the Multiverse. I won’t shy away from any battle to protect our home, no matter if it’s invaders or Dominators,” Gregor said, and the old lady nodded in agreement.

Zac internally breathed out in relief, as one of the most important goals of the underworld was somewhat

accomplished. The discussions went on for a while, and it became clear that one of the biggest worries of the Underworld Council had been that Zac wanted to gobble up the whole underworld. That he was only using the fight with the invaders as an excuse to get his foot in the door.

But the fact that they could easily prove that they had closed multiple incursions through Joanna's quest quickly warmed the council members, and discussions rather moved to the topic of cooperation. Zac eventually decided to send over a group of ambassadors to get a better understanding of the battle with the Fire Golems. The squad would also act as Emily's protectors while she looked for her sister since he didn't have time to go himself.

A large problem with the golems was that they were the only force seemingly unencumbered by the extremely hard rock in the underworld, allowing them to freely create new paths and flood the ones the council used with Lava. The council could only perform quick raids against the golems nowadays, afraid that their path of retreat would be cut off.

So the fact that a group of extremely powerful people had entered the underworld brought hope for the council that they could finally launch a decisive strike against the core of the golem incursions, stopping the threat for good.

"Can we ask when Lord Atwood plans on moving against the Fire Golems? They are the largest threat to the survival of the underworld," Gregor finally asked.

Neither Joanna nor Sap Trang dared to speak up regarding this subject, as Zac still hadn't made his decision on how to proceed. There was the issue of the demon incursion, and also that report that had caught his eye. After mulling it over for a few seconds, Zac looked up at Gregor.

"There are some things we need to deal with before we turn our eyes toward the Fire Golem incursion. But we hope to launch an all-out strike within three weeks at the latest."

HIDDEN WEALTH

“You wanted to see me, sir?” the young woman said with a shaky voice, clearly afraid to enter the large room where Zac had been training with his shield the past day. “I’m Emma.”

Zac looked over with some confusion, not recognizing the girl by the entrance. But he quickly realized who it was, and stowed away his shield.

“Are you the scout I asked for?” Zac asked, trying not to sound threatening.

“Y-Yes. I was in charge of a scout team looking for valuable veins within the Unio— ahem, Lord Atwood’s domain,” Emma hastily explained, keeping her eyes on the ground.

“Great. Come with me for a bit,” Zac said, leaving the training room and the group of Valkyries who had been his sparring partners.

The councilors from the Underworld Council had left yesterday along with a group of ambassadors led by Tylia and Joanna, taking the impatient Emily with them. Zac himself had decided to follow up on the idea he’d had while waiting for things to get sorted out. So he had called for the person who had written up the report, and it was the girl currently following him.

Unfortunately, she had been out on a mission, and it looked like she’d only returned just now. So since Zac had some time to spare, he decided to work on some of his undead skills. All of them were still at the Early stage, and he hoped

that one way to improve his battlefield impact was if he upgraded them.

[**Bulwark Mastery**] was the easiest, as it only required him to learn and incorporate the movements with the shield. It took him less than an hour to upgrade the skill to Middle mastery, and another ten hours to reach late mastery. But just like with [**Axe Mastery**], he found that there was something missing to push it toward Peak mastery, so he could only stop there.

Upgrading [**Bulwark Mastery**] did not improve his attributes or allowed him to unleash some new power, but it did help a lot in utilizing his shield and the fractal equivalent in [**Immutable Bulwark**]. It even showed him how to properly fight with a weapon in one hand and a shield in the other.

Until now, he had been a bit clumsy and limited in that department, but he quickly learned how to use both his weaponry to their full potential. The shield was not only a large plank to block out damage, but it was a tool that would also create the opening for him to finish his enemies with his weapon. His other skills, unfortunately, weren't as easy to level up, but he didn't despair. Hopefully, he would be able to push some of them forward in the following weeks.

“Don't worry, you're not in trouble or anything like that. I have read some of your reports. You were the one who wrote this, correct?” Zac wanted to confirm after the two entered his office, handing Emma the report he'd found the other day.

He could understand Emma's nervousness. She had worked in the department under one of the leaders who were found guilty of human trafficking just this morning. Almost two-thirds of the leaders of the Union had been found complicit in the slave trade, and they were executed as punishment. It wasn't unthinkable that the minions would suffer for the sins of their boss as well.

“Wha– Oh? Yes!” she stammered after glancing over the first page. “I was the one who wrote it. I am the only survivor from that excursion.”

“Large vein deposit. Unknown resource. Quality – highest. Danger level – highest,” Zac said, listing the main points from his memory. “Infested by, and I quote you, an insane number of mutated bugs. But no location?”

“Leonard, the department head, did not want us to write the location in the reports of very valuable things. He was afraid competing departments were spying on him. I only told him in person,” the scout said.

“Tell me about this place,” Zac said.

“The vein is three days’ travel from a remote outpost, hidden in a huge cave system at the bottom of a lake. We found it by accident when looking for valuable resources underwater. When we entered, we realized there was some odd crystal that was emitting a really mysterious light, but we didn’t have time to excavate even one before we were overrun.”

“By what?” Zac asked.

“Insects, each about as large as a large dog. But they were so strong! We barely managed to harm them, but they slaughtered everyone in seconds. I only managed to use my identification skill once before I fled. The insect was level 68. That was one month ago,” the scout said with horror in her eyes.

“Have you seen anything like that before?” Zac probed.

“No, there are some really strong insects down here in the underworld, but they are usually solitary. We saw thousands of Peak F-grade beasts, and we didn’t even really enter the vein. I’m sure it’s teeming with E-grade beasts further down, especially now that so much time has passed,” she said.

“How did you survive?” Zac asked with some suspicion. “You’re only level 42, and I am sure you were lower at that point.”

“I have a good movement skill,” she said, “and the beasts stopped when I jumped into the water to get back to the surface.”

Zac slowly nodded. He wasn't disappointed when he heard how dangerous the mysterious cavern was, but rather the opposite. A place crawling with extremely strong beasts was exactly what he needed.

His plan was simple. He wanted to throw himself into the thick of it and, with the help of [**Deathwish**] and [**Fields of Despair**], grind all the way to level 60. Normally, such a thing might have taken over a month, mainly because beasts strong enough to provide a nice boost of energy were few and far between.

But this cavern was for some reason overflowing with powerful beasts that would each be able to control their own region on Mystic Island, turning the cave into a cultivator's paradise as long as one was strong enough to survive. Not even the rabid beasts in the hunt would be able to compare to the massive numbers of beasts in there.

Depending on how much stronger the beasts had become in the past weeks, it would only take a week or two to get to level 60. If the skill he got at that point would allow him to confidently fight the invaders in his undead form without risking the lives of his people, great. If not, then he would turn into his human form to fight, even if that would result in a loss of Cosmic Energy.

Besides, there was undoubtedly something interesting in that cave if it had turned its inhabitants so powerful.

"Why do you think the insects are so strong at that place?" Zac asked.

"I don't know... but if I had to guess? I think it's those rocks somehow evolving the insects," she said with some hesitation.

Zac nodded and asked some follow-up questions about anything that might be useful in his expedition. When he felt confident about finding the place, he excused the scout after having her sign a temporary contract of confidentiality.

Personally, Zac believed there was another possibility to the one Emma provided. There might be a great natural

treasure at the bottom of the cave, which was the source of both the mysterious crystals and the powerful beasts. He already knew that the planet had been given a handful of great treasures by the System, items that normally shouldn't appear. His Tree of Ascension was such an example, and the Abbot's lotus was another.

Each such item could bring a great boost to the one who managed to seize it, but so far, Zac had only gotten one, even though he was so far ahead of the others of Earth. The odd place in the report might be his chance at a second one.

Since he had everything he needed, he didn't waste any time. He immediately set out after informing Mr. Trang about his decision. Zac knew this somewhat messed with the quest the Valkyries had received, but he needed to focus on his own development at this point. He needed to improve as quickly as possible to be able to match the Dominators.

He instantly teleported over to the small town cave that the scout had mentioned, and immediately rushed out into the open underworld. The scout had mentioned three days of travel, but Zac didn't want to waste almost a week on travel for the round trip.

Instead, Zac changed into his human form for the first time in a while and rushed across the subterranean landscape with **[Loamwalker]**, and he found himself at the lakefront in less than a day. The fact that he didn't have to skirt around the domain of powerful beasts saved him one day, while his movement skill saved him another.

When he stood by the shore of the crystal-clear lake, he once again changed his race with the help of his transformation skill and quietly entered the depths when his change to his Draugr form was complete. Remembering the scout's description, he swam down twenty meters and ripped apart some moss at the wall to expose the entrance to the cavern.

He swam in the pitch-black water-filled tunnel for almost five minutes before finally finding air, and he couldn't believe that the scouting party had dared to enter a scary place like

this. Even with his massive pool of Endurance, he felt it was a bit unsettling, like a beast of the depths could crop up at any moment to swallow him whole. But he managed to exit the tunnel without any problem, finding himself in a massive cave system.

The cave itself was a large and open area illuminated in green, but not by the usual luminescent moss and fungi. It was rather some crystals embedded in the walls that seemed to have green fireflies fluttering around inside. Zac immediately understood those crystals were what Emma had been referring to, but he couldn't sense any special energy from them.

Zac wanted to excavate one of the crystals to take a closer look, but incessant clattering echoing in the cave stopped him in his tracks. It looked like he was getting the same reception as the scouts, as a tidal wave of insects frenziedly rushed toward him.

All of the insects looked the same, though they were of slightly varying sizes. They most closely resembled a giant weta or cricket, with three pairs of legs, and the hindmost set was extra long. But they also possessed enormous mandibles that looked strong enough to bite a human in two. Finally, they had a pointy stinger at the back, though the scout didn't know if these things possessed any venom or not, as she'd had to immediately flee.

Their bodies were covered in layered shell, but they looked much thinner compared to the Ayn ants that he'd fought during the beast waves. But in return, they were much quicker, jumping toward him with greater speed than a charging barghest.

Each one of them looked like a decent foe for any cultivator, with their combination of natural weapons and a pretty high speed. But what was truly intimidating was the wave of killing intent that pushed toward him upon their approach. Zac quickly used his eye skill before things got too hectic.

[Lower Crust Battleroach – Insect – Level 73 – Strength]

The result of **[Inquisitive Eye]** proved that the beasts had improved a couple of levels in the short month since the scout had been here, making Zac even more confident there was something in the cave that pushed these things to evolve.

However, there was no time to do an in-depth analysis as the tidal wave of insects was upon him. He took out **[Verun's Bite]** as the Miasmatic haze from **[Fields of Despair]** spread through the cave. The change in energy made a few of the insects stop in confusion, but they were quickly overrun by frenzied brethren.

A fractal shield materialized behind Zac as his axe turned into a blur. Green liquid splattered in all directions as Zac felt a steady stream of energy enter his body, both through **[Fields of Despair]** and the quick kills from his swings.

The shells of the insects barely hindered the upgraded **[Verun's Bite]**, and even **[Deathwish]** steadily killed one insect after another as they threw themselves at him from every direction. Specters kept popping up around him to retaliate any strike against him, his shield, or the fractal bulwark protecting his rear.

Mists of Miasma rose from the air as the corpses started to transform into fuel for the fight, and Zac started to slowly push forward so as not to get buried in insect corpses. His whole body was already covered in green goop, but he didn't care, as he saw every disgusting insect as a burst of energy to progress his levels.

Zac resolutely kept moving downward in the cave, and between the increasingly thick haze of Miasma and the constantly appearing specters, it looked like an undying legion was trying to break into the underworld. And in the middle of the carnage, a System prompt appeared, telling him he had received a quest.

ASCENSION BREAKER

Zac froze in the middle of his rampage when he noticed the screen in front of him. The momentary lapse in concentration allowed one of the insects to leap up at him, clenching its mandibles around his throat while trying to scratch open his chest.

The bite wasn't anywhere near strong enough to cut off his head, but it did draw some black ichor with its bite. The pain woke Zac up, and he destroyed the battleroach with a swing of his axe. Battle lust roared in his mind, but he forced himself to stop in his tracks and curl down on the ground with **[Immutable Bulwark]** covering his whole body.

It was his self-invented turtle stance that allowed him a breather in return for an increased expenditure of Miasma. The roaches kept their assault going, desperately trying to claw or bite through the thick shield, which only got them whittled down by the specters of **[Deathwish]**. Zac didn't hunker down to catch a breather, but rather to be able to read the quest without interruptions.

Ascension Breaker (Unique, Limited): Stop the Battleroach King from Evolving into a Primordial Warroach. Reward: [Primordial Breath Amanita], Death-Attuned Skill [03:06:23:54].

Zac slowly read through the quest to not miss any details, but it seemed quite straightforward. Somewhere in the cave the insect boss was located, and it would evolve in three days. It reminded Zac of the image of the monkey Herald silently cultivating under the Tree of Ascension. But Zac's eyes were

mostly glued to the rewards, both of which were quite tempting.

He had no idea what a **[Primordial Breath Amanita]** was, but it surely wasn't anything useless. Anything referring to the primordial probably had a great origin, since it hinted toward ancient beings and the mysteries of the universe.

Of course, sometimes things were simply named like that to sound overbearing or more valuable than they truly were.

The death-attuned skill was an even greater lure for him, and he knew that it was a reward tailored to his current needs. The whole reason he'd entered this den was to gain another skill, and with the help of the quest, he might actually walk away with two skills rather than one.

He had already been meaning to explore the depths of this place for any potential reward, but this made him even more eager to head down. Besides, if things proved too dangerous, he could always jump into the water and swim to safety. However, as if hearing Zac's thoughts, another line of text appeared next to the quest.

[Note: Exits closed. Exits will remain sealed for 1 year upon failure of quest.]

"That's the System I remember," Zac muttered with some helplessness.

It looked like he had no choice but to give it his all to stop the battleroach boss from evolving, and he had a decent idea of what that meant. By traveling with Verana and the Beast Masters of the Tal-Eladar in the past days, he had learned quite a bit about beasts and their cultivation system. While titles and classes were the two largest factors for differences in power between two warriors, the deciding factors for the power of a beast were their bloodline and its purity.

Something that had confused Zac for a long time was the fact that pretty much all the beasts he had met, from the barghest to the wolf waves, were equally strong as their brethren. This was because beasts didn't have any titles, and they didn't possess classes either.

Their bloodline was their class, and their levels came with a higher number of raw attributes to compensate for the lack of titles. A strong bloodline would give more attribute points, whereas a weak bloodline would give fewer. Greater bloodlines would also provide a greater number of bloodline skills, like the terrifying beam the Star Ox had released at him during the Sovereignty trial.

But the type of bloodline was not the only important factor to consider. There was also the purity of the bloodline. As generations passed, the bloodline of a race might get diluted, pushing the race further and further from their powerful ancestor. In fact, Vul, the Barghest Herald, was not a different race than the other barghest, even though it was far more dangerous. It was simply a talented barghest whose bloodline had been purified by Clan Azh'Rezak.

Beasts could also purify their bloodline on their own, by slowly rotating their energy to expel impurities. This process could be drastically sped up if the beasts stayed close to natural treasures. The herbs or metals continuously emitted excess energy while they grew or evolved, which was why almost all treasures had beast guardians close by. They were using the treasures to essentially cultivate, and losing the treasure would mean losing their chance to evolve.

A skilled Beast Master spent most of their wealth and efforts on purifying the bloodlines of their contracted beasts. It would not only drastically increase their power and longevity, but the bloodline also dictated how far the beast could reach on the road of cultivation. Some of the more intelligent beasts even voluntarily entered contracts with cultivators in order to get help with improving their bloodline.

But apart from purifying the bloodline, there was another, but far rarer possibility: bloodline evolution. It was possible to ascend to a higher tier of being, which usually brought a tremendous boost in power. It was akin to a house cat evolving into a saber-toothed tiger. This was something that might happen through mutation, but it mostly required a great treasure or some other rare opportunity.

Zac suspected that this was the type of evolution he needed to stop, rather than simply stopping an F-grade to E-grade evolution. Since the weakest beasts at the edge of the hive were almost at the peak of the F-grade, there was no way that the Battleroach King hadn't already evolved to E-grade. Since it was much too early into the integration to talk about evolving to D-grade, then bloodline evolution was the most likely scenario.

Zac closed the menu with a sigh as he got back up on his feet, and with a wide swing, created some space from the densely packed battleroaches. He had initially planned on pushing downward step by step, grinding for over a week if need be, but now he felt the clock ticking.

Zac also couldn't stop some worry from creeping in, making him second-guess his decision to come to this place. His experience with most quests so far was that he had been pushed to his limit, barely surviving the trials. That was simply how the System worked. If it was too easy, the System wouldn't provide any good rewards. If it was impossible, it wouldn't give out the quest since its purpose was to train, not to kill.

Before he kept descending any further into the cave system, he first fought his way back to the water. It was the waterline that had allowed Emma to return alive, but when Zac arrived, he noticed with some helplessness that a shimmering shield covered the water. It was the System blocking any escape, and he knew better than to try to brute force it.

Instead, he turned back and started making his way down the cavern. The onslaught of battleroaches was relentless, and Zac had killed over a thousand by the time his area was wiped clean. There were still swarms of the roaches remaining further down, judging from the incessant clattering echoing from the depths, but it didn't look like they were interested in coming up to his floor.

Cleansing the first floor had taken a bit over an hour, and the short burst of intense carnage had almost given him two full levels. The speed would shock anyone else, but Zac was actually a bit disappointed. While killing the battleroaches

provided a steady stream of energy, each kill provided just a fraction of what he would receive from killing a cultivator at the same level.

But the situation was still pretty great since the roaches were completely berserk. They didn't try to avoid the insectoid specters at all, making it possible for **[Deathwish]** to continuously kill targets even with its limited power. The battle had proven pretty easy, with the only issue being the somewhat high energy consumption. Less than half his Miasma remained, as the returns from **[Fields of Despair]** couldn't match the expenditure from constantly utilizing multiple skills.

He had initially wanted to head straight down to the next floor so as not to waste any time, but since he needed to rest up, he first walked over to the wall with the shimmering crystals. Inspecting the wall proved he was correct that there definitely was some relation between the crystals and the insects.

On a closer look, he saw that there were quite a few holes where crystals had been extracted, and scratch marks around a few other places indicated that some insect had tried, and failed, to rip out crystals. It only increased his curiosity about the green energy inside, because no matter how he looked at it, he didn't sense anything special.

He gingerly touched one of the crystals, and after nothing happened, he ripped it out of the wall for further study. The lights kept buzzing inside the crystal even after getting extracted, but no matter what Zac did, he couldn't figure out the purpose of these things. However, when Zac accidentally held the crystal close to **[Verun's Bite]**, the slumbering spirit inside stirred.

Zac felt some hope that he had finally found something else that Verun wanted to absorb. One troubling realization after he had evolved the axe to E-grade was that it no longer used blood to evolve. It still consumed the blood of evolved beings to charge up its fractal, but it didn't do anything to unlock the other four fractals on the haft. Zac had a feeling

that he needed to find treasures that would unlock each of the five fractals before evolving it to D-grade.

Truthfully, he had been worried that the axe had become such a picky eater that it would only drink D-grade blood to evolve, but perhaps Zac simply hadn't found the right materials. If the axe liked these crystals, he would evolve Verun in no time, since there were thousands of them in just the room he was standing in. But unfortunately, the axe grew disinterested after a few seconds, no longer giving the shimmering crystal any attention.

It was disappointing, but Zac knew he was still on the highest floor. Perhaps the crystals around him were something that Verun wanted, but they were F-grade when the axe needed crystals of a higher grade.

Greed shimmered in Zac's eyes as he looked at the crystal-studded walls. He truly wanted to pick each one since the crystals were something good enough that even the picky Verun woke up. But he was currently working against the clock, as getting locked inside this place for a year would spell disaster for not only himself but Earth as a whole.

The crystal was put into his Cosmos Sack since Verun wouldn't eat it, and Zac headed over to the entrance to the next floor. It was a large hole straight in the ground, and looking down into it was like looking down into the abyss. There were no crystals in the hole, and the only clue there was something beneath was the incessant susurrus of innumerable insects moving about.

Zac sat down next to the hole as he took out two E-grade Miasma Crystals. Luckily, he had stocked up on crystals through Calrin before entering the underworld, and he would be able to fight nonstop for weeks with the help of his reserves of Miasma Crystals.

His stores of death-attuned energies were filled up in four hours, and Zac stood up to look down into the abyss. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, so Zac simply jumped down into the hole, placing his shield beneath himself as he imbued his body with the Dao of Heaviness.

The air screamed around him as he shot downward like a bullet, reaching the next level in just a few seconds. The whole cave shook from the shockwave of Zac's landing and even the impossibly hard foundation showed some cracks. A surge of energy also welcomed his arrival as at least fifty battleroaches died from the impact.

Zac got up to his feet and shook his head. His ears were ringing, and even he was a bit discombobulated by slamming into the extremely hard ground. But his axe was already moving through muscle memory, and the sounds of pitched battle erupted once more.

REFINED SKILLS

As Zac once again started up his slaughter, he shot a glance at his surroundings. The second floor looked mostly the same, though slightly larger. The same green crystals studded the walls, and the same frenzied critters were already charging him. He even noticed the same type of hole leading to the next floor on the other side of the cave. It almost felt like he was in an illusion world because of the similarity, but the fact that he kept gaining energy was undeniable.

The Miasmatic haze once again spread out as Zac methodically killed one battleroach after another. He had three days to complete the quest, and he believed the easiest method was to simply rush down and kill the Roach King. But he had no idea how strong it was, so he wanted to gain as many levels as possible before confronting it.

He also had no idea how many floors this place had, but if he started to run out of time, he would skip killing the beasts and jump down one floor after another until he reached the bottom. Worst case, he would have to fight a bunch of extra battleroaches along with their boss if they jumped after him, but better than getting locked in this cave for a year.

As he kept fighting, Zac started to enter a rhythm, almost a dance based on the moves he had recently learned from [**Bulwark Mastery**]. His feet moved across the cavern, following a precise pattern as he weaved a trail of carnage with his axe. His shield was quickly becoming an extension of his body, allowing him to control where and when he was attacked by the rabid beasts.

Order was quickly being forced upon the chaotic swarm of battleroaches, and Zac realized that he was steadily decreasing his Miasma consumption without lessening the pace that the insects died. As he started to incorporate the teachings of his skill in battle, he also started to more actively work with **[Deathwish]**.

It was possible to simply keep the skill running, but Zac realized his way of using it had been too wasteful. Not every strike against him warranted a retaliation, as the reflected attack would sometimes bring fewer benefits than the cost of Miasma warranted. So he started to control which strikes to counter, and which ones to simply endure. It reduced the number of specters appearing around him by half, but the number of kills was almost the same.

Efficiency was something that Zac once excelled at, something forced upon him due to overindulging on Cosmic Water before he knew any better. But as his powers grew, he had slowly forgotten this important lesson, instead opting to fight like a brute because of his massive pool of attributes.

But Zac realized that such a mindset stifled growth and stopped him from pushing himself to the limits. It also wasted a lot of time. Perhaps not through the battle itself, but most of his time on the last floor had been spent recuperating his expended Miasma. He was not a cultivator who could rapidly restore his reserves, so he needed to make use of every smidgeon of Miasma in his body.

He slowly got the hang of splitting his attention between striking the weak spots with his axe and manually controlling **[Deathwish]**. But he felt his work still wasn't done. He started to change the way he moved slightly, forcibly stopping the impulses to avoid getting hit in certain spots. Slowly, the attacks from the battleroaches started to center on his belly or his head more and more.

Zac's idea was simple. The spectral projections from **[Deathwish]** assaulted the attacker in roughly the same area that Zac was attacked in. That meant if he made sure to get hit in the areas that were weak spots of the roaches, the lethality of the projections would increase without any increase in

Miasma consumption. It did require more precision, though. He needed to make sure his thick skull was hit rather than his vulnerable throat or eyes, for example.

More wounds dripping ichor soon adorned Zac's body, but he was slowly getting the hang of it. And his efforts were quickly rewarded as a prompt told him that **[Deathwish]** just reached Middle mastery. The effect was immediately obvious, as the continuously appearing spectral projections turned slightly more corporeal, and hazy fractals adorned their bodies.

They had also become stronger, noticeably so. Zac had already measured that the power of the specters from **[Deathwish]** was roughly around 10%–15% of the original strike's power, meaning that it usually took a couple of tries until they managed to kill or grievously wound their enemies. Zac couldn't be sure exactly how strong the specters were now, but after using the skill for a few minutes, he felt that the power had increased by at least 50%.

But that wasn't the most interesting change in the skill. After upgrading **[Deathwish]**, he realized that he suddenly had limited control of the specters as they appeared. Each time a ghost was summoned, he felt as though he had grown a new appendage, and with some effort, he managed to manipulate the specter.

The effect was extremely limited at the moment, though. He only managed to slightly alternate the trajectory of their retaliatory strike. But that slight adjustment could be the difference between hitting a thick chitinous plate or a weak joint, and if Zac could learn to naturally control the specters as they popped up, he would truly increase the lethality of the skill by a notch.

Flush with success, Zac immediately started to investigate means to improve his other skills as he whittled down the number of battleroaches in the cave. But finding other quick upgrades didn't come as easy. He didn't have any control over **[Fields of Despair]**, so he couldn't figure out any means that might help him move to a higher mastery.

The same went for **[Indomitable]**, which he kept running just in case something down here could use mental attacks. That only left **[Immutable Bulwark]**, the fractal wall he currently used to block out all attacks from behind. He knew that he wasn't using it to its full potential since, currently, it only worked as a blockade rather than utilizing the large spikes that covered its front.

During his rampage in the caverns beneath the Eastern Trigram Sect, he had used the bulwark like a bulldozer, putting it in front of his body as he rushed forward. The more vulnerable of the beasts had been crushed into meat paste from his charge, turning the skill into a competent offensive skill.

But after a few tries, he had to give up on that approach against the battleroaches. While the shells of the insects weren't as sturdy as some other species, they were still quite durable. That was why **[Deathwish]** rarely finished its enemies in one swing, and why he had to utilize **[Verun's Bite]** to properly cut the critters apart.

The large bulwark slowly swirled to Zac's front, and with a grunt, he started running forward. The roaches screeched in rage as the large shield slammed into them, and nothing they did could stop his progress. Dull thuds started echoing through the caves as the roaches slammed themselves into the incoming wall.

Sadly, the collisions of **[Immutable Bulwark]** proved insufficient, and only a scant few of the insects actually died on the spikes. The rest bounced off the shield to the sides, immediately getting back up on their feet to assault Zac from the sides. But Zac suddenly got a burst of energy when he rammed straight into a wall, crushing all the roaches between the bulwark and the cave into a wet mess.

But even when he used the bulwark as a meat press, the speed that he killed the beasts was worse than when utilizing the combination of his axe and **[Deathwish]**. Zac soon gave up on that tactic, even if it might be the key to upgrading the skill, and once again returned to methodically decimating the roach population with the combination of **[Deathwish]** and his axe.

His bulwark was once again relegated to staying behind his back to block any strikes from the rear.

But Zac suddenly had an idea, and the wide fractal wall rose into the air as it started to turn until the spikes were pointing at the ground. Since there was no longer anything blocking the roaches that tried to attack Zac from behind, they immediately flooded toward his back to claw at his neck and legs. The moment Zac felt a painful swipe on his back, the bulwark fell down like a trap roof in an old movie.

He had gotten the idea after witnessing how easily the bugs were crushed against the wall. Since he had control over the fractal shield, he could move it around in any direction as long as it wasn't too far from his current position. That gave him the idea to use the large thing as a hammer, crushing everything dumb enough to walk beneath it.

Unfortunately, the bulwark shared an annoying similarity with the movies. The falling bulwark was too slow, to the point that most of the frenzied roaches managed to scuttle out of the way just before they were crushed.

Zac glanced at the large fractal wall with some reluctance, and it once again rose into the air. This time, it started emitting a mighty pressure, to the point that the air around it shuddered. Zac had imbued it with his Peak stage Seed of Heaviness. The Bulwark once again slammed into the ground, this time with almost three times the speed.

The whole cave shuddered from the impact, and the unlucky roaches that were caught beneath were turned into a paste in an instant. Zac was elated with the result and started to move the shield up and down as he focused on the enemies in the front. Loud thumps started to echo through the cave every five seconds, making it sound like an industrial press was constantly running.

Using [**Immutable Bulwark**] like a huge hammer was a bit stupid, and it certainly wouldn't work against an intelligent opponent, but it did increase his killing speed while only consuming some mental energy. Another downside was that

some quick roaches occasionally reached his unguarded back to attack his neck.

Luckily, he had enough control of the situation in the front to give him the freedom to avoid most attacks from the rear any time his danger sense warned him. But wounds still started to accumulate at a higher speed, making the layers of green goop on his back get intermixed with black ichor.

Soon enough, the fighting abated, and Zac stood amongst the sea of destroyed battleroaches. A quick inspection showed that the crystals that studded the walls were no better than the ones on the floor above, so Zac immediately sat down to absorb Miasma as he went over the results of the battle.

The second floor had housed roughly 20% more battleroaches compared to the first, yet he had taken less than ten minutes longer to completely decimate everything. This was a decidedly better grinding speed, especially considering that he had spent quite some time adjusting to his more refined fighting style and experimenting with **[Immutable Bulwark]**.

He had also reached level 57, meaning that he had already gained three levels in one short day. Even his optimistic calculations had him taking at least a week to reach level 60, but as it looked now, it might only take two days unless he ran out of battleroaches to kill.

But the most exciting difference in clearing out the second floor was that he had consumed even less Miasma than the floor above. This was even though he both utilized **[Immutable Bulwark]** more actively and killed a lot more roaches. It was a testament to the fact that he had wasted too much energy the way he originally fought.

The restoration took a bit over four hours, at which point his mental energy had completely restored itself as well. He had spent over ten hours in the cave already, so Zac immediately headed down to the next floor.

The sounds of battle kept echoing as Zac turned into a stoic killing machine, knowing no retreat or surrender. He kept working on perfecting his battle coordination, constantly

trying to kill the roaches faster and faster without wasting any unnecessary energy.

The roaches on the third floor were a bit larger than the second, with many proving to be level 75, true Peak F-grade beasts. But apart from a decent boost in power and speed, they didn't have any new abilities, so Zac kept fighting as usual. Soon enough, the third floor was cleansed, and he only kept going, resting as short a time as possible between fights.

After completely decimating the sixth floor, Zac realized he had been constantly fighting for over thirty hours, and the results were astounding. He had already reached level 60, and as expected, he received his next Class Quest.

PROFANE DOMINANCE

Zac's leveling speed was shocking, taking just over one day to push from level 54 to 60. But he also knew that his way of going about things would only be possible for someone extremely overpowered like himself. The roaches didn't pose any real threat to him, but he was still covered in shallow wounds from their sharp mandibles and serrated legs.

The fact that the insects were able to hurt him, even though his effective Endurance was over 1,000, proved that almost everyone else on Earth would be ripped to pieces in seconds from the rabid assault of the beasts. Even he was feeling the strain, so he quickly ate a healing pill before opening his status screen.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 60

Class: [F-Epic] Undying Bulwark

Race: [E] Draugr

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord

Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt – 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step

Limited TitlesFrontrunner

Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Peak, Seed of Trees – Peak, Seed of Sharpness – High, Seed of Hardness – Middle, Seed of Sanctuary – High, Seed of Rot – High

Core: [F] Duplicity

Strength: 718 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]

Dexterity: 320 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Endurance: 827 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]

Vitality: 432 [Increase: 50%. Efficiency: 140%]

Intelligence: 174 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Wisdom: 248 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Luck: 140 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]

Free Points: 6

Nexus Coins: [F] 295,264,610

Zac hadn't bothered to allocate his free points while pushing down the tunnels, but now he put them all into Strength before opening up the quest screen. The Ascension Breaker quest showed that he had just under two days remaining, but he was more interested in the new quest he had just received.

Profane Dominance (Class): Kill 1,000 Peak F-grade beings within 3 hours OR Defeat 1 being at least 30 levels above you. Reward: [Profane Discharge] OR [Profane Seal]. (0/1,000 – 0/1)

Zac was surprised to see that it was a forked quest, just like the time he'd received **[Nature's Punishment]**. At that time, he had the choice of choosing a nurturing path or a path of destruction going by the quest requirements, and this time, there was a clear indication of what he would receive as well.

It was quite clear that no matter which option he chose, it would still be an offensive skill that he would get. **[Profane Discharge]** was likely an area skill that would help him kill

large packs of weaker enemies, whereas **[Profane Seal]** was meant as a skill to take down powerhouses.

Indecision plagued Zac as he sat down to restore his depleted reserves of Miasma, and he went over the options repeatedly. It would be effortless for him to complete the first option, as he had killed battleroaches at a far higher rate until now. But it would have been an extremely daunting task if he didn't have his massive pool of attributes given by his titles and second class.

In fact, if he kept going as he did, he wouldn't be able to avoid getting **[Profane Discharge]** even if he wanted to since there were more floors beneath with more battleroaches. The only way was if he drastically slowed down his killing speed, but that might cause trouble with his other quest.

The other skill, **[Profane Seal]**, was more troublesome to complete for the current Zac, but not because of the difficulty. He had confidence in defeating most level 90 beings in his current form. It might take some time to whittle it down with **[Deathwish]**, but he was sure he would be able to outlast almost anyone in his current state.

The issue was whether he could even find a level 90 being apart from the Dominators. All the E-grade beasts he had encountered so far were between level 75 and 80, a far cry from level 90. His best chance was either the Battleroach King or the leaders of the incursions.

Furthermore, if he wanted to aim for this skill, he couldn't gain too many levels either. Each level he gained would push the required level of the kill forward as well. Finding a level 90 enemy was hard enough, but if he grinded another ten levels, he might not find a target for months.

Both skills were things that he wanted for his current class, and they would help him tremendously during the underworld incursions. This would be the first truly offensive skill for his Epic class, and he couldn't imagine the skills were anything but amazing. The hours passed as Zac restored his Miasma, and he slowly decided on how to proceed. When he was

finally topped off, he jumped down to the next floor and was immediately greeted by another wave of battleroaches.

This time, there were actually several battleroaches that were over twice as large as their brethren, and their outer shell had a mysterious pattern the same color as the lights in the crystals adorning the walls. Zac immediately realized these were battleroaches that had reached the E-grade and received a large boost in strength.

Zac would normally have been elated to see the even juicier targets, but he couldn't help but frown in irritation when he saw the battlerroach captains. He only shook his head with a sigh as the large wall of **[Immutable Bulwark]** appeared.

Enraged screeches echoed through the cave as Zac steamrolled everything in his path toward the hole leading to the next floor. Insects were thrown in all directions, and even the larger evolved roaches could only stop Zac for a second before he inevitably kept pushing forward.

There was a simple reason he didn't unleash another wave of destruction on everything around him. He had chosen to go with the second skill, **[Profane Seal]**. Since he didn't know whether the Battlerroach King had a swarm of underlings surrounding him, he didn't dare to kill any beasts to inadvertently get the other skill.

He had briefly considered killing the E-grade roaches at least, reaping the huge amounts of energy from killing evolved beings, but in the end, he decided against it. He immediately realized that one or two swings wouldn't kill those sturdy-looking insects, and he didn't want to waste too much energy on a bunch of underlings.

He was confident he could complete the Class Quest without any hiccups, but the quest called Ascension Breaker was another matter. Zac had a feeling that the System wouldn't award him the quest with such nice rewards if the Battlerroach King wasn't a formidable foe. He would probably need everything in his repertoire to take that thing down.

Since there were no other exits in the cave system, he would head down to the bottom floor to fight the boss. Afterward, he would slowly work his way up through the battleroaches he had passed. That would allow him to get the skill he wanted while wasting almost no time.

There was a simple reason he chose to go for [**Profane Seal**]. Getting the area skill might be more convenient for the current him if he wanted to farm out his levels, but Zac looked at it from a longer perspective. The choices he made would perhaps affect what class choices he would get when upgrading his class, which made him think of Yrial's tips.

He would no doubt try to get a more offensive class when evolving, one that fit better with his personality and set of Dao insights. But that didn't mean he needed to get an identical class as his human side. His Hatchetman had already proven to provide great area skills, especially with the addition of [**Deforestation**]. There was no need to head in that direction for his undead class as well.

Perhaps it would be possible to get one class that excelled at large-scale battles, and another that would allow him to fight powerhouses and survive. That was at least the goal of Zac. Hopefully it would also allow him to quickly kill, or at least occupy, any incursion leaders before they could set their sights on his allies.

Zac was unstoppable with the help of [**Immutable Bulwark**], and with a final push, he soared out over the large pit. A dozen screeching battleroaches were also pushed down, and they all fell toward the next floor. Zac landed with a thud, and crunches could be heard around him from legs and shells cracking when the battleroaches landed all around him.

A glance up at the hole proved that, apart from a few overeager battleroaches, the others stayed on their floor, impotently screeching down at him. Zac sighed in relief as he kept pushing forward to the next pit, and he kept moving further and further down, only killing when absolutely necessary. Each floor had stronger and stronger enemies, with the evolved battleroaches taking up a continuously larger share of the population.

This many E-grade beasts would spell disaster almost anywhere on earth, but they only served as bowling pins at this moment. But even Zac was shocked by the sheer number of evolved targets, and he knew that he would be able to gain at least five more levels in this place after dealing with the Battleroach King.

There was finally a change when Zac reached the eleventh floor, as there was no new pit to jump into. Instead, there was a tunnel leading into the dark, out of which a green mist slowly emerged. The tunnel entrance was completely crammed with E-grade battleroaches, though none of them dared to enter the tunnel itself.

It looked like they were inhaling the green haze, meaning it was probably something beneficial to their cultivation. Zac looked around the room and saw there were more than a thousand battleroaches in total, with at least two hundred of them being evolved. He hesitated for a bit before taking out his axe.

He slowly started to take down the roaches on the last floor one by one, forgoing using **[Deathwish]** completely. He instead only used his axe to finish off the beasts and his shield to block out attacks, trying to perfect his coordination. But even then, he was forced to slow down his speed by quite a bit to not inadvertently complete the wrong quest.

Frustration started to well up in his heart, and he felt the urge to go on a rampage, cutting down everything in his path, feasting on the blood of his enemies. But a shake of his head soon had him back in reality. It was the splinter acting up again, pushing him to unleash hell in the cave.

Zac forcibly ignored the violent impulses, but as the minutes passed, he started to feel worse and worse. It was as though his whole body was itching, and he felt like he was starting to go crazy. His mind screamed for blood, and every second he felt like he was about to lose control. Zac's muscles shivered as he desperately held himself back from activating all his other offensive skills.

It was a shocking realization, how big an impact the splinter had on him. When he went all out, it was just a small whisper in the back of his head cheering him on, but now he felt just how large the impact was. It made him wonder just how much the thing was affecting his actions and personality without him noticing.

Finally, the head of the last battleroach in the cave was crushed with a slam of his shield. Zac had repressed his urges for over four hours, and he slumped down on the ground, more exhausted than from all his other battles combined. Every cell in his body was screaming at him to rush into the pitch-black tunnel to unleash a storm of violence at whatever was hiding inside, but he instead took out a Miasma Crystal with shaking hands and started to absorb it.

He had kept **[Indomitable]** going through the whole ordeal, but the mental defense skill seemed to be completely ineffectual against the insidious urgings of the Splinter of Oblivion. The effect slowly ebbed over the next hour, though, finally allowing Zac some peace of mind.

Zac got up on his feet after another hour, finally completely back to normal. At least he hoped he was. His Miasma was topped off, and he hadn't expended any mental energy cleaning out the last floor, so he was ready to press on.

He quickly opened up his status screen since he had gained another two full levels from the cave. He put his free points into Strength again before walking toward the tunnel. The green mist was still floating out from the tunnel, and now that there wasn't a swarm of battleroaches to gobble it up, it started to spread through the cave.

Zac hesitantly entered the mist and stopped, but he didn't feel anything bad was happening, and his danger sense didn't warn him either. He even felt a bit energized from staying in the mist, even though he didn't breathe at the moment.

Since the mist didn't seem to be poisonous or have any adverse effects, he immediately entered the tunnel. But Zac only walked two steps before he stopped in shock, as he was blinded by a blazing emerald light. No matter where he

looked, he saw huge crystals that were radiating a dazzling luster.

Zac frowned and looked back toward the cave where he came from, but it still looked completely normal. The only answer Zac could arrive at was that something was blocking the sight from outside.

But who would have erected an array at such a place?

BREAKING OUT

“What’s the status?” Alea asked with a tired sigh, looking over at Ilvere.

The rugged warrior didn’t have his usual boisterous attitude after entering the town hall that had been turned into a temporary command center for the war efforts of Port Atwood. He rather looked a bit helpless as he scratched his hair, with multiple new scars adorning his arms.

“They keep pressing forward,” Ilvere said. “They’ll be here in a day or so if they keep their usual pace. No matter what we do, they won’t be deterred.”

Alea shook her head and looked down at the map with confusion. The last week had been a true exercise in futility.

Initially, everything had gone as planned. The combined forces of Port Atwood and the Sino-Indian Alliance had met the sea of Zombies at the predetermined location and slowly started to whittle down their numbers from the flanks.

The horde didn’t seem to care about the losses and kept stumbling forward in the direction of the zone rife with human and Ishiate settlements. For every ten meters they progressed, they left dozens of destroyed corpses behind as the living continuously peppered them from the sidelines.

Of course, the horde wasn’t completely helpless. Now and then, large groups of elite Zombies would break out of the swarm of low-tiered undead, charging straight into the ranks of the two armies. These Zombies were not intelligent like

humans, but they weren't like the brain-dead Zombies that only mindlessly stumbled forward.

They were like a pack of wolves, and their bodies were extremely durable. They shot into the ranks of Port Atwood and the other humans, causing some murder and mayhem before rushing back into the safety of the horde. Port Atwood was generally able to rebuff these raids with the help of the powerful demons and superior equipment. But losses were unavoidable, with hundreds of soldiers already having fallen.

Of course, that was nothing compared to the losses of the Sino-Indian Alliance. They possessed large squads that mainly relied on their old-world weaponry, so when the elite Zombies pounced on them, they were like foxes let loose in the henhouse. The alliance suffered disastrous losses until they rearranged their ranks to protect the normal soldiers with cultivators.

But even Port Atwood was starting to feel the pressure. Gear was being destroyed and defensive treasures expended at a rapid rate. For now, only recruits had fallen, but their core warriors would start dying soon as well unless they turned the situation around.

But the most baffling thing had happened two days ago. The large horde suddenly changed course and was currently heading in a direction that would lead them dangerously close to their base camp. When such a thing had happened until now, there would always be a swarm of Zombies that splintered off from the main horde to cull the population of the nearby town. It was a way to bolster their numbers while they marched, or perhaps just have an outlet for their bloodlust.

She didn't believe the reason was to bring the fight to them. They would teleport out long before the slow-moving horde managed to reach them. Besides, even if they managed to take down this place, there were mostly noncombat personnel and logistics based here. Most warriors were already trailing the horde.

That wasn't the only odd thing. While the horde that the Marshall Clan fought kept their original direction apart from a

few odd detours, the third horde had veered off course as well. It was now heading into a mountainous region that was almost completely devoid of people.

That whole sector had long since become a haven for strong beasts, and there weren't just one or two evolved beast kings prowling those mountains. Heading there with a bunch of dumb Zombies would simply turn a large number of them into food for the animals.

Their scouts had also spotted dozens of smaller hordes of one to five million Zombies leaving the Dead Zone, and their initial fear had been that they were moving to bolster the larger swarms just as they started to reduce their numbers. But the smaller hordes moved in irrational patterns as well, and less than a fifth of the smaller hordes had joined up with the three large ones.

“Start packing up. I don't know why they want this place, but let them have it. We'll relocate to base camp two,” Alea said.

Ilvere nodded in confirmation, leaving the command center to make preparations. Alea stayed behind and looked at the map as though she were in a trance. She needed to figure something out to turn things around. If they just kept nipping at the sides of the swarms, they would slowly expend their people and resources, creating a Pyrrhic victory.

So far, no matter how hard they had pushed, the horde just wouldn't splinter, and they unhesitatingly sacrificed any small groups that were separated from the flock. If things continued in this manner, they would never be able to starve them out, since the innumerable Zombies kept spewing out a storm of Miasma that tainted everything and obscured their vision.

That cloud of Miasma, in turn, stopped them from daring to push too deep into the hordes for a decisive blow. They still had no idea what lurked in the middle of the sea of Zombies. If they cut too far into the horde, they might find themselves without a path of retreat.

Her lithe fingers slowly ran across the map as the minutes passed, following the paths the hordes had taken during the

past weeks. When her finger reached the small wooden soldiers representing the separate hordes' current positions, she started again with a different group, over and over. But suddenly, she froze, and she quickly got a thick marker to draw out the paths they had walked.

“They’re drawing an array!” she blurted with some terror in her eyes.

It was still in the early stages, but judging by the paths of the hordes, the Undead Empire was drawing a massive fractal with their pathing. The three larger hordes were the main veins of the fractal, with the smaller parties creating assisting pathways.

Her thoughts immediately went to the fact that the huge horde stopped for an hour or two every now and then. They had assumed the leaders of the hordes let the weaker Zombies rest, but what if they only stopped to plant array flags into the ground under the cover of the Miasmatic cloud? With millions of Zombies stomping the ground afterward, there would be no way to tell that they had dug up the ground and left something.

She blankly looked down at the map for a second, her mind reeling at the concept of just what kind of effect such a monstrous fractal would have. If it was completed, it would span a greater area than most kingdoms, its lines running thousands of miles.

She needed to report this to Lord Atwood and Ogras immediately. This was too terrifying a prospect; something of this magnitude could never be allowed to be unleashed on a planet. She was no expert on arrays, but judging by their pathing, she guessed that they would have drawn out the whole fractal in just a month. There was no way they would be able to grind down the main horde within that time.

The worst thing was that she had a pretty decent idea of what the goal of the undead was. The Undead Empire always aimed to take full control of any planet they encountered during an incursion, turning the world into a land of death. But how would that be possible when they faced the constant

oppression of the planet itself, which was constantly generating new Cosmic Energy?

Perhaps the goal of the massive array was to kill the very planet itself.

Alea hurried out of the town hall and immediately headed for the teleportation building. But she stopped in her tracks when she saw the large group of people standing in line outside with confused faces.

“What’s going on?” Alea asked the nearest demon with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“Something is wrong with the array,” the demon warrior said with a slight frown on his face. “We got the instruction to start moving the base, but the array suddenly shut down again just a few minutes after it was activated.”

Alea immediately nodded in thanks before she hurried into the building to find out what was going on. She didn’t have Lord Atwood’s supernatural sense for danger, but she’d grown up fending for herself, which awarded one an instinct for survival. And her instincts were currently screaming at her that something was terribly wrong.

“What’s happening?” she asked when she found Ilvere standing together with a few noncombat personnel.

“I was just about to call you,” Ilvere said with a somber face before he walked closer and continued with a soft voice that only she could hear. “Our array is being blocked.”

“How is that possible?” Alea said with shock. “Those siege tools shouldn’t be available on a baby planet. We haven’t prepared any countermeasures.”

“I have no idea. What do you want to do?” Ilvere asked.

Ilvere was a strong military leader, always fighting in the vanguard to bolster the troop morale. But he wasn’t the best-equipped demon to handle this sort of unclear situation. Alea bit her lip for a second before looking up with determination.

“Get everyone ready and immediately recall the army. Have them return within six hours even if they have to run

until their feet bleed. Also, send out scouts to investigate in all directions,” she said. “We need to get away from here; something is wrong. If the teleporters are down, we can only leave on foot.”

Ilvere nodded and walked out, immediately starting to bark new orders to the gathering crowd. Alea also left the teleportation room after asking the stationed guards to keep trying. They had no experts in arrays, so there was no one that she could ask to figure out a work-around or a way to dispel the blockage. They were currently at the mercy of whoever was running interference.

Various thoughts swirled in her mind as she walked back to her own residence. She quickly put away all her possessions before walking down into the massive room in the basement. It had once been a luxurious spa with two pools, but Alea had turned it into something else completely.

The larger pool was half-filled with a deep green liquid that emanated small puffs of smoke at regular intervals. Alea sighed when she looked at her creation. She lacked time, and the purification wasn't completely done. But her specially modified [**Corpserot Poison**] should at least be concentrated enough to make most of the elite Zombies fall apart in seconds.

Her mood improved noticeably when she walked over to the smaller pool, whose jets kept the liquid inside in constant motion. The electrical pool was truly a marvel, and she had already decided to get her hands on one of these things for her house after the war was over. Imagine watching the stars in one of these things, perhaps even with a companion.

Alea quickly snapped out of her daydreams and put her hand into the warm golden liquid. It was as though her hand were a vacuum or tear in space, as the potent poison rushed into her body without leaving a drop behind. After the first pool was cleared out, she did the same with the second pond.

The hours passed as a subdued atmosphere spread across the small town and its three thousand temporary residents. The human Barkeep had tried to enliven people's spirits by

offering his energized concoctions, but it barely helped. They all knew that something was truly wrong.

The teleportation array was still out of order after four hours, proving that it was not just some odd coincidence. But worse yet, their scouts had recently found out that their retreating army was harried by a swarm of almost a million elite Zombies. The undead had kept pace with them since the soldiers of Port Atwood left the main horde of the Zombies.

“Has everyone returned?” Alea asked as she stood in the command center once more for a final meeting.

“Three scouts haven’t returned. They were all supposed to scout northwest, so I fear they have met some trouble in the passage,” the scout leader said with a sigh. “There’s nothing else in the other directions apart from the beasts.”

Alea looked down at the map with a frown. Northwest was the direction that she had wanted to move in. Northwest had a reasonably safe path between two mountain ranges that led to a large settlement after a week’s travel.

If they moved north or east, they would have to travel twice that distance in extremely hostile terrain before reaching any town with a teleporter. And even if they managed to get through to the towns, they would face catastrophic losses during their flight. Alea and the other leaders weren’t like Lord Atwood. They couldn’t keep the whole army safe from the continuous onslaught of rabid beasts.

South and southeast were right in the direction of the Zombie horde, and that was to head straight into the maw of the beast. Especially now that the undead seemed to actively fight back for the first time since the conflict started.

“We’ll head northwest,” Alea said as killing intent started to leak from her body. “Someone wants to trap us here, but the people of Port Atwood are not so easy to contain. Prepare for all-out war. We’re breaking out by force.”

BATTLE ROACH KING

Zac stared at the mouth of the entrance with confusion, not understanding who could have placed an array there. He couldn't imagine anyone managing to sneak all the way down to the bottom of this roach-infested cave system in one piece and not leave a single trace behind.

The effect of the array wasn't limited to simply blocking out the light from the crystals, but it was also hindering most of the green gas from escaping. Judging by the density of the green mist in the tunnel, Zac guessed that only 10% of the gasses escaped through the array, if even that.

He carefully looked around the entrance for any array flags, hoping that the design would give a hint of the origins of whoever had placed it there. However, no matter where he looked, he couldn't find a hint of the source of the array, making him wonder if this thing might actually be one of the natural formations he had read about.

But a clattering from further inside the tunnel quickly caught Zac's attention, and he slowly moved forward with his axe and shield at the ready. The radiant tunnel turned out to be less than fifty meters long, and he immediately reached another large cave after turning around a bend.

The whole cavern was filled with a green mist reaching all the way to the ceiling tens of meters in the air. But even with the thick haze, he had no trouble seeing what was going on inside. The cave was blasted by the emerald light of the large crystals, and the light pierced through the mist without any trouble.

His eyes only lingered on the surroundings for a fraction of a second, as there was something that immediately commanded his attention. A huge hulking battleroach lay unmoving close to the center of the cave, seemingly asleep. The layered carapace along its back slowly moved up and down as though they were fans, but Zac noticed that green mist was continuously being sucked into the gaps beneath the shells.

It was the Battleroach King that commanded the center of the cave, and there were quite a few differences between the king and its subjects. The Battleroach King was completely emerald, for instance, rather than the brownish-black of the normal battleroaches. It was also huge, spanning over five meters in length.

Its long legs looked a lot sturdier compared to its brethren, and short serrated blades ran along their length. A casual swipe would likely bisect most people without effort. Its mandibles were enormous, spanning over a meter as well. Finally, it even had a large horn, reminding Zac of some beetles.

The presence of the huge battleroach was so intense that Zac didn't notice the other object in the cave for a few seconds. But soon enough, he spotted the large, stubby mushroom that grew just a few meters away from the large beast.

It was almost a meter tall and had a fat bulbous stalk and a spherical cap. All in all, it looked a lot like a supersized fly agaric, apart from its colors. The stalk was deep purple while the cap was emerald and studded with black spots. It looked extremely toxic, though Zac had a feeling that actually wasn't the case.

It was the first plant that Zac had seen inside the cave system since entering. More interestingly, it looked like the mushroom was the source of the massive clouds of green mist. After putting two and two together, he quickly realized that the mushroom was the **[Primordial Breath Amanita]**.

Zac frowned when he saw that the treasure was out in the open. A battle at his level would cause pretty massive shockwaves if he went all out, and he was afraid that the precious mushroom would get ruined.

Then again, the cave was quite massive, a few times larger than the outer caves, where thousands of battleroaches had been crammed together. He would simply have to move the battle away from the Amanita. Seeing how close the beast was to the mushroom, it should be quite important to it, so it would hopefully comply immediately.

There was nothing else for Zac to do at this moment apart from getting on with it, so he stepped out into the cave and immediately used [**Inquisitive Eye**]. Zac breathed out in relief when he saw that the beast was level 94, just four levels above the minimum required to complete the quest.

Luckily, he had only cleared out the last floor to avoid any reinforcements during the battle. If he had slowly made his way down while killing the roaches on each floor, there was no way he would have been able to finish the quest for [**Profane Seal**].

A piercing screech suddenly echoed through the cave as the roach king woke up. It had noticed the prying, and it was enraged that someone had encroached upon its domain. Zac wasn't surprised that he had been exposed because his observation skill was truly basic. He immediately ran into the cave, wanting to move as far away from the mushroom as possible.

Zac only had time to take a few steps along the edge of the cave when his danger sense screamed at him. He quickly summoned [**Immutable Bulwark**] to protect his front, but the next second, a huge force lifted the bulwark with lightning speed. The Battleroach King used its horn to wedge beneath the shield and yanked it up with superior power.

It was the first time his skill had been so effortlessly circumvented by a beast, and Zac barely had time to move his real shield as well before the beast slammed into him with tremendous force. Zac was thrown into the wall with enough

momentum to make his head spin, and a few of the crystals embedded in the wall painfully dug into his back.

The attack wasn't over, though, as the enormous mandibles closed in around him, aiming to split him in two. Zac's brows rose in alarm as he quickly pushed his large shield upward to use it as a wedge, and he immediately infused it with the Dao of Hardness.

Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing when the top of the sturdy E-grade shield was being slowly pincered, the metal starting to twist and bend as the large mandibles cut into it. Seeing that the shield wouldn't be able to hold for much longer, he ducked down and forcibly twisted the shield with all of his power.

The move allowed him to drag the shield out of the battleroach's grip before it was ruined, but ducking down put Zac in clawing distance of the front legs and their sharp blades. A burning pain erupted in his shoulder as one of the legs raked a bleeding gash with its first swipe. The other leg tried to cut open another wound as well, but Zac slammed into it with **[Verun's Bite]**.

A sharp clang echoed across the cave as axe and leg met, and Zac looked with dismay when even his axe barely left a mark. This was a swing empowered by his huge Strength and the Dao of Sharpness, not a random swing from some middling cultivator. At least the collision allowed Zac a breather as the leg was pushed back.

Zac didn't want to stay in such a place surrounded by bladed legs, but he had a feeling that the belly was his best bet if he wanted to cause any real damage to this thing. Miasma surged in his arm as he rushed forward two steps. He blocked another swipe from one of the beast's legs as his arm kept swelling from **[Unholy Strike]**, and with a roar, he swung upward in a ferocious swing.

The air screamed as **[Verun's Bite]** went in for the kill, but the huge target above Zac's head suddenly disappeared. Zac looked in all directions, but the roach was nowhere to be seen.

The roaring mists quickly gave a hint as to where the huge beast had run off to: the skies.

A set of huge magical wings spread out from the back of the emerald Battleroach King. Their span was only a few meters, but it was obvious the set of wings didn't follow the laws of nature to keep the huge beast afloat. The wings were made from pure emerald energies, looking extremely similar to the lights in the crystals.

“What the fu—” Zac groaned, but he suddenly had to jump out of the way as the flying roach dove for him with terrifying speed.

The ground trembled, and gravel shot in all directions when the Battleroach King slammed into the ground where Zac had just stood. The shockwave from the collision threw Zac a few meters away, and he shot a glance at the mushroom with alarm.

Sometime during the battle, a golden shield had encapsulated the natural treasure, and Zac recognized the System's handiwork immediately. He nodded in relief, knowing that nothing would harm the Amanita even if the two tore the whole cave apart.

The fact that the battleroach managed to crack even the rocky foundation in the cave was a testament to just how powerful it was. A level 94, the beast was closing in on the level that Inevitability had when he fought it during the hunt, and Zac really felt the pressure. But constant battle had turned Zac's nerves into steel, and he unhesitantly rushed toward the beast as it tried to extricate its mandibles from the ground.

The green mist swirled around him as he jumped forward, his axe swinging down with terrifying momentum. The weapon was once again infused with the Dao of Sharpness as Zac aimed down at a joint in the beast's neck. But a green radiance flashed as a shield appeared right above the joint, stopping Zac's swing in its tracks.

Zac couldn't believe what a cheat-like existence the Battleroach King was, even possessing defensive skills on top of its abnormally hard shell. But he refused to give up and

jumped up on the back of the beast as he stowed away his shield to grab hold of a shell for balance.

Terrifying swings rained down on the head of the Battleroach King, and Zac alternated between the Dao of Heaviness and Dao of Sharpness to crack open the thick plating to kill the beast. If that didn't work, he hoped that he would at least be able to cause some blunt-force trauma with his powerful attacks.

The roach roared in rage, but no matter how many swings Zac unleashed, he couldn't seem to break open its head. But it did start to stumble around, proving that the force was starting to have an effect. Zac resolved to keep slamming down at it, sure that his Spirit Tool would last longer than the brain of the beast.

Suddenly, a searing pain erupted in his side, and Zac looked down to see a green beam shoot straight through his body and into the wall beyond him, causing a huge scar. Zac screamed in anguish, feeling like his insides were boiling. But he forcibly ignored the pain and quickly looked back to see that the massive wings had changed to instead form two large arrays, one of which had released a massive beam at him.

The attack had been instantaneous, and not even his danger sense had been able to give a warning in time. Worse yet, it looked like the second array was charging up a similar beam. Zac knew he wouldn't be able to dodge in such close proximity, so he quickly took out his shield and summoned **[Immutable Bulwark]**.

Just a fraction of a second later, another terrifying beam hit the bulwark, causing a tremendous impact. Luckily, the shield held, but a large amount of Miasma was expended from the blast. But since he had taken out his shield for protection, he had let go of the beast, and between the bucking Battleroach King and the shockwave, he was thrown off the beast.

A spectral projection looking like the Battleroach King bit down at the emerald array hovering above the beast's back as Zac was flung away, but it was as though **[Deathwish]** tried to strike a cloud, and it ripped right through. Zac sighed in

disappointment when he saw the specter slam down on the extremely thick backplate instead. It looked like destroying the arrays was not an option either.

Zac groaned in pain as the wound in his side made itself remembered from the impact of landing on the ground, but Zac forcibly got back up on his feet. He was unwilling and unable to give up, knowing that if he didn't destroy this insectoid tank, he'd be trapped down here for a year.

BATTLE OF ATTRITION

Just as Zac was unsure of how to proceed against the seemingly impenetrable Battleroach King, the two arrays above the beast lit up once more. Zac immediately moved the bulwark to his front again, but his brows rose in alarm when he saw dozens of small emerald embers rush out every second, each flying toward him as though they were alive.

The moment he saw the quick turns and amazing speed of the small motes of light, Zac realized that he never would be able to block them all, and he wouldn't be able to flee either. Instead, he could only infuse himself with the Dao of Hardness while getting his defensive treasures ready just in case.

The first ember flashed around the large bulwark to slam into Zac's chest, and Zac was relieved to realize that while it was painful, the attack only caused a superficial wound that would heal by itself soon enough. Another specter appeared again in response to the attack, once again swinging down at the tough back carapace, though with far less power compared to the last one.

Zac realized that his skill considered the array as the source of the attack, rather than the battleroach. Otherwise, it would have aimed for the softer belly instead. But as he saw **[Deathwish]** once again failing to cause any damage, he had an inspiration.

The next moment, one light after another slammed into him, each causing a small wound on his body. The area above the battleroach immediately filled up with scores of specters that charged its impervious back plating. However, the

appearance of some of the specters soon started to change, taking on a murky green tinge.

Elation flashed in Zac's eyes as he endured the energy barrage. His idea had proven successful. While **[Deathwish]** was still in Early mastery, he'd had no connection to the projections that were created, but now things had changed. Since there was a connection, Zac realized he might be able to infuse the ghosts with his Dao to empower the strikes.

His idea had proven correct, though Zac only managed to infuse some of the rapidly appearing ghosts. His control of mental energy was still not too impressive, and the window to imbue the ghosts seemed to be shorter than a second. He tried to utilize his earlier lesson about only retaliating some of the attacks, but his mind was already too occupied with the Dao infusion, so he could only let the skill keep running.

The reason the ghosts turned a murky green was that Zac had chosen to imbue all the specters he could with the Dao of Rot. He realized that if he couldn't even break through the shell while wielding **[Verun's Bite]**, then there would be no way to do it with the far weaker attacks from **[Deathwish]**. But what if he could whittle down the beast in another way?

Zac had already learned that the effect of the Seed of Rot was stacking, and he hoped to accumulate enough rot on the shell to affect the beast. The rapid-fire attacks of the arrays were luckily an excellent way to apply the Dao of Rot over and over, and in just moments, the emerald mists around the battleroach had turned a shade darker from Zac's Dao.

Of course, this didn't come without a price. His whole body was covered in flesh wounds and black ichor, and his Miasma was getting drained at a terrifying rate. It was starting to get to the point that Zac was getting unsure whether he would still be standing before his plan would even come to fruition.

However, the exchange seemed to not only drain Zac's reserves. The two arrays soon dimmed down and sank into the body of the Battleroach King again. Zac's eyes tried to glean any change in the beast's demeanor, but from what he could

tell, it was the same as before. The shell still looked as impervious as before, apart from having a slightly darker tint.

The beast looked at Zac as well, and its layered protection once again started to slowly fan up and down. Zac glared back at the beast before taking out a healing pill. The two reached a stalemate of sorts, each party perhaps surprised at the power and resilience the other exhibited.

But the stalemate only lasted for a few seconds before both once again exploded into action. Zac slammed his shield into the ground, causing a wave of sharp spikes to erupt in a wave toward the incoming beast. The battleroach didn't falter the slightest, and rushed into it headfirst, crushing the spikes without any trouble.

A few spikes managed to topple its balance, but it was soon upon Zac once again. This time, Zac didn't try to block its mandibles with his shield and instead weaved beneath the beast. The legs' razor-sharp blades flashed all around him as he desperately blocked as many attacks as he could while retaliating with a rot-infused axe over and over. Now and then, he tried a surprise strike at the joints, but the emerald energy shield kept appearing to block any damage.

The brutal melee kept going for minutes as the two unleashed a storm of blows at each other that would render most people crippled. But Zac had truly met his match in endurance this time. The glistening emerald carapace held steady against Zac's assaults, even though Zac mostly tried to hit the same spot over and over.

Soon twenty minutes had passed, and Zac was forced to consider a means of escape. He was running dangerously low on Miasma, and his head was already pounding from the constant use of multiple Dao Seeds. He was even considering using his **[Void Ball]** in a bid to end the fight, even if he was certain that would mean failing his Class Quest.

But a change finally took place in the battle as the Battleroach King wildly swung its head to impale Zac on its horn. But the aim was completely off, and Zac was surprised to see that the beast started to stumble as though it were drunk.

His gambit seemed to finally have taken effect. The Dao of Rot might not have worked very well against the inorganic carapace of the battleroach, but mists of putrefaction still covered the area around the strike. This mist got mixed up with the emerald haze stemming from the treasure mushroom, which the beast constantly absorbed. It looked like the compounding effect of Zac's rot finally eclipsed the beast's natural regeneration.

The battleroach screeched in anger as its legs buckled, and it desperately tried to get back on its feet. But the effect was only getting worse, and soon green liquid started to leak through the gaps in the shell as the beast's innards were rapidly rotting away.

Perhaps this was enough to kill the beast in due time, but Zac ran out of patience after waiting another ten minutes. He walked over with his axe as his arm slowly swelled to ridiculous proportions. The battleroach feebly tried to bite down at Zac, but its coordination was completely ruined by now.

Zac easily passed its large head to reach the insect's neck, and with a roar, swung down his axe with all the strength he could muster. An emerald shield appeared above the joint as before, but it had lost its luster and was incessantly flickering. The white head of **[Verun's Bite]** ripped through the shield like dry wood, and Zac finally managed to land a true strike.

A flood of energy entered his body almost immediately, and Zac sat down a few meters from the killed beast in exhaustion. He immediately took out two Miasma Crystals, too tired to even move. He sensed the impartment of a new fractal on his body, but he was in no state to look into it at the moment.

It was only two hours later he opened his eyes. He was still extremely tired, but a somewhat pressing matter had interrupted him. The large carcass of the Battleroach King kept leaking a nauseating goop through the cracks, and by now, it had created a fetid pool around it that almost reached Zac's resting spot. Zac put the large carapace away with some disgust before moving over to the mushroom.

He still hadn't received his reward from Ascension Breaker yet, but he guessed it would complete when he harvested the mushroom, as it was still protected by the System's defensive shield. Just as he expected, the golden shield disappeared when he got close, but Zac's eyes widened in alarm when there was nothing inside. The spot where the mushroom had been rooted was empty apart from a hole reaching into the ground.

But Zac soon breathed out in relief when he saw the two boxes right next to him. They had appeared completely noiselessly without a single energy fluctuation just like his rewards from earlier quests. The larger of the two boxes was made from light-gray stone and inlaid with golden fractals, and it was almost as tall as Zac was.

There was no doubt that the box contained the mushroom, and Zac was more than happy that the System had packaged it for him. Properly harvesting and storing Spiritual Herbs was a skill in and of itself, and he was afraid that he would ruin the mushroom if he simply ripped it out of the ground.

The other box looked like a small jewelry box made out of pitch-black wood. Zac stored the larger box in his Cosmos Sack, instead focusing on the smaller one. As he expected, a small crystal was placed inside, and Zac immediately took it up to scan its contents.

Zac had been worried that the System would award him something that didn't suit his needs, but it looked like he had been too suspicious. The skill was called [**Winds of Decay**], and Zac didn't hesitate to learn it. It sounded like something that would be a nice addition to his current class, and perhaps he even got this specific skill because of the way he'd managed to take down the battleroach.

The fractal found a position at the top of his lungs, right below the area that was being occupied by [**Thousand Faces**]. Having already gotten a few skills from outside sources, he could tell that while the fit wasn't amazing, it wasn't too bad either. He believed the new skill should be able to display at least 70% of its true power when he used it.

Zac had restored less than a third of his energy in the past two hours, but he couldn't stop himself from trying out the skill. Miasma effortlessly entered the fractal, but there was no effect apart from the Miasma changing somehow. He tried to move the energy to his arms to release the skill, but the energy wouldn't budge. Zac frowned as he looked down at the small crystal in his hands until he had an idea.

Fresh air entered his lungs for the first time in days as he took a deep breath, even though he didn't need to breathe in his undead form. The energy from [**Winds of Decay**] entered his lungs as well, making Zac certain he was on the right track. A dark gust billowed out when he exhaled, immediately covering an area of over fifteen meters in no time.

Zac was happy that the skill worked, but he couldn't stop himself from grimacing. Did the System really give him a bad-breath skill? Zac shook his head with a wry smile and instead turned his attention to his class skill, [**Profane Seal**]. He needed something to cleanse the proverbial bad taste in his mouth after getting the last skill. A burst of information entered his mind when he focused on the other fractal, but Zac didn't even have time to celebrate before a change occurred in the cave.

A sudden sound threw any thought of experimenting with his other skill into the back of Zac's mind, and he whirled around with his axe ready. What entered Zac's sight wasn't one of the remaining battleroaches having found its way down from the floors above. It was something else entirely.

A small humanoid stood in the inner corner of the cave, almost on the opposite side of where Zac had entered. It was roughly a meter tall with two large black eyes on a head that looked pretty large for an otherwise lithe frame. If it weren't for the small horns and the tail, Zac would have classified the being as a traditional alien, for lack of a better name.

There were other strange things with the alien apart from the fact that it had somehow found its way down into the cave without him noticing. Two small drones of clearly technological origin hovered above its head, and it looked like he was holding some sort of device in his hand that was more

akin to a tablet than some System-approved weapon. Its clothes also didn't follow the style of most battle gear, and it looked a bit like a modern Chinese Tang suit.

Zac was frozen in shock at seeing the unexpected arrival, but the same could be said about the alien. It stood unmoving a few meters into the cave, looking back and forth between the center of the cave and the battle-worn appearance of Zac.

Finally, the silence broke as the two spoke up at the same time.

“Draugr?”

“Technocrat?”

FIRMAMENT'S EDGE

Zac wasn't too surprised that the alien could identify his origins. He hadn't worn his mask during his time in the cave, which exposed his pallid skin and signature pitch-black eyes.

"Technocrat is imprecise and reductionist. I am a member of Firmament's Edge, something greater than what a miscreation like you can ever imagine," the alien arrogantly exclaimed. "Were you the one who ruined my experiment? More importantly, how did you get here?"

Zac mutely stared at the haughty little alien, unsure of what to make of the situation. He had never heard of Technocrats participating in invading newly integrated planets, yet a member of them stood in front of him. He had no idea what Firmament's Edge was, but he guessed it was one of the many factions within the Technocrat Alliance.

The appearance of a true Technocrat caused a storm in Zac's heart as it dragged up the subject of his mother. Was the appearance of this thing linked to her? Or even worse, was it linked to the item in Kenzie's mind? But Zac forcefully calmed down his fraying emotions and gave the alien an impervious stare. He needed to act the part if he wanted to get some information.

"The Undead Empire goes where it pleases," Zac said with matching arrogance. "I'm here because there were a lot of things to kill."

"You! My poor roach. I spent so much money to infuse it with the genes for energy control! It might have caused an

unseen evolution with the help of the Amanita, but you ruined it all!” the alien said with gnashing teeth.

Zac shrugged his shoulders without a care, though he was internally boiling with rage. Was this little prick the reason that the Battleroach King had such annoying skills like the energy wings and the defensive shield? It had made his life a lot harder than it needed to be. But he pushed down his annoyance since he truly needed to know what was going on.

“Your kind should know better than to encroach a planet under the Undead Empire. What are you doing here?” Zac said.

“Pah, Firmament’s Edge doesn’t fear you. Even if a few of your old undyings crawl out of their sealed cultivation graves, we have people to meet them head-on,” the alien snorted, but he suddenly froze in alarm. “Wait, what do you mean under your control?”

“We came to this baby planet through the incursion, so naturally, the planet belongs to the Undead Empire from now on,” Zac snorted, stilling his fraying nerves.

The fact that the Technocrat wasn’t backing down against a monstrous existence such as the Undead Empire was pretty telling that Firmament’s Edge wasn’t some backwater faction. His thoughts went to the story that Karunthel told about the Technocrat who had no problem blowing up planets. Even Earth had the technology to ruin their world before the integration. What about a faction of hyper-advanced aliens?

“Shit, have you lunatics already started the terraforming?!” the alien gasped. “We need to speak with your leaders immediately. And how the hell did your people find your way down here so quickly? We have been drilling for months.”

“Why would I arrange a meeting like that?” Zac asked with feigned disinterest, ignoring the question of how he got down to the underworld.

“We have no interest in the planet; kill all the natives for all I care. But we need to do a quick sweep of the planet before

you terraform it,” the alien said. “We are even willing to compensate you for the trouble.”

“What’s so important that you came all the way here?” Zac probed.

“That’s private,” the alien immediately responded with a frown.

“Well, if you don’t tell me what it is you’re looking for, I don’t see a reas–” Zac pushed the alien, but he was suddenly interrupted mid-sentence.

For some reason, his Cosmos Sack had started to vibrate, making Zac look down with confusion. When he infused his mind into the sack, he was horrified to see that it was his mother’s necklace that was moving around in the bag’s subspace, something Zac thought was impossible.

He quickly looked up at the alien again, since what happened clearly wasn’t a coincidence. The amulet had been completely inert until now, and it only started to act up the moment he got close to a Technocrat. And as he expected, the little alien had taken out some ball that emitted a barely discernible wave at regular intervals.

“You have it! It’s on this planet! We actually found it!” the alien screamed in shock and excitement as his eyes were glued to the ball. “The traitor has been found!”

A towering killing intent suffused Zac’s mind as he glared at the exhilarated alien. He had been wary of the Technocrats’ stance since he’d learned of his mother’s origin, but the alien’s last comment seemed to cement a disappointing reality that he had been dreading for months.

The Technocrats were enemies.

If his mother had been branded a traitor, there was no way that things would end well if his and his sister’s origins were exposed. They were barely holding on as it was when the largest threat was only a vagrant D-grade cultivator. They couldn’t handle being in the crosshairs of one of the Multiverse’s most powerful factions.

This alien could under no circumstance be allowed to live. The danger to his sister was just too big.

A storm of energy swirled around Zac as he immediately activated almost every skill in his repertoire. He wouldn't take any risks against the Technocrats, especially not when his sister's safety was at risk. A large swathe of Miasma billowed out from him in an instant as **[Fields of Despair]** activated, but Zac held off on summoning the large barrier.

The alien immediately noticed the change, and he looked up at Zac with a scrunched-up face.

“So you have already found it! You should never have meddled in the business of Firmament's Edge,” the alien growled, and the two drones above the alien's head started to hum as they shone with a sinister red light. “Die!”

Zac couldn't sense any energy fluctuations from the increasingly blinding weapons, but he knew that they were charging some extremely strong attack. However, Zac still wasn't worried, and he kept the alien within his sight until the moment his danger sense warned him something bad was about to happen.

Zac stomped down on the ground just before two huge beams shot at his position, causing a wide path of destruction. Even the air itself seemed to be immolated by the terrifying beams, and they even managed to carve holes in the walls that were so deep that the ends of the newly created tunnels couldn't be seen.

But Zac suddenly appeared straight in front of the alien, completely unscathed, as waves of death radiated all around him. The little gray man looked up in shock at Zac's sudden appearance, but he immediately started to disappear through some unknown means. However, Zac still wasn't worried as he once again stomped down his foot.

“Seal,” Zac growled, and the area around him drastically changed once again.

The Miasma from **[Fields of Despair]** congealed into five large towers that formed a circle with Zac as the epicenter. On

the top of each tower, an azure fractal shone like a cursed lighthouse, and hazy fractals ran along the length of the spires.

The towers weren't truly corporeal like the hand that Zac summoned with **[Nature's Punishment]**, but they were much more real than the specters from **[Deathwish]**. They were slightly reminiscent of the Unholy Beacons, but they emitted a far more arcane aura, as though they had been summoned from the true underworld.

The sudden appearance of the towers wasn't the end of the skill, as each tower shot out a ghastly chain that moved like a lightning bolt to converge at the same spot. A shrill shriek echoed across the cave as the alien appeared twenty meters away from Zac, completely chained down.

Four of the chains had fettered his hands and legs, and the final chain snaked around his neck. The Technocrat desperately tried to break the chains with all his might, but it was like they were wrought from divine iron and didn't budge the slightest. A bracer on the alien's arm even shot out two radiant beams at the restraints, but it only left a small mark.

The Technocrat only had time to unleash one attack before he started to howl at the top of his lungs as his whole body spasmed uncontrollably. At the same time, a haze started to pour out from the chains, once again filling the area with Miasma. They were currently forcibly converting the energy inside the small alien into Miasma, just like **[Field of Despair]** did with corpses.

Zac grimaced as he looked upon the horrifying torture, but he made no move to stop it. This was, after all, a person who not only had tried to kill him, but also one who had been completely indifferent to the death of his whole planet.

But soon enough, the alien managed to focus enough to command the two drones to help out, and they started to charge up new blasts. Zac couldn't let that happen, so immediately hurled two daggers at them. But a red shield sprang up to protect them, making Zac remember the extremely durable forcefield that had protected Kenzie at King's Crossing.

He couldn't allow the two drones to attack the chains or the towers, as even they wouldn't be able to last too long against the terrible blasts those small machines could unleash. The Technocrat saw his approach, and he glared at him with hatred. Zac ignored the stare and got ready to destroy the two things with a swing of his axe, or at least make them miss their targets.

Blinding light suddenly stole Zac's vision as a blast hurled him into the distance, almost knocking him unconscious. But Zac refused to let his mind fill with darkness, not when the stakes were so high. He shook his head and immediately got back on his feet with a groan and looked up at the fleeing form of the Technocrat.

The small alien had actually sacrificed a hand and a leg, while the self-detonations of the two drones had destroyed the three other chains. He was currently flying away in the opposite direction of Zac, somehow ignoring gravity. But his escape was immediately stopped the moment he tried to escape between two of the towers as an azure wall appeared to block him.

The alien screamed in frustration and launched a beam of light at the wall from his remaining hand. Zac couldn't tell whether it was a skill or another gadget, but he quickly got his answer as an alien ghost appeared behind the Technocrat and gored him through his chest.

Zac wanted to run up and take down the Technocrat before he could do anything else. But his legs stopped listening to him after a few steps, making him fall over once more. Luckily, Zac wasn't out of cards just yet and took a deep breath.

This time, he didn't simply exhale, but rather blew out a gust empowered by **[Winds of Decay]** with all the force he could muster. A black storm expanded from his mouth like a hurricane, and the whole cage created by the five towers was completely engulfed in a second. Screams could be heard from the other side, but Zac didn't stop and kept blowing and blowing, drowning the area in decay.

But even a minute later, the screams didn't abate, and Zac frowned as he took out a healing pill and started to drag himself over toward where the screams came from. His sight had been blocked by the dense cloud he released, but when he finally reached the location, even he couldn't help but blanch. The state of the Technocrat was beyond pitiful, and Zac almost instinctually killed him to put him out of his misery before stopping himself.

Half the alien's body was in a state of putrefaction, looking like a corpse dragged out of the sewers. But a mysterious force continuously restored his body and expelled the dead cells in a form of rapid regeneration. Zac couldn't see any machines, but he guessed it was some advanced technology at play.

But this process was clearly extremely painful, judging by the alien's screams, and worse was that the moment his new cells were formed, they immediately started to rot again due to the lingering effect of **[Winds of Decay]**. The alien was constantly dragged back and forth in a tortuous cycle of life and death, being both and neither at the same time.

It looked like he had lost all body functions since he couldn't move a muscle; he only looked up at Zac with despair.

"Kill me," the alien cried with a shaking voice.

"Give me answers first," Zac said, fortifying his heart. "What are your Firmament's Edge after?"

AN EASY GIG

“I am not really part of Firmament’s Edge.” The alien wept. “My company was just one of many contracted by them to scan newly integrated planets. I just wanted to use their name to make you back down.”

Zac couldn’t help but shake his head at the Technocrat’s bad luck. Perhaps Firmament’s Edge was a terrifying existence in the Multiverse, but unfortunately for the alien, Zac was perhaps the only Draugr who had never heard of them before.

“Who is the traitor you mentioned? What were you looking for?” Zac asked.

“I don’t know,” the alien wheezed, but his eyes widened in horror when black smoke started to emanate from the corner of Zac’s mouth. “I swear I don’t! We were all given scanning equipment before being transported. We were simply supposed to immediately report back if the equipment found whatever they were looking for.”

It was a huge relief to Zac that it seemed as though the true leaders of the Technocrats hadn’t been warned by the silver ball that was lying next to the alien. Zac gazed at it for a second before he reached over and crushed it in his fist, twisting it beyond redemption.

“Then why did you mention a traitor?” Zac asked with a scowl after turning back to the dying Technocrat.

“It’s a rumor my boss heard. A top person in Firmament’s Edge stole something extremely valuable and fled to unintegrated territory. But insignificant people like us have no

way of finding out the details. If we did, our home planets would get incinerated in a heartbeat.” The alien winced.

Zac kept pushing for more answers, but the alien started rambling and became incoherent in less than a minute. His brain was breaking down like the rest of his body, and Zac ended his life with a merciful swing.

He did, however, manage to find out a few more tidbits. The hidden incursion in the underworld was truly a Technocrat incursion, and it was controlled by a small corporation attached to the Technocrat Faction. They only possessed five E-grade warriors, the foreman of the company along with four cultivator bodyguards.

Better yet, it seemed that the System truly had it out for the Technocrats because it essentially confiscated any and all advanced technology that they tried to sneak to Earth. Only minor items without destructive capabilities or components that needed massive amounts of refinement were allowed through, but at exorbitant cost.

Most of their time had been spent building their base since they needed to produce almost everything from scratch. Of course, the Technocrats’ name wasn’t just for show, and they already had production lines for all the essentials they needed for their mission.

They had created an arsenal of weaponry with the help of the plentiful minerals and crystals in the underworld, creating an impervious defense. Even the two dangerous drones had been created almost from scratch on Earth, proving how great their capabilities were. Luckily, they required a few hard-to-make components that limited their number. But still, rooting them out would be far harder than their low levels indicated.

He also learned that time was of the essence. The Technocrats had been arduously digging toward the surface the past three months, not resting a second after they finally managed to manufacture a monstrous machine that was strong enough to rip through the reinforced ground. They expected to be able to reach the surface in less than two weeks, at which

point they would set up some massive scanning device they had brought.

Zac couldn't let them reach the surface. His amulet had been spotted, even though it was inside a Cosmos Sack, proving the quality of the scanning devices Firmament's Edge possessed. Unfortunately, the alien had no idea how the tools worked or the limits of their capabilities.

He only knew that they couldn't send transmissions through space, since the System blocked them. But they might be able to find anything that Leandra had ever touched. Or even worse, they might find Kenzie even if she stayed within the Mystic Realm.

The Technocrat company that had arrived on Earth hadn't expected to find anything and only saw the incursion as an easy gig. They would arrive at the planet, scan it with the items, steal some resources, and then return to get paid by Firmament's Edge.

They had only brought a small crew of mostly noncombat personnel, wanting to keep their costs as low as possible. But that would all change if they found signs that Earth actually was the planet that Firmament's Edge was so desperately searching for. The Great Redeemer would be the least of Zac's problems if that happened.

Zac looked down at the dead body of the Technocrat, but he still held off on deactivating **[Profane Seal]**. Keeping the towers around did drain a decent amount of Miasma, but there was a good reason for keeping it. A towering aura billowed out from Zac's body, causing the air to shudder as Zac kept changing between infusing it with the Dao of Heaviness, Sharpness, and Rot.

It was his Dao Fields, and he unleashed them to the fullest in hopes of catching and destroying any hidden machines. The Technocrat had turned delirious before Zac had the opportunity to ask anything about the items he possessed, so Zac was afraid to release the cage. What if a hidden spy cam found its way back to the Technocrat incursion?

A crackling noise drew Zac's attention, and he looked over in the direction of where the sound came from. Dozens of small detonations took place in the air, looking like flies getting zapped by electricity. Zac looked at the spectacle with confusion until he managed to snag one of the flies as it exploded nearby.

The thing was as small as a grain and seemed to be made from platinum, but Zac couldn't be completely sure of its original form since it was pretty torn. It was covered in cuts so minute that Zac could barely see them, and bent and twisted as though it had been subject to extreme pressure.

It appeared that the thing was immune to his [**Winds of Decay**] skill, but it was helpless against the Dao. It wasn't surprising, since the Dao wasn't simply increasing the power of skills; it was attacking with the fundamental truths of the universe. It was hard to block out and even harder to heal from when wounded.

Zac's mind was pounding like he had a bad headache, but he pushed himself to the limit to drown the area in his Dao Fields for a while longer. With his current level of insight, the area turned into a field of death, something far beyond the area around the Fiend Wolf during the first beast wave. Even cultivators who had already got their class would likely be turned to mincemeat if they came within fifty meters of Zac at this moment.

Luckily, it only took a few seconds before the crackling stopped, meaning all the microscopic machines in the air were destroyed. He didn't know what the purpose of the small machines was, but leaving them intact couldn't possibly end in anything good.

All the gadgets on the alien's body had been destroyed as well, and the two drones were beyond salvaging. But Zac wasn't disappointed by that since he doubted he could do much with them in any case. While he was somewhat tech savvy for an earthling, he could only be considered a caveman by the standards of the far more advanced Technocrats.

Zac couldn't be sure whether there was still some machine spying on him, but by this point, there was simply no way for him to be sure. But between his Dao Fields and **[Winds Of Decay]**, the area had gone through multiple sweeps, allowing Zac to finally relax somewhat.

Since there was nothing else to trap, he could finally unsummon the five majestic towers. They immediately started to dissipate, once again turning into Miasmatic clouds. Zac gave the towers one last marveling look, completely satisfied with his first test run of the skill.

His new skill **[Profane Seal]** had been beyond anything that Zac had hoped, and he felt he still hadn't discovered all of its marvels. It was comprised of two parts. The first part was a short-distance teleportation, allowing him to move even faster than when using **[Loamwalker]**.

If Zac wanted to, the skill could be ended at that point, meaning it would only act as a movement skill. But there were limits to that, since the skill seemed to have a cooldown. But it would allow either escape or a rapid charge if needed.

The second half of the skill was the cage he'd just dissolved.

Zac could create a sealed space the size of which he could control to a certain degree. The only way to get out was to either destroy the towers through brute force or to kill Zac. But any attack against the towers would be met with the retaliation of **[Deathwish]**, meaning the cage protected itself from attacks. It was a flexible skill that could let him trap a group of powerhouses or even lock down a large section of an army.

There were still some details he needed to figure out through experimentation, but Zac was completely satisfied with his choice. He had a feeling that **[Profane Discharge]** would have worked in a similar manner, where the first half of the skill was the same teleport, with the second part being a large-scale eruption of force.

But Zac much preferred the cage. With his massive pool of attributes, he would be able to whittle almost anyone down before they managed to break out, especially now that he had

[Winds of Decay] to turn the whole cage into a field of death. He only needed to figure out a way to imbue the breathing skill with the Seed of Rot to turn it even deadlier.

Unfortunately, he had tried that in the heat of battle, but there had been no response. Perhaps the skill needed to be upgraded before it could carry the Dao, just like how it was with **[Deathwish]**.

All these things together had immediately spelled the end for the Technocrat.

Of course, he knew that **[Profane Seal]** wouldn't always be as effective as it was this time since it wasn't without its weaknesses. The alien had actually only been level 48, mostly relying on his gadgets for survival. A stronger opponent would be able to not only largely resist the drainage of the chains, but might even be able to rebuff them completely.

The cage also wasn't impervious to interference. People from the outside could destroy the towers with enough force, allowing their allies to escape. So when he managed to trap his target, he had to act quickly before it all was for nothing, because he would only be able to use the skill once or twice during a battle.

Zac sighed and looked down at the half-rotten corpse of the Technocrat before taking out a vial with a green substance inside. He poured the viscous liquid down over the body, and a cloud immediately rose to the sky. Less than a minute later, the body was completely gone, not even leaving the bones.

The liquid was a common item among vagrant cultivators in the Multiverse. It was all too common that you were left with a corpse you didn't want to explain, so the best thing was to make it go away. The liquid completely destroyed any remnants, which would hopefully erase any evidence of what you had done.

One item that had withstood the corrosion was a Cosmos Sack, though, and Zac was a bit surprised that a Technocrat even used an item like that. Perhaps spatial devices were still out of reach through technology, even for the Technocrats. But

Zac didn't immediately pick it up, rather opting to take out an inscribed box to put it in inside.

The box was used to isolate treasures that emitted strong auras, but Zac hoped it would be able to block out any potential distress calls from the items the alien possessed as well. He would bury the box later, only picking it up again when he had a better grasp of the Technocrats' capabilities. For now, it would have to stay in a backpack that Zac took out.

The cave was once again starting to become visible as the mists from **[Winds of Decay]** and **[Fields of Despair]** were dissipating. The emerald smoke originating from the **[Primordial Breath Amanita]** had already mostly dissipated between the Battleroach King's absorption during their battle and the mushroom being sealed away.

The dispersion of the haze left the cave in full display, allowing Zac to finally grasp how the alien had managed to sneak inside.

PRIORITIES

Just a few meters away, the gem-studded wall was flickering in and out of existence, intermittently displaying a well-lit tunnel leading into the distance. Zac wasn't too surprised the alien had been able to create a back entrance. If the Technocrats possessed the capability to drill through the fortified rock in the underworld all the way to the surface, then this was a cakewalk.

The alien Zac killed had been one of the researchers for the incursion, responsible for finding and identifying valuable resources. The two drones he commanded were likely able to get the job done.

Parts of Zac just wanted to rush through the tunnel into Technocrat territory, killing everything in sight. But he knew he had to act smarter, so he instead sat down to replenish his once again depleted reserves. He wasn't too worried about being interrupted by another Technocrat since what the alien had done down here was a private experiment he'd hoped would pad his own pocket.

While Zac slowly absorbed the death-attuned energies from the crystals, he tried to go over the battle with the battleroach. It had truly pushed him to his limits, and he hoped that he would be able to use the battle to push his insights forward.

But any time he tried to ponder on the Dao, the splitting headache only got worse, and he had to give up any idea of improving his seeds for the time being. Zac wasn't too

disappointed, though, as there would be time for meditation later. Besides, there were other gains to go over.

The battle with the Battleroach King had awarded him another three full levels, pushing him all the way to level 65. It felt a bit crazy, but he would have possessed both the first and second spots on the Power Ladder if it listed both his classes.

There was no comparing his own leveling speed with that of the average cultivator by now. Each battleroach in the cave would have been able to push most Rankers to their limits, but Zac had killed them by the thousands, gaining more in a few hours than most would in a month.

But Zac knew that the final ten levels would be tough. He had gotten most of the final levels for free through the hunt last time, but this time around, he would have to grind them out himself. Luckily, he would face a lot of high-level enemies soon enough.

Most notably, there were the caves teeming with battleroaches above that would give him a good start.

Zac opened his status screen and allocated all his free points into Strength. He also checked the quest screen for any changes, but it was now empty of any tasks. After that, there was nothing for him to do apart from calming his mind while he restored his energy. He still felt some of the effect of the splinter, as it had acted up a bit during his last two battles again, but by now, it was fully under control.

Five hours later, half his Miasma had been restored while all the wounds in his body apart from the one in his side were completely healed. His head was still pounding a bit, and he knew he would have to avoid using his Dao for a day or two. But it wouldn't be needed for what he was about to do, and Zac didn't want to sit around any longer.

He got up on his feet with a groan and started walking toward the tunnel he came from, leaving the passage the Technocrat used where it was. Zac had no idea what waited for him if he entered that path of the unknown, and he feared there would be some hidden surveillance in the cave.

Zac even considered using his **[Void Ball]** to destroy the passage, but he decided against it in the end. There was not much to gain from doing so, and he was afraid that the spatial chaos would destroy the whole cave with him inside.

Instead, he chose to go back the same way he came from in order to return to New London. But before he left, he extracted the most radiant crystals of the final cave. It didn't take long, as he only needed to rip them out of the wall after slightly boosting his strength with **[Unholy Strike]**.

[Verun's Bite] once again shuddered and woke up when presented with the radiant crystals, but Zac realized something was wrong after half a minute. Verun hovered between hunger and confusion as Zac held a crystal to the axe-head, but the Tool Spirit eventually gave up on absorbing it.

It looked pretty odd, making Zac unsure whether Spirit Tools were unsure themselves what they needed to evolve. Or perhaps Verun had confused itself with an actual beast, believing that the crystal would help improve its bloodline just like it helped the battleroaches. Zac could only stash away the crystal and refocus on farming the best two hundred or so crystals.

As for the less precious gems, he would figure something out later depending on their value. For now, he left them where they were as he slowly climbed up toward the tenth floor. He knew he would have to waste some precious time fighting his way out, but it was better than using the trapdoor, which might lead in the wrong direction. But Zac started to frown as he climbed through the hole in the roof.

It was way too silent.

There had always been a constant clatter of the battleroaches during his time in this cave system, often intermingled with aggressive screeches. But now there was dead silence, where the only sounds came from Zac himself. After dragging himself up to the crest of the tunnel, he quickly saw the reason. A sea of corpses littered the whole floor. The carapaces of over a thousand battleroaches were dismantled and destroyed almost beyond recognition.

Zac quickly crawled up on the floor, readying himself for another battle. But he breathed out in relief when he saw that the wounds weren't caused by any energy weapons or the like, but it rather looked like they had been caused by the other battleroaches. The only explanation that Zac could find was that the roaches had whipped themselves up in a frenzy for some reason, entering an all-out melee.

Perhaps they could sense the death of the Battleroach King and immediately started to fight for the role of the new alpha. Or perhaps they had never been a pack species and were only kept in check by the much more superior roach on the bottom floor. In any case, it saved Zac a lot of time, though he sighed in disappointment over the missed opportunity. The corpses on this floor alone would probably have given him another level.

A sudden clattering in the distance drew Zac's attention, and he spotted a wounded E-grade battleroach getting to its feet. It was far larger than any battleroach he had spotted on his descent, making Zac unsure what was going on. Had it grown almost to twice its size simply by killing the competition?

Unfortunately, there was no time to ponder before the beast was upon him. It frenziedly tried to grab Zac with its mandibles and rip him to pieces, but Zac effortlessly slammed its head to the side with a swing of his shield.

After fighting the Battleroach King in a pitched melee for almost half an hour, it felt like a joke to fight against this large, but ultimately common, battleroach. Its carapace had become a lot sturdier, but after a few well-aimed strikes, the beast lay dead with brain leaking out from a deep cut.

However, just as he downed the supersized battleroach, a few more rose as well, each of them sporting various degrees of wounds. Zac realized they probably were playing dead to recuperate, but perhaps felt forced into action by Zac's arrival. Altogether, there were eight more of them, all of them E-grade.

During the fight, Zac had ample time to use **[Inquisitive Eye]**, and he found out that the beasts were only around level

79, which was perhaps one or two levels higher than they were before. So it seemed that the increase in size hadn't come from levels, but rather a purified bloodline.

It took less than a minute before the eight battleroaches lay dead on the ground, their heads either broken or missing. Zac quickly stowed away the enlarged bodies before heading toward the next floor. The carapaces were nowhere near as good as the emerald shells of the king, but Zac thought they might be worth keeping since they were definitely a step above the Ayn Hivebeast shells.

The same scene played out on the next couple of floors, where there were a few surviving battleroaches, each of them substantially larger than they had been before. Zac made short work of them all, which wasn't too hard, as all of them were pretty wounded. Some of them were even at death's door already, requiring only a simple swing from Zac to end their lives.

Unfortunately, their ragged state also meant that they only gave a small part of their original energy, but Zac didn't care in the slightest as he rushed up the floors at the highest possible speed. Fighting his way to the bottom took him almost two days, but getting back up required less than half an hour.

The shimmering barrier was gone as expected, allowing Zac to effortlessly swim through the pitch-black water and resurface in the secluded lake. He was back in New London a day later, once again donning his signature mask. He had buried the box just outside the small outpost he teleported from, giving him some peace of mind.

Zac's initial instinct was to head back to Port Atwood before rushing the Technocrat incursion, but he quickly realized that he might need help. So instead of teleporting away again, he rushed over to the former Union headquarters and went to the secluded chambers that Ogras had made his own.

The demon had kept his identity secret all this time as well, always donning a large hood and obscuring his features

with a shroud of shadows. But Zac hadn't made any effort to hide his arrival, so the demon hadn't bothered with his disguise when Zac entered his quarters.

"Good, you're back early. There's a problem," Ogras said the moment Zac entered his office.

"I was just about to say." Zac sighed as he sat down opposite the demon. "What's going on?"

"We've lost contact with the Port Atwood army," Ogras said.

"What?" Zac said with shock. "They're dead?!"

"No, calm down," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "They're probably alive. But two days ago, the whole sector of the Dead Zone where our army was stationed went dark. All the teleportation arrays in the area, including the one where our war outpost was, have been disconnected from the network."

"How is this possible? Is someone targeting us?" Zac said, scrambling to get a grip on the situation.

Zac had been keyed up to launch a scorched-earth assault on the Technocrats as soon as he got back, but it seemed that the universe had once again thrown a wrench into his plans.

"No, I think it is the Undead Empire that's finally rearing its fangs," Ogras said with a sigh. "We have underestimated them. The resources needed to do something like this are unimaginable. I think they are making a statement because three of their generals have already fallen."

"Can Thea's people help us?" Zac asked with a frown.

"They have their hands full; the Zombies are pushing hard, and they are too far apart to send scouts," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "Besides, all the neighboring arrays that we know of have gone dark as well."

"Do you have any ideas?" Zac asked.

"You have the flying disk. We can use it to scout a much broader area than running on foot, so we should be able to find them within a week or two if we leave immediately. It only

seats a few people, but the two of us are enough to handle most things,” Ogras said.

“One or two weeks...” Zac muttered, blankly staring ahead.

Spending one or two weeks scouring the wilderness for his people would mean that the Technocrat incursion would manage to reach the surface. From the way the alien made it sound, they would send out some drones that moved with extreme speed at that time, and those drones would scour the whole planet with their scanners. It would be too late to stop them at that point.

It meant that he would have to choose. Either let the Technocrats dig to the surface, which would have unknown consequences, or ignore the plight of his people until he could close the incursion.

Kenzie or Port Atwood.

“I... I can't go.” Zac sighed, unable to meet Ogras' incredulous stare.

HERETICS

“You can’t take time to rescue your people? Most of our elites are in that army. My three generals are there. What the hell is going on?!” Ogras growled, causing the shadows in the room to shudder.

“I can’t go until I close an incursion,” Zac said as he shored up his resolve.

“The Flame Golems? They may be a problem, but not to the point you should abandon our army. Worst case, we can simply make our surface teleporter public, allowing everyone to escape. Besides, there’s not enough magma in the core for the golems to flood the entire underworld, so they can only slowly destroy town after town,” Ogras said in disbelief.

“It’s not them. It’s the hidden incursion. It turns out it’s the Technocrats.” Zac sighed. “I met one of them while grinding in that cave I found.”

“What? The Technocrat heretics have joined the fight for baby planets? They usually stay clear because the Ruthless Heavens is more hands-on with places like this,” Ogras muttered before he suddenly froze and looked up at Zac with thinning eyes. “Wait. Technocrats, as in the guys whose insignia you just happen to walk around with? The one you ‘accidentally picked up’?”

Zac didn’t answer, but he knew that that the demon had figured out at least half of the story already. If he hadn’t, then he wouldn’t be Ogras any longer.

“And the only reason you’d act this obstinate is if it was about your sister,” Ogras continued, proving Zac’s hunch. “Don’t tell me?”

Zac scratched his neck with some helplessness. He hadn’t planned on cluing in Ogras to this secret, but it looked like he had left too many breadcrumbs to the truth. But at least he could choose which parts to expose and which parts to keep hidden to protect Kenzie.

“I don’t know the truth either. But my mom might have been one of them, and these Technocrats might be looking for her. I am afraid Kenzie, and even this whole world, will be caught up in something that has nothing to do with us. Leandra disappeared twenty years ago, probably leaving Earth,” Zac said. “We can’t get caught up in whatever mess she created.”

Ruthlessness flashed in Zac’s eyes as he looked up at Ogras, who frowned; then he sensed the killing intent leaking out from Zac’s body. Just the thought of his sister getting caught by the Technocrats because their mother had forced Jeeves into her head made Zac furious.

“So I can’t go to the Dead Zone yet. I cannot let a single one of the Technocrats leave this planet alive,” Zac said with finality.

Ogras silently looked at Zac for a few seconds before sighing with a shake of his head.

“Fine, let’s go kill some heretics.”

Zac was surprised at the ease with which Ogras agreed, and he couldn’t help but feel a bit suspicious. The demonkin army and his generals were half his claim to power in Port Atwood, and if they fell, he would be almost isolated apart from his friendship with Zac.

“How about you take my disk and head to the Dead Zone while I deal with the incursion?” Zac probed to see his response.

“No point,” Ogras said with a wry smile. “As much as I hate to admit it, I am not sure if I’ll be enough to change anything in the face of the Undead Empire. We need the

human netherbeast to mow through the Zombies like you did with the silver puppets.”

Zac slowly nodded his head, feeling it was a good enough reason.

“I have to go prepare something back at Port Atwood first. We’ll meet back up in an hour or so at the border town I came from,” Zac said before hurrying out of the office toward the teleporter, leaving a befuddled demon behind.

Zac made his way through the chain of arrays before finding himself in Port Atwood. He didn’t find Kenzie in either the cultivation cave or his compound, so he hurried over toward the Mystic Realm instead. However, he did change to his human form and clothing first, because he might run into some people who didn’t know about his Mr. Black alias.

There was a new array in the network that led straight to the center of Mystic Island. It wasn’t too long since he came here last time, but it had undergone drastic changes. The chaotic swirl of spatial tears was gone, and in the desolate space that they occupied, a small encampment stood instead. The array he arrived at was placed some distance away from the small town, likely as a safety precaution.

There were less than fifty structures, but it had a wall that was even sturdier than the one he had around his own town. Not only that, but there were also multiple arrays creating a thick layer of defense, stopping any possibility of sneaking inside. Zac was suitably impressed as he walked toward the encampment.

“Lord Atwood!” someone called, making Zac turn toward a vaguely familiar woman.

On a second look, he realized it was one of the more recent additions to the Valkyries, a girl who had joined after the first round of casualties during the final beast wave.

“Kaitlin, right?” Zac asked with some hesitation.

“That’s right,” the girl said, some worry evident in her eyes. “I’m sorry, but have you found our people yet?”

“Not yet,” Zac said, guilt welling up in his chest. “We’re working on it. Is my sister in the Mystic Realm?”

The Valkyrie nodded in confirmation before Zac hurried away. He couldn’t look the girl in the eyes, considering the decision he had made. Because it was an undeniable truth that he had chosen his sister over the rest of Port Atwood, even though it wasn’t even sure that she was in any danger. He could make all the excuses in the world, but that was the gist of it.

But keeping his sister—his sole surviving family member as he saw it—safe had been his main goal since the start, the reason why he fought so hard. She was the only reason he had erected Port Atwood. If that meant that people would die, so be it. Zac would have to live with those sacrifices. Besides, everyone knew that they risked death when they joined the fight against the Undead Empire.

He stepped through the teleporter in the center of the settlement, and the next moment, he stood in a cave, peering out into the supersized garden that Ogras had mentioned. As he walked out, he saw the majestic trees lining the horizon and the silver borders crisscrossing the sky, but he didn’t have time to marvel at this place. He would have to explore its mysteries at another time.

Beneath the small hill, another walled settlement stood, looking almost identical to the one outside. Zac hurriedly looked around until a demon warrior pointed him toward one of the larger buildings, which turned out to be a study filled with books and crystals.

“You’re here?” Kenzie said with surprise when she noticed Zac’s appearance. “I thought you were in the underworld.”

She had been sitting on a comfortable sofa with an information crystal in her hands.

“I had to come back quickly,” Zac said with a smile as he sat down next to her.

“Is it about the arrays stopping working?” Kenzie asked with worry in her eyes.

“That too.” Zac sighed. “There’s a lot of things to do. How are things on your end?”

“You know, I am pretty sure that this place has something to do with the Technocrats! We went to the gate Ogras talked about, and Jeeves said that the wall is definitely of Technocrat origin!” Kenzie excitedly blurted out, clearly having waited for the opportunity to share the news. “I didn’t enter, like you said, but I’m sure there are a lot of things Jeeves can find out. Zac, perhaps Mom is here!”

“Don’t touch anything yet; we aren’t strong enough,” Zac said with worry, reiterating the severity of the situation. “You might trigger an alarm or something, leading Mom’s enemies here. And I don’t know about Mom being here. The people in this place seem to have been isolated for thousands of years, and Mom disappeared only twenty years ago.”

Kenzie’s face went from exuberant to downcast in a second, and Zac felt a pang in his heart as he patted her head. He knew just how much Kenzie wanted to find Leandra.

“But perhaps I’m wrong. We will find out sooner or later,” Zac acquiesced. “I actually came back with some news about Mom, though I am not sure about all the details.”

Kenzie once again perked up, but as Zac told her about his encounter with the little alien in the underworld, her face started to scrunch up in a frown.

“So you think that Mom is this high-ranked person from the organization Firmament’s Edge,” Kenzie concluded. “Which means that the thing they’re looking for is Jeeves?”

“Well, it could all be a coincidence,” Zac ventured, though his face betrayed what he truly thought. “But their targeting device did react to the amulet. I will leave it here for now so it won’t happen again.”

“What will you do?” Kenzie asked.

“Well, if they’re Mom’s enemies, I can’t let them stay on Earth. Ogras and I will kick them out of here before they can perform the scan. Who knows what else Mom has left on Earth. Things are crazy enough without a bunch of

Technocrats arriving,” Zac said with a wink as he handed over the amulet.

“See if you can find out anything about Mom, please,” Kenzie entreated.

“I will, though you should know that these people only seemed to be hired thugs. They didn’t seem to know a lot.” Zac shrugged. “Please stay inside the Mystic Realm until I’ve dealt with the incursion. Who knows how strong their scanners are.”

“Okay, okay, I will stay in here. Perhaps a few will choose to stay behind like the Tal-Eladar. It might us help understand the Technocrats and Mom better,” Kenzie said.

“Perhaps.” Zac smiled, though he knew that would never happen.

“I’m making some headway on my formation studies anyway. It’s pretty interesting stuff,” Kenzie added.

“Oh?” Zac asked with interest. “Anything on the thing we found on Salvation’s body?”

“Well... maybe?” Kenzie said with some hesitation. “Jeeves has looked at it for quite a while and made some deductions. I think I can break its lock, so to speak. But I still have no idea what would actually happen when I did that. Perhaps the Origin Dao trapped inside will flood out around us, but perhaps it will simply disappear? Or perhaps the whole thing will explode?”

Zac was surprised that Kenzie had made progress so quickly with the thing. He would have thought it might take months to figure out the details of such a complicated item. It was no wonder the Technocrats wanted Jeeves back.

“Well, there’s no stress. Take your time with it. Remember, stay in the Mystic Realm,” Zac said as he made to leave.

“Wait,” Kenzie said to Zac before he could leave. “Please bring back any technology you can find. Jeeves wants to eat it.”

Zac stopped in his tracks and looked back with surprise.

“He needs technological items to evolve rather than high-grade materials?” Zac asked with confusion, as it was completely different from how Spirit Tools evolved.

“Jeeves isn’t sure, but probably,” Kenzie said. “Jeeves is a combination of technology and magic, so I think I will need both. I have already found a few ores he liked.”

Zac thoughtfully nodded. Bringing any gear to the AI might not be a bad idea even if he couldn’t eat them. Perhaps Jeeves could also help them understand the equipment, allowing them to use the things for themselves. And if not, he might at least be able to make sure they didn’t send any signals to the Technocrats hiding in outer space.

“I’ll bring it over after we’ve closed the incursion,” Zac agreed. “Take care.”

“Be careful!” Kenzie said. “And look after Ogras. He isn’t as sturdy as you.”

“What he lacks in sturdiness, he makes up for in slipperiness.” Zac smiled. “We’ll be fine.”

He left Kenzie’s study and took one last look at the artificial sky before entering the teleporter. Zac was back in the underworld soon enough, appearing in the isolated outpost where he’d told Ogras to meet him. He couldn’t see the demon anywhere, but a dancing shadow in the distance told him that Ogras had already arrived.

“What’s with the cloak and dagger?” Zac asked with confusion when he found the demon hiding a few kilometers outside the town.

“The demons are still around. I have probably caused enough problems for Grandpa already without adding hatred from the Abyssal Demons.” Ogras shrugged. “I scoured all the intelligence regarding the Technocrat incursion while you were gone, and I think I know the path. It will take us two days to get there if we push it.”

“Great, let’s go. The sooner we destroy the Technocrats, the faster we’ll be able to head to the Dead Zone.”

DRONES

Zac was ready to go, but Ogras held up a hand to stop him before he rushed out into the wilderness.

“You should know that this mission has a pretty decent risk of failing. The Technocrats possess all kinds of tools that don’t really conform to the conventional grading system,” the demon said.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with confusion.

“I mean that their technology can be pretty hard to predict. For example, their shields may be way stronger than the arrays we have encountered, or we may be immediately spotted even if we try to sneak in. I have no idea whether my shadows can fool their detection devices,” Ogras explained.

“We’ll just have to see how it goes.” Zac sighed. “I guess I’ll swap over to my Draugr form before we go.”

“Uh, I think your other class might be more useful in an all-out assault,” Ogras said with some skepticism in his eyes. “This might not be the time to look for more levels.”

“I am afraid their devices will detect that I might be part Technocrat, so better that I use my Draugr body,” Zac explained.

“Paranoid, I like it.” Ogras nodded in appreciation. “Well, in any case, I’ll fight with you, but I am not throwing my life away for your vendetta.”

“I know, just do what you can,” Zac agreed.

The two started to run through the dour landscape, both pushing themselves as much as they could while maintaining combat readiness. As they ran, Ogras took the opportunity to update Zac on what had been going on in the underworld during his days of training.

The wealth that the merchants had amassed was extremely impressive, but unfortunately, it looked like many of them had chosen to hide their wealth rather than carry it around. None of them were powerful fighters, so a common fear had been that their Cosmos Sacks would be snatched without them being able to fight back.

A few of the burrows had been found, but a lot of wealth was still unaccounted for. It had turned into somewhat of a treasure hunt, as whoever found a cache would be handsomely rewarded. Ogras had also received word that Emily had finally found her sister, who turned out to be a captain under one of the councilors. The teenager was staying with her for now, catching up on the lost months.

Their day was pretty uneventful otherwise. Between Ogras' stealth and Zac's towering aura, the wildlife left them alone, allowing them to keep running in peace. It was only after running for almost forty hours straight did they stop and make camp in a small cave.

"The reports stated that there have been signs of activity in this direction. The resources in the area have been excavated, and scouts have gone missing. There haven't actually been any sightings of the Technocrats apart from a mention of a red light in the distance," Ogras explained as he took out a map. "But this can only be the place, especially considering that heretic you killed had time to visit the cavern."

"That some parties managed to walk unencumbered through the area should mean that they haven't bugged the place. Those who got killed probably just got unlucky and encountered the Technocrats," Zac deduced.

"Probably," Ogras agreed. "Or they ventured too far. In any case, these reports are over a month old. Hopefully, the heretics have finished draining the resources in this area,

allowing us to get close to their base without them noticing. But that leaves the matter of how we'll deal with the incursion itself. There's only two of us, and you're using that class."

"I can take care of the five E-grade warriors as long as they are close to each other," Zac said. "I have a new skill that's pretty convenient for such a scenario. But you should make sure to keep some distance from me."

Ogras looked over with interest, slowly nodding in agreement.

"What about the rest of the Technocrats?" the demon asked.

"Leave no one alive. Kill everyone as quickly as possible. Let no one contact their homeworld," Zac said.

A ruthless grin spread across Ogras' face when he saw Zac's resolve. It looked like he couldn't wait to start fighting, which was a bit surprising considering the demon's earlier misgivings.

"Why are you so eager?" Zac asked with confusion.

He was more than happy that the demon seemed motivated to help out with this problem, but he was a bit skeptical about it. The demon never threw himself into danger unless there was something in it for himself.

"You should know that most forces in the Multiverse, including the demons, are in a passive state of war with the Technocrats." The demon smiled. "But do you know why?"

"Isn't it because they want to destroy the System while you want to keep it?" Zac answered with a raised brow.

"Well, it's part of the reason, but the Technocrats are crazy powerful. Normally, people wouldn't want to mess with them. However, there's another reason from what I've gathered. The Technocrats hate the Ruthless Heavens, but the Heavens hate the Technocrats just as much, it seems." The demon grinned.

"What? Isn't the System, like, an unfeeling program?" Zac blurted out in confusion.

“Well, the Ruthless Heavens at least have some sense of self-preservation, I guess.” Ogras shrugged. “According to rumors, it brings all kinds of benefits if you take out the Technocrat heretics. For example, it counts as great achievements, which will help with Class Evolutions. I’m sure taking out one of their incursions will bring amazing benefits.”

Zac could only gape in response. It was truly a ruthless move by the System if what Ogras said was true. A lot of people were ready to do almost anything to push themselves forward on the path of cultivation. There were innumerable people stuck at one bottleneck or another, so it was no surprise that many forces would fight the Technocrats tooth and nail if it could help them break through.

It would also explain why they didn’t expose themselves while in the underworld. They could have gained a lot more resources if they started raiding some settlements. But perhaps the Technocrats were afraid that the other invaders would drop everything to hunt them for merit.

“So I guess there’s nothing good that can come from pissing off the System,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“Well, I don’t think the Ruthless Heavens has time to listen in on ants like us.” Ogras grinned. “In any case, I squeezed some things out of the hands of Smaug. I have two of those balls that disrupt teleporters. I am not sure whether they work on Nexus Hubs, though.”

“Nice. Anything to blow any shields open?” Zac asked.

“Unfortunately, no. I have a few offensive trinkets that should cause widespread carnage,” Ogras said. “If nothing else works, we’ll have to use your **[Void Ball]**, though avoid it if possible. Even if we break the shield, we might not be able to pass because of the spatial tears.”

The two discussed various strategies for a bit longer until they finally came to a decision. They would try to sneak inside the Technocrat territory, relying on Ogras’ shadows. After the battle ensued, Zac was responsible for taking down the powerhouses, whereas the more mobile Ogras would be responsible for taking care of the others.

The two immediately set out, keeping to the shadows as they started to traverse the area that was presumed to be claimed by the Technocrats. Thirty minutes into their travels, Zac saw clear signs of excavation, with the ground having multiple symmetrical holes leading into the darkness. However, there were neither men nor machines active in the area, allowing the two to breathe easy.

Another hour passed as the two started to move slower and slower, carefully scouring the shadows and the sky for any hints of Technocrat activity. Their carefulness was finally rewarded as they spotted a small hovering ball in the distance.

It was the size of a tennis ball and pitch black, almost seamlessly blending into the surroundings. It didn't move or make a sound, only silently floated in the air. Neither Zac nor Ogras had seen such a thing before, but it was easy to assume it was either some sort of surveillance drone or a floating mine.

Ogras looked over questioningly at Zac, who motioned for the demon to keep going. This would be a test to see if they could pass the sentry unnoticed, or whether it could see through the shroud of darkness. It would greatly impact how they would act in the rest of the assault. The two crept forward, with Ogras completely covering them in dense layers of shadows. They slowly moved closer and closer, making no attempt to avoid the drone.

The drone seemed completely oblivious to their existence until they came within a few hundred meters of it. At that moment, it moved with shocking speed to stop right above them, and a mesh of red beams started to run over the ground. Zac's eyes widened, and he immediately indicated for Ogras to destroy it.

A beam of shadows, almost completely invisible in the darkness of the underworld, shot up and ripped a hole through the small ball. It immediately fell out of the air, and some unknown energy inside it caused a few flickering discharges. But by the moment it thumped to the ground, it looked completely dead, which wasn't a surprise, since only its shell remained after getting impaled.

“So much for stealth,” Ogras muttered, looking down on the drone with some interest. “Perhaps it would have worked if we had Janos with us, but a moving blob of shadows won’t fool the machines.”

“It looks like it covers the area of a square kilometer or so,” Zac added thoughtfully.

“Perhaps we can circumvent the others with distance, but they should already know this thing is broken,” Ogras said as he poked the destroyed ball by their feet. “What now?”

“We’ll keep going as earlier,” Zac said. “They might not care too much about one destroyed drone. It might have been a beast for all they know since we never exited the shadows. But if we meet more of these things, we’ll have to rush it.”

“Yeah, one or two might be okay, but any more than that, they’ll definitely understand that something is up,” the demon agreed as they kept moving forward.

Just a few minutes later, they spotted another ball in the distance, though they were able to avoid its detection by taking the long way around it. But that orb was just one of many, and they soon found themselves stuck. If they wanted to keep moving forward, they would either have to enter the field of vision of one of the orbs or start destroying them.

“There’s no way we’ll get to their base unannounced,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

“Then we’ll have to speed up. Destroy all the orbs so they at least don’t know what’s coming.” Zac sighed.

The demon nodded, and the two immediately sped up. Any drones that came within Ogras’ reach were instantly destroyed, causing one subdued explosion after another. Zac started to feel a bit shocked as they ran, as there were just so many of them. Ogras had destroyed close to a hundred after running for just a few minutes, but that was only a fraction of the inescapable net that the Technocrats had created. A conservative estimation by Zac put the number of drones at five thousand at the minimum.

Soon enough, the behavior of the drones started to change, as the unmoving sentries by the sides started to fly toward them one after another. It looked like the Technocrats had finally realized something was up and started to control the movements of the flying scouts. The two of them had still avoided getting scanned by the red lights, but their path of movement could easily be plotted by following the destroyed machines.

“Something’s coming,” Ogras suddenly said, looking into the distance with a frown.

“Shit!” Zac said when he saw what Ogras was talking about.

It was four machines that were suspiciously similar to the two drones that had accompanied the Technocrat in the battleroach cave, with the notable exception that they were twice as large.

“Dodge!” Zac shouted, as even he didn’t want to block four of those beams at the same time.

Ogras grabbed Zac by the arm, and the next moment, the two disappeared in a sea of shadows, only to appear fifty meters away. Just a moment later, the four beams converged at their earlier spot, and the effect of the four beams was terrifying. Each lance of energy was powerful enough to incinerate the air, and even space itself seemed to be unable to handle the four attacks converging. The area where the beams had ripped through kept twisting and distorting even after the attacks, only stabilizing a few seconds later.

“What is that?!” Ogras spat when he saw the power of the beams, clearly starting to regret accompanying Zac on this venture.

“That’s the Technocrats for you.” Zac sighed as he got ready for battle.

HEAVEN'S PATH

Ogras only grunted in an exasperated agreement before taking out his large spear with one hand while he threw an offensive array at the drones. The crystal sphere ripped through the air, but the machines seemed to understand it was dangerous. They immediately started to spread out, but they didn't have time to move too far before the ball cracked, unleashing a sea of electricity in the sky.

Two of the drones managed to dodge the offensive array, but the other two were swallowed by the dense lightning bolts. Zac briefly saw a red shield enclose the two submerged machines, but they flickered and petered out in just a second. Zac was relieved to see that the technological shields weren't without limits and that they would sooner or later break under pressure. In fact, they seemed only slightly stronger than an ordinary defensive treasure that Zac had found dozens of during the hunt.

He took out a clump of steel from his Cosmos Sack that essentially looked like a cannonball, and he hurled it at one of the surviving drones after infusing it with the Seed of Heaviness. Another red shield appeared to protect the drone, but the attack contained enough momentum to push the machine into the ceiling hundreds of meters above. It caused a large explosion when it hit the rock, and scrap pieces started to rain down from the impact zone.

Zac had long ago replaced the small hill of rocks in his Cosmos Sack with something that could better take advantage of his huge attribute pool. Any time he threw rocks or boulders

to test out his enemies lately, the stones would break long before his enemies did. However, a steel ball weighing almost a hundred kilos contained terrifying kinetic energy, especially when it was infused with the Dao of Heaviness.

Only one drone remained, but it was soon taken care of by Ogras, who had appeared up in the air. He stabbed straight through the energy field with his spear, and the spear tip entered the drone through a joint. A second later, the drone expanded until it exploded in a shower of shadows and metal.

Zac nodded, feeling that the Technocrat incursion might not be too dangerous after all. But when he relaxed, he finally realized something odd. He had gained a small surge of energy for destroying the drone just now.

“Why are these things giving Cosmic Energy?” Zac asked with confusion. “They’re not alive.”

“No idea.” Ogras shrugged with some disinterest. “The Ruthless Heavens provides the energy, I suppose.”

“Perhaps the other ones were too weak,” Zac said hesitantly.

“No, there is a need of a soul to gain energy,” Ogras disagreed. “That’s why living golems who cultivate give Cosmic Energy when killed, but destroying a battleship does not.”

“Then what is it?” Zac asked with confusion. “Are these machines alive?”

“No, check your quest screen,” Ogras said with a smile spreading across his face.

[Supremacy of Heaven’s Path (Limited, Area): Close Incursion of the Followers of the Boundless Path. Reward: Merit. (0/1) NOTE: All destruction of inanimate combatants will reward energy while quest is active.]

“It’s an area quest,” Ogras explained. “I think that anyone who gets close enough to the heretic’s incursion will be automatically awarded this quest as an incentive to destroy it.”

“What’s merit, though?” Zac asked.

“I would guess it would boost our available class choices when evolving, like eating a Fruit of Ascension,” the demon said, not able to hide his excitement.

“Truly a VIP treatment,” Zac said with a wry smile. “I wonder if I should start to worry about my own safety.”

“I think we would have noticed it by now if the Ruthless Heavens wanted you to die,” Ogras said, though there was some hesitation in his eyes.

“Like how? Dropping me off all alone on an island with a bunch of demons?” Zac snorted.

And having me roll for survival instead of just moving me a few meters, Zac internally added.

“Uh...” Ogras said. “I’m sure that was just a coincidence.”

However, Zac did notice that the demon took two subtle steps away to distance himself from him. Zac only rolled his eyes in response and kept going.

“If we got the quest, the incursion shouldn’t be too far. Do you know if the other incursions are out in the open or if they are in town caves?” Zac asked.

“Both, it seems. The fish people are in a large town cave that’s partly submerged, and I think the humans have a large one as well. But the demons are out in the open,” Ogras said.

Zac nodded, and the two kept going, destroying any machinery that tried to impede their approach. Another set of drones tried to stop them a few minutes later, but they were turned into scrap in short order. Their offensive capabilities were pretty terrifying, but their defensive strength left a lot to be desired. Even without the assistance of any offensive arrays, the shield only needed an attack or two before they broke.

Soon enough, they got their answer as they saw something odd in the distance. Another pack of drones appeared out of thin air, though the background started to wobble when they appeared, as though there were a wall of water.

“Illusion array, or whatever their equivalent is,” Ogras muttered. “There’s likely a grand reception awaiting us on the other side.”

Zac took out another cannonball and used it to destroy one of the drones. Soon, all four were blown to bits, at which point Zac finally activated his real skills. A shroud of Miasma spread out from his body as the large spiked wall appeared in front of him.

“You go ahead.” Ogras smiled. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Zac only snorted in response as he started to run forward, putting his bulwark as close to his body as possible to protect from attacks from any angle. Just as he was about to pass through the illusory wall, a sense of danger erupted, but Zac only gritted his teeth and imbued his bulwark with the Dao of Hardness.

“Jump,” a roar suddenly came from behind, and Zac didn’t dare to hesitate as he pushed off as fast as possible, causing him to soar tens of meters into the air.

Zac suddenly felt a weight on his shoulders and glanced behind to see that Ogras was actually standing on his back as though he were a surfboard. But before he had the opportunity to tell the demon off, an enormous explosion erupted beneath them, pushing a pillar of fire right in their direction. Zac was about to move his bulwark to cover them, but Ogras quickly intervened.

“I’ll handle the fire. Keep protecting the front,” he shouted to be heard over the ruckus as he threw down a crystal at the flames.

The crystal cracked the moment it came in contact with the inferno, and the next moment, the flames were simply gone, replaced by a thick haze. Zac was shocked by the rapid change, but he quickly realized that Ogras had prepared some tools to counter his newfound weakness to fire.

But Zac didn’t have time to think about that as his danger sense kept screaming in his mind just as two thick beams of pure energy ripped toward them. The attacks slammed right

into Zac's bulwark, but they were so immense that the beams continued around them, enclosing them in a relentless sea of chaotic energies.

It felt as though he were stuck inside the sun as he held on for dear life against the limitless powers of the two beams. The heat rose to an unbearable degree just from being next to the scorching rays, and he couldn't even keep his eyes open during the onslaught. Only after a few seconds did the beam relent, and Zac sighed in relief since his Miasma had been depleted at a shocking rate to protect them from the brunt of the attack.

The two fell down on the ground after the attack, and Zac finally had a chance to see what was going on. A large line with hundreds of aliens stood with weapons at the ready, many of them appearing quite shocked that Zac and Ogras were still alive. Interestingly enough, the Technocrats were comprised of all sorts of races, and the gray little aliens only accounted for a quarter of the full numbers.

Most of the Technocrats held various types of guns, but some were unarmed apart from small drones hovering around them. A few even wore a sleek exoskeleton as they gripped some sort of energy weaponry.

Accompanying the living Technocrats were almost a hundred four-legged drones and various other mechanized weaponry such as the flying machines. There were even two huge robots that stood over twenty meters, smoke coming out of their right arms. Zac almost drooled at the sight of all the awe-inspiring technology, but he soon cooled down when he realized that the things were there to kill him. He tried using **[Inquisitive Eye]** on the robots, but nothing popped up.

Just a few hundred meters behind the row of warriors, the large Nexus Hub hovered, emitting a silver glow that illuminated the whole area. There were rows of simple structures behind the crystal, looking like warehouses and containers of various sizes. It was clearly a temporary encampment, a simple means to an end. It gave a clear indication that the Technocrats truly had no interest in staying

on Earth. They simply wanted to complete their mission before returning back home.

It wasn't very hard for Zac to spot his main targets, the four bodyguards and their ward. They stood together in the center of the lineup, two people at each side of a stocky alien who was equipped with one of those exoskeletons.

Excitement filled Zac's heart when he saw that all his targets were clumped together, but he didn't dare pull the trigger and activate **[Profane Seal]** just yet. There were too many robots around, and Zac was afraid that the towers he summoned would get blasted apart in no time.

He needed to reduce their firepower before trapping the others, and taking care of the huge mechas felt like something that should be prioritized. The two attacks they'd launched while he was air-bound had stolen almost a fifth of his Miasma, so he couldn't take too many such attacks.

"I think we need to destroy the two big guys first," Zac muttered. "Do you feel confident in taking on one of them?"

"I have no idea," Ogras said while scratching his chin. "Who knows what other capabilities they have? There's no way I can take them down if they can keep spewing out such beams."

Zac nodded with a grimace, realizing they lacked information.

"Let's head into the thick of it. They shouldn't be able to release those kinds of beams if we're in the middle of their army. Stay clear of the clouds I'll release. It will melt your skin right off," Zac said.

"It will what?" Ogras shouted, but Zac was already running toward the defensive line of enemies.

The ever-careful Ogras didn't want to lose the protection of staying close to Zac, so he soon reappeared right behind him as he ran forward. Various weapons started firing at them, and the large cave lit up as though it were a laser show.

Beams kept slamming into **[Immutable Bulwark]**, and Zac frowned at the expenditure. He was losing at least a

percent of his Miasma every second from the concentrated fire, meaning that he would be all out of energy within two minutes if this kept up.

“Can you teleport us inside? I can’t keep this up for too long,” Zac growled, and Ogras placed a hand on his shoulder with a nod.

The two disappeared, but Zac frowned when he saw that they didn’t reappear within the Technocrat ranks, but rather right in front of them.

“I got blocked somehow,” Ogras said with a frown.

“I’ll open a path.” Zac sighed as his arm started swelling, and he rushed forward to cross the last stretch between themselves and the Technocrats.

Explosions and beams filled his whole vision, but Zac didn’t care about that or the energy expenditure as he arrived in front of the Technocrats. A resounding crash reverberated through the area when **[Immutable Bulwark]** was forcibly stopped by a red translucent shield that appeared right in front of them. The shield shuddered when it was stabbed by the spikes on the shield wall, but it held true.

Of course, Zac wasn’t planning on breaking through with his defensive skill and pushed the bulwark to the side as he jumped forward, **[Verun’s Bite]** already slashing in a horizontal arc with enough power to cause the air to scream in protest. Zac imbued the axe with the Dao of Heaviness just before the edge slammed into the shield, and it cracked like a broken window.

ENEMIES AHEAD

“Persistent bastards,” Alea muttered with displeasure as a poisonous cloud billowed out from her hand, causing one Zombie after another to stumble before they fell down into a rotting heap.

Her skill [**Gift of Talasa**] only possessed limited effect against the undead, but it was one that did not require an actual compound to empower it. After the past few days, she knew she would need to ration her basin-sized stockpiles because it was becoming increasingly obvious that the Undead Empire wanted their army dead even if they had to sacrifice a terrifying number of their low-tiered undead.

“Every goddamn hour,” Ilvere agreed as he led a squad of warriors to mow down dozens of elite Zombies every second.

His weapon, a huge ball attached to a chain, ripped through the air, creating a circle of death around the demonic general. Any Zombie unlucky enough to get hit by the wrecking ball was instantly turned to paste, but those closer to Ilvere weren't much better off, as they instantly got bisected by the chain.

The demon wasn't using any skills at the moment, only taking advantage of the reach of his weapon while occasionally infusing the ball with his Dao to increase the momentum. He was conserving his Cosmic Energy in case another powerhouse was hidden inside the Zombie wave. Unfortunately, Alea herself didn't have such a luxury, as her only physical weapon was a thin rapier she used to decapitate any Zombie that got too close.

There were also the **[Wailing Spikes]**, but controlling those cursed objects cost too much, and wasn't something that she would use unless she was out of options. So she was stuck wasting Cosmic Energy, desperately circulating her cultivation manual to restore her constantly depleting reserves. But there was no choice; the undead were completely relentless in their pursuit of the bedraggled forces of Port Atwood.

The fifteen-thousand-man-strong group had kept a rapid pace northwest to outrun the horde of elite Zombies on their tail. They hadn't stopped moving since they'd fled their temporary base, moving through the wilderness at a rapid pace to get away. But the Zombies seemed to have no trouble keeping up, with raids assaulting their rear constantly.

There was no rest for the warriors of Port Atwood. Even Alea herself and Ilvere were forced to occasionally defend the rear to avoid too many casualties. But neither of them ever dared to go all out to clean out a larger swathe of the attacking undead.

Alea was constantly on guard against a pincer strike from ahead. She had thought it would come almost immediately after they fled the small town due to the missing scouts, but so far, they hadn't even seen the shadows of any threat at all. That did not instill any confidence, but instead the opposite.

It appeared the undead were taking a page out of her own playbook, and they seemed willing to slowly grind them down. Normally, the constant raids from Zombies wouldn't be a too large concern, as Port Atwood lacked neither experts nor gear. But the fact that they were constantly on the move made it hard if not impossible to properly rest up after the battles.

After a full day of fleeing, they had tried to take a short rest while the rear guard protected their camp, but just moments after their large group stopped, the undead turned crazy, heedlessly rushing their position. Only after a frantic one-hour escape did the undead relent, resuming their pattern of constant, but manageable, harassment.

“Enemies ahead! Golems and beacons!” a blaring warning came from a command crystal in Alea's hand, and she

immediately gathered a number of the elites fortifying the rear.

Ilvere and his squad also retreated, leaving the task of defending against the elite Zombies to the regular army. Some demons would stay behind as well to help out, but the lack of elites would no doubt cause some deaths. But there was nothing to be done since the true threat came from the front.

On a hill a few kilometers ahead, a small army stood ready. Their numbers were less than five hundred, but Alea could sense the powerful energies from the members even from this distance. Their lines were orderly and well-armed. A few of the gargantuan Corpse Golems were present as well, proving this was not another group of rabble. Even two large monoliths were erected, constantly spewing out Miasma in the surroundings.

“It’s finally here,” Alea muttered before turning to Ilvere. “We need to go all out on this one.”

Ilvere somberly nodded as he looked out over the elite army barring their path.

“Can you find the leader?” Alea whispered as her eyes scanned the army over and over.

“No, but I think that’s a good thing,” Ilvere hesitantly said. “If there was a true powerhouse there, he wouldn’t bother to hide within the ranks, right? I think there’s no general spearheading this army.”

“It also means we won’t be able to complete our quest just yet.” Alea sardonically smiled.

Soon enough, the elites of Port Atwood stood ready, but their numbers were less than half of that of the undead army. Of course, Port Atwood was able to augment their lack of experts in various ways.

“Get the lunatics as well,” Alea said after some deliberation.

“Are you sure? We can only use them a few times,” Ilvere asked from the side, but Alea nodded without hesitation.

She honestly didn't feel confident against this small but intimidating force in front of them. It would be one thing if they had Lord Atwood or Ogras here, but there was no one to hold down the fort for them. They would need to use every weapon in their arsenal.

Eventually, ten ragged Ishiate rushed over. They looked wrung out from the last day's march, but a manic gleam could be seen in all of their eyes. It was the tinkers who had created the terrifying cannons that utilized Nexus Crystals. They had been working on improving their inventions since their last field test. Alea hadn't used them in the war so far, wanting to keep their extremely destructive weaponry as a hidden ace.

"Are you confident in blowing up those two pillars over there?" Alea asked a one-eyed Ishiate.

"Mistress, I'd say we need four shots to be somewhat sure. But even the shots we miss would cause some mayhem," the maimed Ishiate said after spying on the undead squad through brass binoculars. "Of course, if they possess shielding, that's another matter."

"Good. We'll sound them out and hopefully break their defensive array. Try to destroy those beacons no matter what. If it seems impossible, maximum carnage," Alea said.

"Maximum carnage," the Ishiate agreed, a wide smile spreading across his face.

Ideally, she would have wanted to prepare longer before assaulting a pure core squad from the Undead Empire, but the elite Zombies were putting immense pressure on their rear. She could only start the assault prematurely, as they truly needed to move forward. A thousand-man-strong army rushed forward until they created some distance from their noncombatants.

Hundreds of the Atwood Academy recruits immediately started to infuse crystals with energy, creating a wide, shimmering wall in front of them. They would be the defensive line protecting the noncombat classes and the ranged strikers such as the Ishiate craftsmen.

At the same time, a smaller force pushed forward, including just the strongest warriors. Ilvere was already spinning his weapon in the air above them, accumulating a terrifying momentum. Janos was there as well, and energy surged around him as the area was suddenly filled with demonic warriors storming the front while a haze spread over them. All of them were illusions, of course, but it would improve their survivability while hiding their actions within the mist.

“Are you ready?” Alea said to one of the demons with a ranged class, and he nodded as he took out an extremely oversized crossbow from his Cosmos Sack.

The demon was Peak F-grade, but he was barely able to carry the monstrosity. It was more apt to call it a ballista going by its size, and that was just what it was before the craftsmen of Port Atwood got their hands on it. It was over three meters long, and the slot for its bolts looked large enough to fit a young tree. It was part of the arsenal Clan Azh'Rezak had brought for sieges, and it had served well during the final battle against the beast waves.

But Alea had required something portable, since they knew from the start that the war against the undead would be a continuously moving skirmish, so the craftsmen had modified it for such a purpose. Unfortunately, the modifications led to a loss in power, but it was still an extremely mighty weapon. The ranger expertly loaded the crossbow with a densely inscribed bolt that was as long as he was. The number of such a munition was quite limited, but they weren't in a situation to hold back against an army of this level.

A wail from behind made her snap her neck around just as Alea was ready to give the command to start the operation. Her eyes widened in shock to see a hundred translucent ghosts appearing out of nowhere, assassinating one soldier after another. The soldiers were quick to respond, but most attacks just passed right through their incorporeal bodies.

Only a few of the demons were able to harm them with the help of their Dao, but it was clear that even most Daos were ineffective against them.

“Divine Array!” a captain under Ilvere roared from the defensive line, and the next moment, the whole army lit up in golden radiance.

It was an array that Calrin had managed to purchase after a lot of trouble. It didn't make warriors any stronger, but it turned all attacks inside life-attuned. The one-sided slaughter quickly turned around, and two-thirds of the ghosts were cut down in rapid succession before the rest managed to slink away. Alea could breathe out in relief when she saw that the Ishiate tinkerers were fine and ready to go.

“Now.” She nodded at the ranger, who immediately got down on his knee. The inscribed crossbow bolt was released with a powerful twang that caused a small shockwave as the projectile soared toward the undead army.

An azure shield sprang up in front of the army, and the bolt got stuck as it started to release a tremendous amount of lightning that tried to rip open the barrier. However, the defensive array was empowered by not one but two Unholy Beacons, and the extremely expensive bolt was only able to cause some hairline cracks that let a few errant lightning bolts inside.

Ilvere let out a resounding roar as he pushed the chain forward with enough power to make his whole body shake with strain. The large wrecking ball that had been accumulating a terrifying momentum immediately changed course and soared toward the undead army, its chain magically elongating as it sped forward.

The huge ball was thrown with such force that a few explosions took place in the air as it broke the sound barrier, until it slammed straight into the lodged crossbow bolt with pinpoint accuracy. It was like a hammerhead hitting a nail, and the bolt pushed straight through the array. It unleashed a final burst of lightning inside, causing chaos even among the elite soldiers.

Most importantly, the attack managed to crack the array, exposing the whole army beneath. A couple of deep thumps erupted from behind, sounding like primordial drums of war. It

was the Ishiate tinkers, who shot their extremely unstable payload at the exposed army with the help of their comically large cannons. The large projectiles soared above Alea's head like four miniature suns, a mix of splendor and terror waiting to erupt.

The undead warriors clearly understood the threat of the incoming bombs, and a storm of attacks rose from their camp to intercept. But the insane Ishiate hadn't been lazing about the past months, and thick green shields sprang up around the projectiles, blocking out the attacks lucky enough to hit. They had managed to incorporate a few defensive treasures into each of the bombs, effectively creating a defensive coating that would allow them to reach their target.

The power of the undead army wasn't anything to scoff at, though, and they soon managed to destroy one of the bombs. Its explosion created an enormous fireball up in the air that threw Alea and her party to the ground, and it also dispersed Janos' illusions in an instant.

A second detonation followed soon after to submerge the heavens in an even greater conflagration, making it seem like the end of days was approaching. A third explosion followed after a brief pause, but Alea breathed out in relief to see that it detonated just above the undead army.

The shockwave slammed all the warriors apart from the mighty Corpse Golems into the ground, immediately stopping the persistent attacks toward the air. Better yet, hidden defensive arrays around the two Unholy Beacons flashed into being before they got destroyed just as quickly, leaving the towers defenseless.

It allowed the final bomb to sail into the enemy camp and explode just in front of one of the beacons. It looked like a sun erupted, swallowing a third of the army. A second detonation followed soon after, causing an azure wind blade to rip through the firestorm and cause even more mayhem in the undead ranks.

It was the Unholy Beacon getting destroyed by the bomb. The second beacon still stood, but the results were still above

Alea's expectations. Those crazy beastmen had made the detonations far stronger than they let on. The hair on her head stood on end when she remembered that those lunatics had repeatedly taken the bombs out to fiddle with the runes, even while running along with the army.

She looked back at their camp with incredulity, seeing the group dance around their cannons in glee, some of them sporting obvious burn marks.

“One fight at the time.” Ilvere laughed as he spat a bit of dirt out of his mouth. “Hopefully, we won't need to enlist their help again. I'm sure your boyfriend is on his way.”

Alea rolled her eyes in exasperation, but a sense of sweetness welled up in her heart. It was true, Lord Atwood was surely on his way by now.

“Just shut up and help me destroy this army.”

MAN VERSUS MACHINE

“Defend!” one of the Technocrat warriors screamed, and battle drones pushed forward to block the rapidly closing hole in the shield.

“I’ll go right,” Ogras said from behind before swirling forward in his shadows and effortlessly passing the machines.

Zac grunted and pushed forward as well, though missing the demon’s grace. He stomped forward like an angry bull, tanking a few beams the drones launched at him as he squeezed through the regenerating shield.

The main weapons of the land-bound war machines were energy beams just like the drones, though they were able to rapidly attack in exchange for far weaker power. Getting hit left smarting scorch marks on Zac’s body, but it would take a whole lot of attacks of that caliber to take him down.

A black storm heralded his arrival as Zac unleashed [**Winds of Decay**] the moment he got through the shield. The corrosive cloud did not only cloud the enemies’ vision, but pained screams echoed in the vicinity as some of the warriors fell down in anguish. It was the Technocrats who did not possess any corrosive protection, and Zac felt streams of energy starting to enter him in just a few seconds.

“Stand down! We work for Firmament’s Edge. If the two of you don’t back down this instant, we’ll be forced to report your actions to our superiors,” a shout came from the distance, and Zac looked through the haze to see the Technocrat leader staring at him.

“The Undead Empire goes where it pleases,” Zac shouted back. “You heretics of the Boundless Path can never live under the same sky as us.”

Zac didn't know if his words would ever reach Firmament's Edge, but he felt it was prudent to throw the blame on the undead rather than the people of Earth just in case. As for the Boundless Path, he had no idea what that actually was. But if that was what the System called the Technocrats, then it could only be accurate.

Zac had asked Ogras during their earlier approach, but the demon wasn't sure either. Perhaps Heaven's Path and the Boundless Path were things that ants like them weren't qualified to know about just yet. Of course, that was why Zac used those words rather than calling the Technocrats invaders or something similar. He wanted to act as a Draugr elite to sow some confusion.

The Technocrat kept shouting for Zac to stand down, but he didn't personally take action just yet. Zac chose to ignore him after the initial exchange, instead using his mouth to keep drowning the area in corrosive clouds.

Unfortunately, quite a few of the Technocrats seemed to possess some sort of defensive gear that created a personal barrier that kept the mist at bay, and the clouds were kept at arm's length. Almost all the machines were fine as well, with their durable hulls completely sealed to protect the more vulnerable innards.

The skill was just a means for Zac to cause some chaos, though, and he was surprised that it managed to melt a few of the machines at all. He instead relied on his axe to cut down anything in his path. Neither the Technocrats nor the machines could last more than a hit or two, allowing him to gain a steady stream of Miasma through **[Fields of Despair]**.

Zac's rampage started to put the fear of God into the Technocrats, and no one seemed willing to get within melee range any longer. The humanoids donning the exoskeletons could only stand to the side and spectate Zac and Ogras dismantling their mechanized military.

The machines were going completely berserk, and tens of them rushed forward to heedlessly throw themselves at Zac. He didn't mind at all and crushed all the machines as they came. But he only had time to deal with half of the frenzied assault when his mind screamed of danger.

Zac didn't hesitate and immediately entered his turtle stance by jumping down on the ground with [**Immutable Bulwark**] forming a protective layer above him. The next moment, his whole vision turned white as something bombarded him from above, turning all the nearby machines into shrapnel in its effort to take Zac down as well.

Luckily, it only cost him some Miasma and caused some ringing in his ears since he'd reacted in time. Zac immediately jumped up to his feet and ran through the inferno to see one of the two large robots standing in the distance, streams of smoke rising from its back. Zac couldn't be sure, but he had a feeling that the mecha had launched some sort of sneak attack while he was occupied with the smaller war machines.

The ground cracked under Zac's feet as he started to rush forward, his bulwark once again paving the way by mowing down everything in his path as he targeted the huge robot. It seemed to have anticipated Zac's approach, as it calmly raised one of its arms toward him. Its forearm started to transform with a clinking sound, rapidly turning into dozens of pipes aimed in Zac's direction.

Zac frowned when he saw the sight, and another gust of black mist covered Zac and his surroundings as he unleashed some more corrosive clouds. The moment he was covered, he slightly changed his approach, wanting to flank the robot instead of rushing head-on.

The robot didn't seem to care in the slightest, and the concentric circles of barrels steadily started to light up, each one of them shuddering with power. The air twisted around the arm of the robot until an enormous shockwave blew Zac's [**Winds of Decay**] far away, cleanly exposing his position. A second shockwave erupted as tens of glowing lights were launched toward Zac.

They looked extremely similar to the attacks that the Battleroach King had utilized with the help of its arrays, making Zac wonder if one was influenced by the other. The Technocrat had mentioned that he had infused the beast with certain capabilities, after all. Perhaps those were based on this robot. However, there was one clear difference apart from the fact that the incoming lights were black instead of green.

They looked like miniature black holes as the air around them twisted and distorted beyond recognition, warning Zac of the terrifying power they contained as they rushed toward him in parabolic arcs. Zac desperately tried to dodge the ballistics, but they possessed the same type of homing capabilities as the Battleroach King.

Zac felt there was no option except to once again hunker down to withstand the assaults. The projectiles were approaching him from all directions by this point, and he saw no other way to block them all. He rolled forward and placed both his shield and bulwark above him to endure the blasts. The large mecha immediately pointed its other arm toward him and shot a beam at him from an attached gun.

Luckily, it wasn't the same weapon as the huge barrel that had fired at him while he was launched into the air. That barrel was over five times wider and was mounted instead of a real hand at the end of his arm. The weapon the mecha used now was instead the same type as the ones that the flying drones from earlier used.

Such a beam wouldn't be able to break through his turtle defense, so Zac didn't worry too much about it. But before he knew what was happening, he was suddenly flailing about almost ten meters in the air as the black holes closed in on him. The beam hadn't been aimed at his shield to crack open his defense; it was rather shot in front of him.

The blast had launched him up in the air, circumventing his defense against the other attacks. Zac saw no option but to infuse his whole body with the Seed of Hardness as he tried to cover as much of his body as possible with [**Immutable Bulwark**] and his shield. But he could only block some of the strikes, and a burning pain erupted in his back as one of the

black holes slammed into him, causing a deep wound dripping ichor. His Miasma was rapidly depleted as well from the tens of balls hitting his bulwark.

The large tower shield wasn't faring much better, as parts of it got bent and twisted when blocking the attack. The shield still hadn't completely recovered from the bout with the Battleroach King, and this put it dangerously close to falling apart completely. Anger burned in Zac's chest from the pain of the multiple impacts, and he roared as he rushed the final stretch.

A huge metallic foot ripped through the air toward Zac as the mecha tried to kill him with a kick. But whatever was controlling the robot had underestimated Zac's strength as he met the kick head-on. The kick slammed into him and pushed him backward, but Zac pushed back with all the power in his body as he imbued himself with the Dao of Heaviness.

His fingers dug into the thick plating as he stopped the kick with his superhuman strength. However, Zac wasn't done there. His muscles strained as **[Unholy Strike]** was used to its limit, and Zac was actually starting to drag the huge machine. It tried to fight back, but Zac was relentless. His mind was telling Zac to fling the machine into the horizon or slam it into the ground like an enraged caveman.

But, unfortunately, reality wouldn't comply with his rage, and he only managed to topple it. The thing was extremely heavy, and even with his Strength, he wasn't able to toss it around like a rag doll. But at least it was down on the ground, and Zac pounced on it like a rabid beast before it could get back on its feet.

All its limbs were equipped with various weapons, such as battle knives and ranged weaponry. But that arsenal was of no use against Zac, who had managed to climb up on its chest with his axe, ready to cause some real damage. But a flash of greed suddenly overcame his rage, and he peered down at the machine with interest.

He slammed his hand down on the mecha as he infused his Cosmos Sack with energy, but he growled in annoyance when

nothing happened. He had wanted to both neutralize the threat and make some money by stealing the whole thing. But if he couldn't take it, then it didn't need to continue existing. A storm of corrosion blew around him as Zac started to hammer down on the chest plate of the machine.

A blue shield managed to block the first round of attacks, but Zac wouldn't give up. Even when he started getting shot by some Technocrats down on the ground, he wouldn't relent, and shockwave after shockwave exploded from the top of the robot until the shield broke, and Verun's Bite bit into the robot. There was actually a cockpit inside, and a small green alien peered up at Zac with horror when he finally managed to rip apart the chest plate.

A beam flashed as Zac peered down into the cockpit, but he managed to dodge the blast from the pilot's rifle at the last moment with the help of his Luck. Zac growled in anger as he reached into the cockpit and grabbed the alien by the neck. A nasty crack echoed out from the robot as Zac got a huge stream of energy. It looked like killing the pilot also counted as killing the robot itself.

Zac was about to start demolishing the mecha in his towering rage, but he suddenly froze as he tried to put the robot in his Cosmos Sack again. This time, it worked without issue, and he fell to the ground with a thump. He took a gander at the state of the battle, and he felt everything was mostly under control.

Most of the battle droids had been destroyed by his and Ogras' efforts, and quite a few of the actual Technocrats were dead or dying as well. The demon was currently whittling down the second robot, and he had managed to tear off one of its arms somehow. Ogras had activated his ultimate state, and he was currently in the skies, circling the land-bound mecha. His large wings kept him out of harm's way as he struck the robot over and over with lightning speed.

The foreman and his four bodyguards were still on the battlefield, but they still hadn't done anything. He already knew from questioning the Technocrat earlier that the four cultivators were there to serve as bodyguards for Syvas, the

leader of the incursion. Whether the rest of the Technocrats lived or died didn't matter in the slightest to them, as they were just hired hands.

There was no way they would involve themselves in the battle unless they got paid extra or if Zac attacked Syvas himself. But it didn't look like the Technocrat boss had any interest in joining the battle. In fact, the group of five seemed to be inching toward the Nexus Hub behind them.

Zac had no intention of letting the leader go, and it looked like it was time to go all out. But before he assaulted the five E-grade warriors, he needed to make sure his back was protected from the remnants of the Technocrat army.

"It's time, buddy," Zac said as the huge form of Verun appeared with an earthshattering roar.

THE FINAL FIVE

The crimson fractal on [Verun's Bite] had long been recharged, and he didn't want his battle with the E-grade powerhouses to be interrupted by the remaining forces. Verun understood his thoughts and immediately stormed into the thick of it, its oversized maw snatching up Technocrats and drones alike.

If the Technocrats' equipment could be seen as a counter to Zac, with his inability to activate [Deathwish] against attacks that relied on technology, then the opposite could be said for Verun. Some of the drones tried to fire at the large beast, but its intangible form was the perfect counter to the laser beams, as they harmlessly passed right through it.

Zac had already guessed that the Tool Spirit was a bit like the ghosts of the Undead Empire. Normal attacks didn't work, and they needed to be empowered by the Dao to be able to reach him. Perhaps only the cultivators would be able to harm it at all, which gave it free rein on the battlefield. Miserable screams echoed across the underworld as the beast reveled in its uninhibited carnage.

Satisfied that his back was protected by Verun, Zac could finally target the leaders of the incursion without worries. He stomped onto the ground with tremendous force, and the next second, he appeared right in front of the Technocrat with one of the spatial crystals in hand. He immediately threw it at the Nexus Hub in the distance, hoping to seal any communication or escape while he was occupied.

“Protect me!” the foreman screamed, and four powerful strikes flashed toward him almost as soon as he arrived.

Zac was inundated in a sea of lightning, and even with his tremendous Endurance, he felt his consciousness slipping. Luckily, the attacks only lasted less than a second, and Zac immediately slammed his foot into the ground again before they could launch the next attack. The five large towers rose into the air as Zac unleashed another cloud of corrosion in the cage.

The moment the towers appeared, the ghastly chains immediately shot out, but this time, each chain targeted a different person. Unfortunately, things did not go as smoothly this time. The four cultivators immediately backed away from Zac while they started to fight the chains, launching powerful strikes to rebuff them. The chains acted like snakes, slithering around and trying to pass their defenses, but the cultivators kept them at bay as they looked for means of breaking out.

The Technocrat wasn't as lucky, though. He had a personal shield that stopped the chain a few times, but after a few slams, the chain managed to create a large enough crack to pass through. The Technocrat tried to clumsily defend himself with his expensive-looking exoskeleton, but a wide swing left his whole side open for the chain to sneak up and wrap around his neck.

Zac couldn't believe how weak the man was. It looked like he had never been on a battlefield before, just asking for death by being here. Perhaps he was just a businessman or an owner of the company that had taken the mission to scan Earth, and never even planned to enter a battle.

The brief pause allowed him to scan the five with **[Inquisitive Eye]**. The foreman was actually only level 76, not having improved the slightest since breaking through. The four cultivators were a bit better, though, ranging between level 83 and 86. But Zac still didn't feel there was any need for alarm since he had fought far stronger enemies until now.

“Help me, you buffoons!” the Technocrat screamed to finally regain the attention of his guards.

“Transform!” one of the guards screamed as he unleashed in an enormous discharge of lightning that pushed the special chain far away.

The next moment, the sky above the cage darkened as thick clouds formed in an instant. It was the first time Zac had seen any clouds in the underworld, and it was obvious that they had been created by the four guards. They were almost as dark as the mist Zac created with [**Winds of Decay**], but they were teeming with wild energies, and they continuously lit up by lightning bolts.

Zac guessed the four bodyguards came from the same sect or clan since they all possessed lightning-attuned classes. Perhaps the foreman had hired them since they would be efficient in protecting him from other Technocrats and their machines.

Of course, lightning attacks were just as effective against humans as well, and Zac’s eyes darted between the bodyguards and the foreman, unsure of whom to deal with first. But the decision was made for him as the four powerhouses simultaneously charged him. Zac got ready to defend while the world turned white, and four massive lightning bolts slammed into the cage.

However, the lightning did not target Zac, but rather the four guards. It slammed into all of them simultaneously, completely hiding them inside the blinding light. Of course, Zac knew they weren’t about to kill themselves, so he wasn’t surprised when they emerged unscathed. The lightning had helped them transform into another shape.

Crackling white armor covered their bodies, and they all held weapons that seemed to be wrought out of frozen lightning bolts. Two of them were holding spears, whereas the other two held broadswords. They had even gained wings made from electricity, making them look like gods of thunder.

Their looks weren’t the only thing that changed with the lightning strikes. Their speed almost doubled as they zoomed toward Zac like four streaks of lightning. He barely had time

to prepare his defenses before they were upon him, all stabbing toward his vital spots.

Zac blocked two of the strikes with the help of [**Immutable Bulwark**], one with his shield while he met the final strike with [**Verun's Bite**]. Two ghosts immediately appeared behind the two who stabbed his bulwark, while a crack resounded as the sword wielder whom Zac met head-on broke one of his arms in the clash between weapons.

The two ghosts only managed to cause minor wounds, but the surprise strike was enough to distract one of them enough for the chasing chains to lock around his throat. Zac felt a shock run through his body from the massive amounts of electricity the four warriors released, but he forced himself forward to follow up on his strike.

The sword wielder with the broken arm tried to create some distance between them, but he was attacked by the relentless chain when he tried to flee, forcing him to stop in his tracks. Zac wasn't about to give up on the opportunity, so he slammed the shield into the ground, causing a wave of spikes to push the final bodyguard away as he pursued the wounded one.

A shield erupted around the guard as Zac's axe swung down with ferocious force, defending against the strike. But Zac only refocused his efforts, and [**Verun's Bite**] once again fell down with finality. Zac suddenly felt a blazing pain in his side as a lightning spear tore into his body, and a jolt of electricity caused such a shock to his system that he accidentally dropped his weapon.

His muscles spasmed and flinched, but Zac forced himself to throw his body onto the guard who had narrowly escaped being bisected by the swing of his axe. Tens of lightning bolts hit him as he gripped the horrified cultivator, but Zac refused to let go. A fountain of blood rose to the skies when Zac managed to forcibly rip the warrior in two, ignoring the lightning armor completely.

Steam rose from his body, and Zac felt as though he was half-roasted from the barrage of lightning bolts. The constant

shocks also aggravated the multiple wounds he had accumulated in the earlier fight, and he felt his steps starting to become unsteady. Every part of his body hurt, but he refused to stop.

He still had some fuel in the tank, even though his expenditure up 'til now had been massive. It was partly due to the stream of Miasma he was receiving from the spectral chains that had started to absorb the life force of their captives. Since one of the warriors had died, the final chain rushed toward the Technocrat on Zac's command.

The Technocrat leader was unleashing a barrage of attacks on the chain around his neck with a power that belied his earlier embarrassing display. It was the exoskeleton that was showing its worth, even though it could only turn a turd into a more powerful turd. Cracks were already starting to show on the chain, and Zac was afraid he would be freed soon enough unless he was bound tighter.

The sky suddenly rumbled as the area was drowned in a thunderstorm as the clouds started unleashing bolt after bolt in the area. The five towers got the worst of it, as they essentially acted as lightning rods. As Zac looked at the chaos, he realized that the remaining time was limited, so he forced his exhausted body to exert even more power.

Two unfettered bodyguards remained, one of which had a light wound from **[Deathwish]**. Zac targeted the wounded one first and immediately pounced on him. The guard wanted to keep some distance as he launched a storm of lightning at Zac, but his movements were restricted due to the harassment of the ghastly chain assigned to him.

Zac forcibly ate a couple of strikes as he kept the other guard at bay with **[Immutable Bulwark]**. He finally managed to get close to him, his axe already on its trajectory of death. The cultivator looked unreconciled and glared at Zac with hatred.

“Die!” he roared as his whole body started crackling with berserk powers.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm, and he activated both the defensive rings on his hands, causing two barriers to appear around him. The next moment, he was blasted into the air once again from a thunderous explosion. The guard had chosen to self-destruct in an effort to bring Zac down with him, but his layered defenses were enough to take the brunt of the strike.

The good news was that the desperate strike didn't only affect Zac. Even the other guard who was trying to flank him was swallowed in the explosion, scorching half of his body and throwing him up in the air as well. The chain acted quickly and captured him too, which meant that everyone inside the cage was finally captured.

However, one of the fractals atop the five towers started showing cracks from the barrage of lightning strikes coming from the sky, and a few Technocrats had managed to sneak away from Verun's frenzied carnage to try to break out their leader. Zac's vision was turning blurry from the constant shocks, but he forced himself to run over toward the remaining guards.

The first one was screaming at the top of his lungs, already looking a bit shrunken from the incessant drain of life force the chain subjected him to. It didn't look like he had any means of resisting it, in contrast to the Technocrat, who still seemed full of energy as he tried to free himself from his fetters. Zac wasted no time and cut off the guard's head in one swift motion. There was no resistance, as the guard was completely consumed by the pain and completely oblivious to his surroundings.

The final guard put up a feeble fight, but he was all alone against an enraged Zac, so he was quickly cut into pieces as well. Only the Technocrat leader remained, and he was currently bound by three chains, as he had managed to destroy two others while Zac fought the guards. Luckily, new chains replaced those that the Technocrat had destroyed, keeping him in bondage during the whole fight.

"You can't kill me! Firmament's Edge won't tolerate it!" the Technocrat wheezed as he saw Zac approach with murder

in his eyes. “Not even the Undead Empire or the Demon Legions are safe from their wrath.”

“That’s not my problem,” Zac growled as he lifted his axe.

A wet thud could be heard as the axe almost cleaved the Technocrat in two, but Zac frowned when he got no energy to confirm the kill. The Technocrat was somehow clinging to life, staring straight into Zac’s eyes with hatred and what looked like glee.

“I... warned... you,” the Technocrat wheezed with a sneer as blood poured out of his mouth.

The next moment, a terrifying change took place in the Technocrat’s body, which started to twist and deform as he grew with shocking speed.

DESPAIR

In just the blink of an eye, the diminutive leader turned into a huge monstrosity reaching over three meters, whose bulging muscles would put even Billy's constitution to shame. Even the large wound from **[Verun's Bite]** was gone, the axe pushed out of its body as the wound closed in an instant. Even the expensive-looking exoskeleton had been discarded as it was bent into scrap metal from the alien's expansion.

Odder yet, he had turned into an amalgamation of metal and flesh, as parts of him had turned into that of a robot. Zac didn't understand how, but the dying Technocrat had turned into a Cyborg teeming with immense power. Even Zac felt threatened from just standing in front of the hulking figure, something he hadn't felt for a long time. Something told Zac that this wasn't some ultimate technique by the Technocrat himself, as his face tilted listlessly to the side, and his eyes were empty.

The foreman had warned him about reprisal, but Zac hadn't expected it to be so direct. He felt the situation was turning bad, and he immediately unleashed a round of attacks on it, holding nothing back. But metallic clangs and deep thuds were all that could be heard when the axe-head hit the Technocrat's muscled torso, only leaving scuff marks behind. Zac couldn't believe it was so durable that he wasn't even able to leave a shallow wound.

He didn't give up, though, and unleashed one ferocious strike after another across the brute's body in hopes of finding a weak spot. But danger suddenly screamed in Zac's head as a

fist as large as a wrecking ball slammed into him with such speed that he didn't have time to even blink.

The power of the punch was enough to shatter all the spectral chains still binding the Technocrat in an instant, and Zac was launched into the air with such speed that it looked like he was teleported away. The enormous shockwave swept all the corrosive mists in the area away as well, exposing the decomposing corpses of the cultivators on the ground.

It felt like his whole body was broken, and it only got worse when he slammed into one of the towers from **[Profane Seal]** with enough power to cause a large crack running along its whole length. Black ichor ran from his mouth as Zac desperately crawled back to his feet, only to see the monstrosity treating his entrapment as a joke.

Alarm bells were going off in Zac's mind, and every fiber of his being was telling him that this was not something he could contend with. He frantically tried to figure out what to do next, but the Cyborg wasn't waiting for Zac to come up with a strategy. A huge shockwave exploded out from where it stood as the Cyborg disappeared from sight, only to appear right in front of Zac once again.

This time, Zac was somewhat ready, and he barely managed to duck out of the way from another world-ending fist that instead tore the Miasmatic tower apart. It almost looked like the extremely sturdy structure was made out of Styrofoam as it shattered and dissipated into churning mists of Miasma.

The destruction of the tower was the straw that broke the camel's back, and **[Profane Seal]** started to crumble. All the chains were already broken, which had damaged the other towers as well, and with one tower utterly destroyed, the shield was already down for the count.

Luckily, the fight outside had mostly ebbed as well, with Ogras dismantling the last remnants of the Technocrat army. The demon seemed to be in good vigor, though his clothes were completely burned, and the side of his face was covered in a large scorch mark. Verun was nowhere to be seen, though,

but that quickly changed as the large beast appeared out of nowhere and chomped down on the towering Cyborg.

Verun didn't have much better luck than Zac did, despite its furious attempts to rip his master's enemy to shreds. The Tool Spirit's large fangs couldn't even break its skin. The Cyborg only stoically stood there, acting like it couldn't feel a thing until it slammed its hand in a ferocious overhand slap that hit Verun's head.

The Tool Spirit yelped in pain and was forced to let go, at which point the Cyborg unleashed yet another of its terrifying punches. Verun was utterly helpless as it turned into motes of light that fled into Zac's axe. Thankfully, Zac could still sense the Tool Spirit in his axe, though it immediately entered hibernation after being destroyed.

If Zac's heart had been beating in his current form, it would have been hammering away at this moment as he gazed upon the Cyborg. Something unfathomable was happening with it. It was as though the monster had gained over twenty levels in just a few seconds, and its towering aura had more than doubled since it had attacked Zac the first time.

Futility threatened to consume him as Zac scrambled for any idea of getting out of this mess. The Cyborg didn't seem to possess any skills or Dao Seeds, but it also didn't need it due to its ungodly power. It was like a supercharged version of Zac himself, a true testament to the horror of superior attributes.

There was a small remnant of the Technocrats sticking close to the Nexus Hub. They had likely tried to escape Earth but were blocked due to Zac's interference. But the group seemed emboldened from the turnaround in the battle, and they rushed toward Zac in an effort to assist their foreman in taking him down. Zac had no time to bother about them, so he could only infuse his body with the Seed of Hardness as he kept his eyes trained on the true threat.

Another apocalyptic punch soared toward Zac, who desperately activated **[Immutable Bulwark]**. An earthshattering explosion echoed out across the area when the

fist connected, and Zac realized the power was well beyond that of the first strike. He wasn't sure he would still be in fighting condition if the first fist had contained this amount of force. Even the extremely hard stone bed cracked all around them from the attack, a testament to its immense power.

The unlucky Technocrats who had wanted to fish in muddy waters were rendered into meat paste just from the shockwave. They died without knowing what had happened, likely thinking that the foreman was still on their side. But Zac knew that this thing had no such alliances. The former foreman had turned into an emotionless tool of slaughter upon his death.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm as the punch caused massive cracks across the bulwark. Neither Salvation's self-detonation nor the laser beams of the two enormous mechas had been enough to cause a crack in his defensive wall, but one simple punch from this thing was all it took. But just as Zac despaired, a huge form materialized and punched into the chest of the Cyborg.

It was [**Deathwish**] that activated, and the force was tremendous, even though it only contained a part of the original strength of the attack. This became especially true after Zac managed to imbue the spectral projection with the Dao of Heaviness with some quick reflexes. The Cyborg was launched into the air, flying tens of meters away before slamming into the ground with a large bang.

"What the hell is that thing?" a shocked voice asked from the side.

Zac looked over to see Ogras standing there, staring at the Cyborg with horror in his eyes.

"A cyborg, a mix of man and machine." Zac sighed. "The foreman turned into this thing just as I was about to kill him."

"Mix of man and machine? That should be impossible," Ogras said with a shake of his head.

Of course, it was hard to refute the evidence as it stood up again as if nothing had happened. Its chest was completely fine, with not a single blemish from the retaliatory strike. The

air around it was crackling and twisting from just standing still, and it looked as though it had once again powered up.

“I can’t harm it, and I can’t defend against it, and it keeps getting stronger.” Zac sighed. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Throw things at it,” Ogras said, immediately taking out a handful of offensive arrays.

Hope reignited in Zac’s heart as he took out all his offensive treasures as well.

The next moment, the underworld lit up in a cacophony of chaotic energies as over ten powerful offensive arrays exploded at the same time. Everything from fires burning so hot the flames were white to poisonous mists and crackling lightning caused a both beautiful and terrifying display as the Cyborg was submerged in a conflagration of their most powerful arrays.

Zac even went so far as to throw out his one and only **[Void Ball]**, his ultimate tool of destruction. The ball plunged the whole area into spatial chaos far worse than what he had seen over by the entrance to the Mystic Realm. That time, he had even been thrown inside while fighting the tiger, but he’d managed to navigate his way out in one piece.

This time, the zone was jam-packed with spatial tears, some as large as two or three meters. Some of the largest tears even combined to form large sections of void space, looking like windows into outer space. Those were even more terrifying than the tears, as one could actually fall into such a thing. What waited on the other side depended on one’s luck, but it was most likely a horrible death.

Zac didn’t think he could throw a stone through the area unscathed, let alone pass through it. But the hulking form of the Cyborg seemed completely unbothered as it stood inside the blast zone, a few scorch marks and slightly melted metal the only proof that he had been inside the radius of the attacks at all. Even the spatial tears were crushed against its body, though they did leave somewhat deep cuts. But the wounds didn’t bleed at all, and it didn’t look like the Cyborg even noticed them.

Zac and Ogras only looked at it with dismay, unsure of what to do next. Its enormous fist suddenly slammed into the ground with impossible speed, causing a huge shockwave to erupt. It looked like an atomic bomb had erupted beneath the ground they stood on, causing crushed stones to blast upward in a circle of hundreds of meters.

Zac and Ogras stood over a hundred meters away from the center of the impact, but they were still pushed back another hundred meters, barely able to keep their footing. The demon also suffered multiple cuts from errant pieces of stone hitting him with the speed of bullets. The remaining power of the offensive arrays were blown away in an instant as well, with only a few spatial tears remaining.

“Is it D-grade?” Ogras screamed in alarm. “We need to flee!”

Zac had to agree with Ogras’ assessment. This thing was just too powerful. Zac could barely cause a few cracks in the extremely hard rocks around them, but this monster could suddenly cause widespread damage with a simple punch, something Zac wouldn’t even be able to replicate on the surface. There was no way that the Cyborg had less than 2–3,000 Strength by now, judging from that slam alone.

The two immediately started to run away, but the monster was just too fast. One moment it was still standing in the distance, but in the next it was right next to Ogras, shrouding the demon in darkness. Its fist ripped through the air at the demon, foretelling of impending doom. Ogras roared as torrential amounts of shadows erupted from beneath him, completely submerging the Cyborg in darkness.

The Cyborg froze and shuddered in response, which caused the shadows to get ripped into pieces and Ogras to cough out blood from the blowback. But the brief pause allowed Zac to once again summon **[Immutable Bulwark]** and place it and himself in front of the demon for a final stand.

But the Cyborg had grown too powerful in this short time, and the bulwark only managed to absorb some of the force before cracking like brittle glass. Zac only had time to erect all

his other defensive treasures before the herculean fist rammed into his shield, causing both Zac and Ogras to sail hundreds of meters away until they slammed into a wall with a resounding crash.

Zac almost blacked out from the pain as black ichor flowed like a waterfall from his mouth and nose. At least thirty bones in his body were broken, and the demon seemed to be even worse off when the two crashed into the ground. His shield was completely destroyed as well, well beyond salvaging. Zac desperately tried to get back on his feet to meet the oncoming enemy, but he barely managed to get up to a sitting position.

He was almost all out of Miasma in any case, and using any skill was off the table. He would likely turn to his human form in minutes unless he managed to restock on energy. He briefly considered trying to transform to his human class, but he knew that it was a fool's dream.

There was no way to finish the transformation, as the Cyborg had already appeared right in front of them with the help of its tremendous speed, a series of crashes in the ground exploding behind it. Its hollow eyes stared down at them without a shred of emotion, which in a sense was even scarier than a glare full of hatred.

The transformation skill required ten seconds to finish, but those seconds were the difference between life and death. Besides, Zac knew that there was no way he could harm the thing, even if he unleashed his most powerful moves from his Hatchetman class. The monstrosity wasn't even hampered by the spatial tears, and those were far more dangerous than his skills.

"I'm sorry." Zac sighed as he shot a look at the demon, who helplessly lay in a heap next to him. "This is all my fault."

"This is the life of the cultivator." Ogras wryly smiled with a blood-filled mouth. "The road has to end sometime. Shame I never got to finish my movie."

Zac's snorted before his thoughts wistfully went to his sister as he closed his eyes, ready to meet his maker.

OUT OF CONTROL

The enormous fist of the three-meter humanoid slammed down with tremendous force, aiming to finally end everything. But just as it was about to reach its target, the air shuddered, and the arm was cleanly cut off. The ground shook slightly as the arm that seemed to weigh over a hundred kilos fell, but not a drop of blood escaped from the huge wound.

Of course, the Corpse Golem didn't even flinch from losing an appendage and immediately tried to attack Thea with its remaining arm. But [**Petalstorm**] had already returned to her side after saving the lives of one of the squads that had veered too deep, and the towering humanoid was bisected into ten pieces in short order.

Not that Thea wasn't able to take out the undead in other ways. But using skills instead of her weapon would cost her more Cosmic Energy, a resource that had turned into the most precious treasure during the past days. She shook her head and activated [**Gale Step**], disappearing from the area as she rode the turbulent winds of the battlefield.

Since she'd managed to gain insight into the Seed of Lightness to support her other seeds, her speed had gained a huge upgrade. Combining the Seed of Gust with the Seed of Lightness for her movement skill turned her into a mirage, flittering across the battlefield with almost impossible speed.

She couldn't be bogged down in this seemingly unending war of attrition; she had her goals to accomplish. Normally, she wouldn't have stopped for one of those macabre

constructs, but she'd destroyed it for convenience, since it was guarding one of her targets.

Thea had already spotted her next prey, a Zombie of a young Asian woman who was no taller than 155 centimeters. What set her apart from the rest of the Zombies was her enlarged skull and the thick veins throbbing across her forehead. This one didn't seem to be protected by a guardian, but it rather tried to hide through blending in with the rest of the Zombies for safety.

Thea had become an expert at spotting the Zombie captains over the past weeks, and she flashed over, completely ignoring all the Zombies beneath her. She still got a constant stream of Cosmic Energy, though, as her invisible weapon mowed straight through the undead horde as it accompanied her in her hunt.

While Thea was extremely hard to spot due to her speed, she hadn't activated **[Skysroud]** to turn herself almost completely invisible. The shroud cost too much to be worth it since it also added a defensive barrier. The normal Zombies didn't even notice her presence as it was, but the large-headed Zombie immediately spotted her and released a shriek that made the air shudder.

"Another mid-tier," Thea muttered with a small smile as an amulet around her neck lit up to block out most of the mental attack contained in the scream.

Between her amulet and **[Calm Seas]**, the attack that would have turned most cultivators' brains into mush was effortlessly deflected, not even able to delay Thea a second. She was right in front of the control Zombie just a second later, and Cosmic Energy entered the fractal on the top of her hand as she activated **[Windblade]**.

It was just a basic skill that she got inside the Tutorial, but it had been raised to Peak mastery recently, giving it a substantial boost in its efficiency. With the addition of the Seed of Sharpness and Seed of Lightness, it turned into a large scythe of death that swept across the area for a very small amount of Cosmic Energy.

Cosmic Energy surged into her body as the blade killed over a hundred elite Zombies before they managed to exhaust its energies, but Thea frowned when she saw that the control Zombie exploded into a mess of flesh and viscera before the blade even struck her. Thea quickly looked in all directions and thankfully spotted an engorged Zombie slowly walking away in the distance.

The large Zombie looked as though he had a huge tumor on his stomach, and he was shaking as he shuffled toward the core of the sea of Zombies. Thea only snorted, and **[Petalstorm]** shot out with blazing speed, blasting a large hole through its torso. Rotten innards spilled out from the Zombie as it fell over, but that was not all that fell out.

The maimed body of the control Zombie fell out of the stomach of the Zombie as well, and it was already dead from the pass-through of the invisible Spirit Tool. Thea had already seen this type of macabre escape tactic before, where the Zombie leader somehow transported into the body of a larger undead like a parasite and ordered their host to flee from the battle.

The moment that the control Zombie was killed by the strike, chaos took hold of the whole sector of the Zombie army around her. The tens of thousands of Zombies that were once under the large-headed Zombie's control immediately splintered off from the horde, veering straight for the army that radiated with life force in the distance.

Thea wasn't worried, as that was all according to plan. The Zombies would be dead even before they reached the defensive line.

Since Thea still had quite a bit of energy remaining, she stayed in the sea of Zombies for another twenty minutes, allowing her to kill a handful more control Zombies and thousands of the normal undead before she started to make her way back toward her camp with plenty of energy to spare. Staying any longer might draw the ire of that terrifying being in the center of the horde again.

She had barely made it out with her life in one piece the last time the Corpse Lord had tried to kill her, and she wasn't ready to contend against it just yet. The undead general was simply too strong to defeat within the undead horde, which was likely the reason she stayed over there rather than joining the constant raids. It would require huge sacrifices to bring that woman down, but they hadn't reached that point just yet.

Thea quickly closed in on the million-man army, sending out a handful of **[Windblades]** to cull some dense groups of Zombies on the way. Of course, the army didn't actually consist of a million people, but after the forced conscription, there were at least four hundred thousand people who maintained a constant battle against the tide of Zombies in this sector.

And this was only one of the five sectors going all out against the Zombies, though only the Zhix horde was larger than her army. She didn't love the fact that they were forced to push unwilling people to the front lines, but the very fate of their planet was at stake.

"Good job. You killed enough controllers to keep us occupied for over an hour," Mark said while handing Thea a water bottle as she entered the command tent.

Controllers were what they called the Zombies that kept the enormous sea of brain-dead Zombies in line. Normally, they shouldn't have been able to constrain themselves with so many living targets nearby, but they had always kept a semblance of order even when the armies tried everything to trick the undead to splinter from the main horde.

But they finally managed to find some clues, partly with the help of Big Blue and through chance encounters with the controllers. They finally learned that every single Zombie in the horde was controlled by a stronger Zombie. However, it didn't seem there was a single undead strong enough to control over a hundred million Zombies, so they had created an efficient hierarchy with the help of the mutant Zombies with improved mental capabilities.

One low-tier control Zombie was able to give simple commands to roughly a thousand normal or elite Zombies. It was thanks to them that they didn't simply run off to hunt for something to bite. These low-tiered control Zombies were in turn controlled by mid-tier captains, such as the ones that Thea had just killed.

One of them could control between ten and fifty low-tier commanders, meaning that one mid-tier Zombie could control up to roughly fifty thousand Zombies, depending on their strength. And things followed that pattern with high-tier controllers, though Thea had only managed to find and kill one of them. Presumably, some peak controller was keeping the whole army in check, or perhaps it was the Corpselord herself holding the reins.

In either case, they soon learned that targeting the mid-tier commanders was the most efficient tactic to destroy the cohesiveness of the Zombie horde. Killing a low-tier commander would only let a thousand Zombies loose, and that wasn't worth the trouble. Thea could personally kill that number with a couple of windblades.

Killing a high-tier commander wasn't really efficient either, as the mid-tier controllers were usually smart enough to stay put and wait for orders. But when a mid-tier commander was killed, their subordinates almost immediately turned to small raiding parties that unhesitatingly rushed the waiting armies of the living in the distance. Only when another commander reined them in fast enough would they stay put within the Zombie horde.

"How are things going at the main front?" Thea asked as she took a swig from the canteen.

"It's pretty desperate," Mark said with a grimace. "If those insectoids didn't bolster our numbers, we would have been overrun by now. But the constant bombardment is rapidly depleting our cache of old-world weaponry. Over a thousand tanks have been destroyed just over the past day. The undead truly refuse to give up on their chosen path."

“Well, that would ruin the array they’re making.” Thea nodded. “How long can we keep going?”

“Three days, perhaps four.” Mark sighed. “A few days longer if our searches for military bases are successful. But sooner or later, the constant barrage of the undead will reach a tipping point where our line breaks and all hell breaks loose.”

“Maybe I should head over there?” Thea hesitantly ventured.

Things were rough on their end, where over a thousand people died every hour, but it was nothing compared to the mayhem at the front. Those people were tasked with contesting every step forward the undead took, by any means necessary.

“No point,” Mark said with a shake of his head. “Our work here is helping them as well. This army killed almost three million Zombies yesterday, even though our elites are at the main army. We’re stealing their momentum and making sure that the leaders of the horde don’t send all their powerhouses to the front line.”

Thea sighed and nodded with some helplessness. It just felt bad that she stayed here in relative safety while her family members were risking everything to stop the horde in their tracks. But she was the only one who was able to constantly hunt the control Zombies to splinter the horde.

“What about the other hordes?” she asked.

“Nothing new,” Mark said. “Port Atwood’s people are still missing. The Sino-Indian Alliance is fighting a losing war, only nipping at the heels of the army. They will not be able to stop the advance of the horde unless something drastically changes.”

“And the movement from the invaders?” Thea asked.

“They are staying clear of us and are focusing on the minor undead hordes. There seems to be an implicit agreement where all the armies avoid each other, targeting only the undead. The zealots are quite terrifying according to our reports, turning every battlefield to hell on earth.”

Thea mulled over the information, though it seemed not much had changed in the past hours. Everyone was desperately struggling to stop the Undead Empire, but they were powerful enough to take on the combined powers of all forces without even revealing all their cards. Almost no one would be able to stop them if their leaders joined the fight.

“What about Zac? Any word from him?” Thea asked.

“Nothing. There has been no sighting of him for two weeks. Some believe he is in closed-door cultivation since reaching level 75, that he’s aiming to break through to E-grade. But our informants believe he has found the underworld and is busy taking control of its riches,” Mark said with some dissatisfaction.

Thea frowned as well, not understanding what Zac was thinking. The idea was for him to quickly close the other incursions before joining the battle against the undead, but he’d only closed a handful of them before disappearing. He hadn’t even gone to help his own people, from what they could tell, since he would have to have used their network to get close to the Dead Zone.

She truly hoped he would appear sooner rather than later. Things were turning pretty bleak, and the world needed a hero.

THE THREE PATHS

The seconds passed, but the darkness of true death never arrived, forcing Zac to finally look up to see what was going on. The Cyborg still loomed above them like a mountain, completely unmoving. The terrorizing aura it had emitted up until now was gone, making the thing seem like a hollow shell.

“Is it dead? What did you do?” Ogras soon ventured with a weak voice, also realizing something was up.

“I didn’t do anything,” Zac croaked, confusion filling his mind.

He wasn’t sure what to do since he hadn’t received a shred of Cosmic Energy, something that usually indicated his enemy was still alive. He was afraid that any sudden action would rekindle the life of the thing, which would end with their deaths without a doubt. Ogras didn’t have any such compunctions, and a blast of shadows hit the Cyborg right in its head.

Zac groaned inwardly as he scrambled for anything to use to protect them in case it responded, but the hulking humanoid simply toppled over. It slammed into the ground with a thud that launched Zac a few centimeters up into the air, but that was it. His body was racked with pain, but he still lunged at the humanoid, putting it into one of his Cosmos Sacks.

The demon sighed in relief as he immediately took out a handful of array disks before eating a healing pill. Zac followed suit, and he also took out two E-grade Miasma Crystals. He still didn’t want to transform into his human

form, just in case some scanning device remained in the area. The Nexus Hub would only be blocked for a couple more minutes, after all.

Normally, he would have completed a sweep to look for such a thing, but there was simply no way. His right arm was broken in at least five different places, and most of his ribs on the side that had tanked the last punch were broken as well. Luckily, he didn't need his organs in his current form. Otherwise, he would likely have been in a far more critical situation.

Neither of the two spoke for over thirty minutes, both focusing on restoring themselves from their critical states. Thankfully, the battle against the other Technocrats was over, and there was no movement at all in the area.

“What the hell is going on?” Zac finally muttered with incredulity, still not believing he had survived that thing.

“Perhaps it ran out of life force? Or perhaps the Heavens wouldn't allow for its continued existence?” Ogras ventured.

“How was that thing even allowed through the incursion in the first place? High tech was supposed to be confiscated,” Zac complained, still rattled from being so close to death.

“Heavens' rules have always been negotiable. If the cost outweighs the benefits, it will usually back down. The Technocrats might have directly paid for the Ruthless Heavens to look the other way. Or they might have paid by hiding the seed from Heavens' eyes. Either way, bringing a thing like this through the Nexus Hub would no doubt bankrupt a clan like Azh'Rezak,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

Zac slowly nodded, suddenly remembering how Greatest was able to keep the System at bay to allow him to have a conversation. Besides, while the Cyborg had been closing in on D-grade power by the end, it hadn't started out that way. Its first attack could conceivably come from a Peak F-grade being if it was using its life force to empower its strike.

Perhaps the machine or parasite that was put inside the foreman was just Peak F-grade at the start, but rapidly pushed

the host to greater heights by draining its life force or something. It would explain why it only lasted less than a minute before shutting down.

“A hybrid of the Dao of Technology and Cosmic Energy,” Ogras muttered with a raspy voice, echoing Zac’s thoughts. “It was not a true fusion, but it’s not too far off. These heretics are something else. Perhaps they can only keep such a thing alive for a few strikes, but it is still a terrifying accomplishment.”

Zac nodded in agreement, but the small movement made him grimace in pain. It was truly a scary thing to put inside someone. There likely were no more than five people on Earth, including the invaders, who would be able to survive that thing’s onslaught. The two of them would have turned into mush if he didn’t have **[Immutable Bulwark]** and the Seed of Hardness to drain enough of the final strike’s momentum.

“Isn’t this something common among the Technocrats?” Zac asked as he ate another healing pill. “I thought blending technology and cultivation was just their thing.”

By now, he had started to feel strong enough for a short battle in case it was needed, so he kept his eyes trained on the Nexus Hub. There might be other Technocrats who were waiting for an opportunity to reach the Teleportation Crystal. Some might have been sent away on missions or were handling the enormous drill that was digging toward the surface. He needed to defend the Nexus Hub for another eight hours to make sure that there were no escapees.

The Cyborg’s punch had thrown them a few hundred meters away, and they had fallen onto an outcropping that overlooked both the battlefield and the small Technocrat outpost. No one would be able to reach the Hub without them noticing unless they possessed some sort of cloaking technology that could move.

“A true integration of technology and cultivation is impossible, since the Dao of Technology is not accepted. The Technocrats always have to work around this inviolable fact, and the way they do this differs. It’s generally known in the Multiverse that there are essentially three main paths of the

Technocrats,” Ogras explained as he finally got up to a sitting position from lying down on the ground like a dead fish. “That’s at least how I understand it.

“The first branch is called the Machine God Faction,” Ogras said. “They go all-in on technology, and you could say they are the Technocrats furthest away from cultivators. They avoid the System as much as possible. Some of them might be level 1 but still possess the capability to kill B-grade cultivators. However, while they have both human and machine parts like this big guy, they don’t cultivate their bodies at all. They consider their flesh components not yet replaced - expendable and inferior.”

Zac nodded, as that was his original impression of the Technocrats after reading about them.

“The second group are the Technomancers. They use a mix of both systems. They might get a ranger class but use technological guns, like the rifles we took during the auction. It’s a slightly annoying path since they still would have to exert twice the effort to improve. Their kills with their technological weapons would give no energy or merit,” the demon continued. “But they usually have destructive capabilities that are far stronger than normal cultivators. Just look at the weapons that these things used.

“The final group are the Transcenders. They use technology to augment themselves, but they fully utilize the class and cultivation systems of the Ruthless Heavens. But they might swap out their body parts with those of a dragon, or forcibly instill themselves with rare and powerful bloodlines. They are mad scientists using their own bodies as laboratories,” Ogras said.

“How is that possible? Does the System allow such a thing?” Zac asked skeptically. “If it’s possible to become stronger like that, won’t everyone do it?”

“From what I hear, the more extreme modifications are in defiance of the Heavens, and it enacts a terrible price that most would say supersedes the gains. I don’t know the details, but such modifications are banned in most empires. There are

unorthodox sects who walk similar paths though, but they work fully within the bounds of the System,” Ogras said hesitantly.

“The goals of the factions are also different. The purists want to destroy the Ruthless Heavens altogether by pushing the Dao of Technology to the point that they create something even greater than the so-called System: the Machine God.”

“The Technomancers and Transcenders, on the other hand, partly work within the rules of the Heavens, and their goal is to change it rather than destroy it. They want to force the Ruthless Heavens to accept the Dao of Technology through raising an Apostate or forcing the creation of technology-based races,” Ogras explained. “Judging by this ugly thing, I’d say this Firmament’s Edge is part of one of the latter factions, even if it might seem like it’s part of the Machine God Faction at first glance.”

“Are the Technocrat Factions enemies with each other if their goals differ?” Zac asked.

“No idea, but when the whole Multiverse is their enemy, I would guess that the three factions would stick together. The three factions are something most people in the Multiverse know of, but I have no idea about the specifics. This is my first time actually seeing Technocrats in the flesh,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

“For one, they wouldn’t deign to come to my homeworld, and secondly, they wouldn’t enter the territory of the Horde unless necessary. The Multiverse is filled with old monsters stuck at bottlenecks who are ready to risk their lives for a chance at breaking through.”

Zac nodded in thanks after Ogras had explained the situation further. He had pretty much avoided the subject since he’d learned of his mother’s origins, but he knew that he couldn’t stay ignorant for much longer. That became doubly true when remembering the Abbot’s words. The Mystic Realm was the key to the fate of Earth, and it might be of Technocrat origin.

But all that would have to wait for later, and Zac opened his status screen instead of mulling on the topic any further. The results of the battle were above expectations. He had gained five full levels in the short but intense battle, even more than when he fought the extremely powerful Nenotheop, who was a far larger threat than the four bodyguards combined. It put Zac at level 70, just a short bit away from the peak of F-grade.

The four bodyguards gave a good boost, but Zac remembered that the largest source of energy had actually come from the enormous robot earlier. The surge he got when he killed the alien in the cockpit was at least twice that of killing one of the lightning cultivators.

He put the free points into Strength before checking his other gains. Shockingly enough, he had upgraded his Dao of Hardness in the heat of battle, though he wasn't sure exactly when. Perhaps it had happened when he'd tried everything in his arsenal to block the final strike of the Cyborg.

Hardness (High): Endurance +50, Wisdom +10.

Zac had gained another 25 Endurance and 5 Wisdom from the upgrade, effectively doubling the boost from the Seed of Hardness. He wasn't surprised at all that the seed still almost only gave Endurance since his definition of Hardness was pretty much solely about enduring strikes.

The good news didn't end there, and he noticed that **[Immutable Bulwark]** had evolved as well, pushing it to Middle mastery. He wanted to check out the differences, but he didn't want to cause any energy fluctuations while they hid within the illusion array. But one thing hadn't gone according to plan. Zac was surprised to see that the quest was still active, even though he had gotten the prompt telling him that he had conquered the area.

"Is your quest active as well?" Zac asked the demon, who nodded after a second.

"We may need to wait until the hub is closed. Or perhaps more Technocrats are hiding in the area," Ogras mused, echoing Zac's earlier thoughts.

“Will you be able to heal up in eight hours?” Zac asked.

“I am afraid not,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “But I’ll be able to walk at least. I will need a couple of days to reach prime fighting condition.”

Zac grimaced, knowing his situation wasn’t much better. But at least they would be able to rest up while looking for the missing army. They would need to travel for over a week since such a large sector was blocked off by the interference.

“I’ll stay here and recuperate until the hub is closed,” Zac said and arduously got up to his feet. “I am not able to scour the area just yet, but perhaps we can catch some people trying to return through the hub. Are you staying, or do you want to go back? I could buy the teleporter for you.”

“I’ll go back as soon as the quest is complete,” Ogras said after mulling it over. “My Daos aren’t optimal against the undead, so I’ll have a talk with the dragonling again before we set out.”

“Dragonling?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Smaug; apparently, it’s the name of an old dragon on your planet?” Ogras snorted. “Gutsy to name yourself after a primordial species. They’ll rip him into pieces if they find out. But you could buy the teleporter over by the Hub. It might make any late arrival believe that we have left.”

Zac nodded in agreement and got out of the hiding spot to place the teleporter in a conspicuous location before scurrying back. Just that quick walk made him shake with pain, so he hurriedly sat down again with a groan to refocus on healing up.

His state was still quite horrid, but he slowly got better as the hours passed. No one had come or gone while the two waited, and Zac started to worry that any remnant Technocrats had fled the area, making them nigh impossible to find in the short run. But a small movement in the distance made the two freeze.

It was one of the inconspicuous scouting drones that were used for keeping watch over the perimeter of the Technocrat

incursion. It had appeared straight out of a solid cave wall on the other side of the settlement, as though it were a ghost.

PRODUCTION LINES

Zac immediately realized the same cloaking technology was being used in the settlement as down in the battleroach cave. The camouflage of the Technocrats was truly amazing to completely trick one's eyes while not emitting a speck of Cosmic Energy.

The drone moved about the desolate town, scanning the buildings one by one. Soon afterward, it flew over to the battlefield and scanned the hundreds of corpses that Zac and Ogras had left where they were. Finally, it flew over to the newly bought teleportation array and scanned it. Zac frowned and took out **[Verun's Bite]**, readying himself for battle.

"Be patient," Ogras whispered as his eyes were trained on the hidden spot the drone came from. "What do you want to do if people show up?"

"Kill everyone. I don't want a single one escaping through the hub," Zac said without hesitation.

The drone passed around the area a few times, but luckily, its scans didn't reach their secluded ledge. Their patience was soon rewarded as a group of Technocrats finally emerged from the cave wall and rushed straight toward the Nexus Hub. Only when the group was halfway there did Zac and Ogras appear in a blast of shadows.

The Technocrats were shocked to see two cultivators appear right in their midst and barely managed to put up a resistance before they all lay dead on the ground. Ogras still had trouble moving about and was forced to fight sitting down

on the ground while blasting shadow spears in all directions. Zac was a little better off, but he had to use the axe with his off-hand since his right arm was unusable.

“The quest is completed,” Ogras said with excitement after the battle group of Technocrats was finished off.

Zac breathed out in relief since that most likely meant that there were no more invaders around. But he still wanted to make sure.

“Can you keep watch while I check things out?” Zac asked, getting a nod in response.

Zac slowly walked over toward the cloaked entrance in the wall, and he activated the upgraded **[Immutable Bulwark]** just in case as he stepped through the illusion. The shield soon passed right through the wall, and Zac stopped in his tracks to see if anything happened.

Luckily, everything seemed completely fine, so he walked through as well. As expected, no Technocrats were lying in wait, and he was only met with silence as he stepped into a large empty space. But he still kept the skill active to see what changes there had been since it got upgraded.

The size of the bulwark was pretty much the same as before, but after some testing, he realized he now was able to change its size. He could make it almost ten meters wide and four meters high, making it look like a proper rampart, but he could also shrink it down to the size of his tower shield. He was also able to move it within fifty meters of himself, allowing him to use it to defend others with greater ease.

There was no change to the shield itself, though. It didn't get thicker or gain any new fractals, making Zac guess that its defensive capabilities were still pretty much the same. Of course, it wasn't the end of the world since only the Cyborg had been able to crack its defenses so far. Zac only played with the skill for a few seconds before refocusing on the scene inside.

The hidden structure was shockingly different compared to the outside, and it felt like he stood inside a hangar of a

spaceship. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all made of metal, with electrical lights rather than mushrooms and moss illuminating the area. There was not much to see in the surroundings apart from a few rows of containers full of raw materials, but there was also the tunnel.

The tunnel that the Technocrats had arduously worked on for months could truly be called a marvel of engineering. It was hexagonal with a diameter of roughly twenty meters, and it was also clad in the same metallic walls as the hall. It was completely symmetrical, with not a single blemish or aberration, but most importantly, it was long. Extremely long.

Zac felt as though he were looking at an optical illusion when he peered into the endless tunnel, which had a straight forty-five-degree incline. It looked like when one placed two mirrors in front of each other, creating the appearance of an endless tunnel. There was no way for him to see the end, but he guessed a tremendous excavation machine was at the other side, somewhere close to the surface.

There was also a large platform at the entrance of the tunnel, silently hovering a decimeter above the ground. Zac guessed that the platform was a lift that could take one to the top, but he saw no console or buttons to steer it. Besides, he had no intention of entering the tunnel at this juncture, as it would take hours to get to the surface with this thing.

He finally understood what had happened after going through the area. The Technocrats who'd just arrived had most likely been working on the mining rig at the other side of the tunnel, when they suddenly got the alert that their incursion had fallen. They took the lift back down and only just arrived to see a desolate battlefield and a hill of corpses outside.

Zac took a final look around before returning to the demon's side. There was still a bit over half the time before the Nexus Hub would shut down, so Zac once again sat down to wait it out while recuperating.

Ogras was well enough to get back on his feet around two hours later, so he left for New London to gather provisions and prepare for the rescue of the Port Atwood army. Zac himself

stayed on and only stood up the moment that the Nexus Hub was inactivated, finally quenching any chance of any unwelcome surprises. The connection between the Technocrats and Earth was finally broken, which would hopefully keep his sister safe for at least a century, perhaps forever.

However, Zac didn't immediately leave the area but instead hurried back toward the battlefield. He had already looted the Cosmos Sacks belonging to the four cultivators and the foreman, but there were still hundreds of bodies lying on the ground with all kinds of precious items scattered about.

Apart from the Technocrats, there were also the droves of broken-down machines. Some were destroyed beyond salvation, but a few were somewhat intact. Perhaps some engineers back at Port Atwood would be able to piece together a couple of whole robots from the scraps.

The drones had fallen pretty easily to Zac's assault, but that didn't mean they were weak. A single one of the battle droids would likely be able to defeat the average Peak F-grade warrior. Not only that, but their hulls were also extremely sturdy, and Zac had been forced to sometimes swing twice before destroying them.

Getting a handful of these things to guard his towns would be a huge boon since he was spreading his personnel thin as it was. It was one of the more glaring problems with Port Atwood at the moment: they lacked people. They had liberated quite a few islands by now, but there were only so many people placed on the remote archipelago.

Zac was also pretty sure he wouldn't find too many more citizens stranded on the remaining islands that had yet to be scouted out. The beasts were too strong by now, and the average people would have long been killed. It was the same on the mainland, where fewer and fewer towns remained standing. But the people on the mainland at least had the opportunity to cooperate with others in the area to form larger settlements for protection.

Besides, even if Zac didn't manage to turn these robots into competent foot soldiers, they would still be worth

salvaging. The machines were made from either some high-grade materials or some impressive composite alloys that the Technocrats created. In either case, he might be able to recast the robots into armor or weaponry.

Zac noted with some annoyance that he actually wasn't the first to scour through the battlefield, since he only found a handful of Cosmos Sacks. The large mecha that Ogras had defeated was gone as well, already snatched by the demon. Ogras had most likely looted while fighting since he had been mid-battle up until the Cyborg made its appearance.

Luckily, there was a lot of ground that the demon hadn't been able to pillage. Neither Ogras nor Zac had entered the structures in the small base camp, and Zac swept through them one by one like a locust. He first hit a warehouse that was filled to the rafters with tens of thousands of ingots of all kinds of metals.

It seemed that they kept a lot of the resources ready on hand for the production lines in the neighboring structure since there was some sort of gravity-defying conveyor belts connecting the buildings. Zac didn't care about that and swept all the materials clean.

The next building housed enormous rectangular machines that just looked like large metallic blocks. They reached over ten meters in the air, and their sides were roughly four meters. However, they seemed to be somewhat hastily put together, and not one of them was exactly alike. It looked like they were something the Technocrats had scrounged together to start production as quickly as humanly possible.

Zac didn't understand the function of the large machines, but he guessed that they were some sort of molds that created the robots from scratch. They reminded Zac a bit of the first furnace he'd bought from the System, the one he'd used to turn his first batch of raw crystals into real Nexus Crystals.

Unfortunately, there wasn't a repository of freshly made war machines, but that wasn't surprising since they would all have been sent to the battlefield. The large constructors themselves were the real prize in Zac's opinion, and he would

definitely have some people looking into setting up a production plant back in Port Atwood.

Of course, he'd make sure to check them for bugs or any other fail-safes. These things could be programmed to blow up like a nuclear bomb in case some unlicensed personnel tried to operate them, for all Zac knew. Jeeves would hopefully be able to assist them in that department.

There was also the issue of the hidden risks of using technology. The things Zac had seen from the Technocrats had all seemed extremely convenient. Who wouldn't want a few thousand drones keeping their place safe at all times? It made sense if a clan in the Multiverse purchased a batch of goods from the Technocrats for this very purpose.

Yet no one in the Multiverse utilized this sort of technology as far as Zac could tell. It made no sense to Zac, who had long realized that there were no such things as morals or scruples amongst the warriors of the Multiverse. Such things were luxuries that very few could afford, and he felt that the anti-technology sentiment didn't make sense unless there was something more to it.

That meant that there was something else that held all these forces back, stopping them from using these things. Ogras had mentioned some unknown costs that would outweigh the benefits when modifying one's body, and it was perhaps the same with incorporating technology into one's force. He essentially needed to understand the situation better before he started transforming Port Atwood into some future city.

But he still stowed away all the machines and everything else in the production plants. He did put all the technology-based items in a spare Cosmos Sack, though, not wanting to mix them with his real belongings. Apart from the constructors, there were a lot of spare parts and a row of extremely heavy tubes that Zac suspected were some sort of high-tech batteries. Each one of them was only as long as his legs, but they weighed more than a car.

In the rest of the buildings, there wasn't much of interest, as most were just residential structures crammed full of bunk beds. He did find what looked like a laboratory, but it seemed to have been ransacked. Perhaps it once belonged to the researcher Zac had killed, and his place had been searched for clues when he never returned to the camp.

He also found what he suspected was the foreman's house and study, and he made sure to take anything that might be worth something there. He even broke apart the walls and floor in search of hidden compartments, but there was nothing of the sort. It hopefully meant that everything of value was kept in his Cosmos Sack, which Zac had already looted.

He had briefly scanned the five Cosmos Sacks belonging to the E-grade warriors, but he didn't have time to properly check everything out. The sacks belonging to the lightning cultivators weren't very exciting, at least. They just contained a decent number of Nexus Crystals along with various pills and daily necessities. They would likely have left their real assets back home before entering the incursion.

Zac had hoped that the cultivators would have things that would give him a nice boost when he finally reached E-grade. But eight months had passed since the integration by now, and the four had likely already used all such resources on themselves by now. The foreman's sack was filled with all sorts of things, but most were of technological origin, so Zac didn't understand their purpose.

Content that there was nothing left of value, Zac finally got back to New London. On his return, he learned that Ogras had already left for Port Atwood, and was asked to meet him there. Zac didn't mind, and soon enough, he stood in his private teleportation room in his compound. He immediately found the demon after stepping outside.

"How are you feeling?" Zac asked when he saw that Ogras still looked a bit pale.

Honestly, he didn't feel much better himself, and he just wanted to lie down and sleep for a bit. But he couldn't do that

just yet and instead used his transformation skill to change to his human form.

“I’ll survive,” Ogras muttered after Zac stood up again. “Everything is prepared. Are you ready to go?”

“I’ll just head over to the Mystic Realm to tell Kenzie that we’re okay but that we’re heading out again,” Zac said.

The demon didn’t object, and the two entered Kenzie’s study within the Mystic Realm a few minutes later.

“Wow, the two of you look like walking corpses,” Kenzie said with shock when she saw their bedraggled appearances. “Are you trying to blend in with the undead?”

SORTIE

“They were a bit stronger than we expected,” Zac simply said, not wanting to go into detail about just how close they came to dying a few hours ago.

Ogras played along, donning a lackadaisical look as he hid the fact that he couldn't put any weight on one of his legs. Zac obviously wouldn't divulge that his right arm still wasn't working either.

“I just wanted to tell you that we're fine, but that we're heading out again. We're going to search for our people; it might take a few weeks,” Zac added.

“Great, I'm coming with,” Kenzie said as she stood up, patting her leggings.

“Absolutely not,” Zac said without hesitation.

“I'm going,” Kenzie said with a glare. “You've kept me on the island long enough. I am starting to feel like a prisoner, and I need some combat experience to keep improving.”

“What about studying arrays?” Zac asked. “And the Funnel?”

“I can do that as well. Won't we be sitting on your spaceship most of the time?” Kenzie immediately retorted. “Besides, I've pushed my defensive seed to High mastery and even gotten a Water seed that helps with restoration. I am almost as unkillable as you!”

“Girl, you haven't been using the Funnel for yourself, have you?” Ogras probed with suspicion in his eyes. “My head

almost got split in two to snatch that thing, you know?”

“I don’t need that thing to improve a few Dao Seeds,” Kenzie snorted.

“Monster siblings,” the demon muttered under his breath, receiving synchronized eye rolls in return.

“It’s great that you’ve improved your Daos, but the Undead Empire is the strongest force on the planet. We have no idea of the dangers we might face,” Zac said. “We probably won’t just be fighting the newly turned Zombies this time.”

“The girl is pretty good with her spells,” Ogras interjected. “She’s even better than most of the other girls you bring along everywhere, and we have room on the flying treasure.”

Zac shot a murderous glare at the demon, but he acted oblivious to the implicit threat. Soon enough, Zac was forced to acquiesce to his sister’s demands, as he knew that he couldn’t keep her locked away on the island forever since that would harm her future development even if she had help from Jeeves.

But he was her big brother; worrying came with the job. Of course, with both himself and Ogras there along with the small hill of defensive treasures he had decked her out in, she would have a hard time getting hurt even if she was in the middle of a sea of Zombies. And she did not only survive the Tutorial but also staying at a border town for months, so she wasn’t some helpless damsel in distress.

“Fine, but don’t take any unnecessary risks. Our main goal is to find and eventually save our people, not to have some last stand against the undead,” Zac said before turning to Ogras. “Is everything prepared?”

“The others are waiting by the public teleporter in Port Atwood,” Ogras said. “There have also been some odd developments, but I thought I would brief everyone when we’re on the move. Don’t forget to withdraw a mountain of crystals for the flying treasure from the town coffers.”

“I need to get a few things as well,” Kenzie added. “I’ll join you in a bit.”

Zac nodded, and the group met up again at the teleportation array in Port Atwood ten minutes later. Zac had gone to take out some of Port Atwood's resources from the Merit Exchange for the trip. He didn't know the state of the army, so he brought a large number of healing pills, Nexus Crystals, spare weaponry, and even food in case they had run out.

Ogras and Kenzie were already there, and they were joined by Tylia and eight Valkyries. Zac was surprised that neither Verana nor any demons were around, and he looked over at Ogras with some confusion.

"Verana will stay in the underworld and consolidate our gains and start working on dealing with the incursions there. I let the brat stay as well to be with her family," Ogras said before nodding at Tylia. "This one has a skill set that might prove helpful, and the eight girls will be able to form a small War Array for your sister. Room's limited, so I didn't bring anyone else. I wanted to find the big ox, but it turns out he went fighting with the Marshall girl."

Zac's eyes lit up in understanding, and he felt it was a solid enough lineup. Billy would have been a good addition, but he could probably do more good helping in the fight against the other horde.

"So where are we going?" Zac asked.

"We'll head to Westfort, and a person from the Sino-Indian Alliance there will take us to Erdenet, the closest array that I could find to where we last heard from our people. There was an array just a few days' travel away from them, but it got swallowed by the interference as well," Ogras explained.

Zac nodded and didn't waste any more time, and just a few minutes later, they stood in the Mongolian town. The guide bowed and immediately returned through the teleporter, leaving the small group to their own devices. They walked over to a cleared-out field, and Zac immediately summoned the flying tool he'd gotten from the Hunt.

The Sky Gnomes had long figured out how to activate the large metallic ball and Zac infused some energy into it,

making it quickly grow and change shape. It was as Calrin said, it was one of the simplest flying tools imaginable, only forming a simple disk that they would sit on. It was nothing like the sleek spaceship or the magical steampunk flying vessel he had imagined.

This was actually the first time he would use it, since he didn't feel too confident flying it in the underworld, where the high ceiling could be swapped out by a narrow passage at a moment's notice. He only had the one and didn't want to crash it.

The group sat down on the large circular surface, and Zac placed a couple of E-grade crystals into their sockets and placed his hand on a control array. The next moment, it floated up into the skies and shot out of the town with tremendous speed.

The air screamed around them, but the group of twelve weren't buffeted by the winds in the slightest, as the flying tool at least possessed some sort of protective array. Zac greatly enjoyed the feeling of flying, and he couldn't stop himself from making the treasure take some sharp turns as it flew across the hills.

"Is it out of your system? You're going in the wrong direction," the demon said with a snort, and Zac hastily changed course with an embarrassed cough.

"Okay, so update me on the situation," Zac said after the disk started to fly southward.

"Things are turning pretty chaotic in this area," Ogras said. "I went by the Marshall Spy Agency before we left, and large changes have taken place."

"Changes how?" Zac asked.

"For one, there are dozens of hordes now, though the three initial ones are still far larger than the others," Ogras started explaining as he took out a tablet from his Cosmos Sack. "They are traveling in irregular patterns, and no one could understand what the hell they were doing until recently."

"And what's that?" Zac asked.

“They’re making a mind-bogglingly huge array where the Dead Zone is just the core,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

Zac was shocked to hear such a thing, since the original Dead Zone was almost as large in area as the former United States. Such a massive piece of land was just the core? But he suddenly remembered the words of the Technocrat he’d interrogated the other day, and some fear gripped his heart.

“Terraforming,” Zac muttered with a frown.

“Exactly.” Ogras nodded with a serious face. “An array this large can only be used for something terrifying like destroying the whole planet. I believe they want to make this planet death-attuned. I don’t know how it works, but all the planets in the Undead Empire naturally produce Miasma rather than Cosmic Energy, and I believe this array is the key.”

“So if they manage to form the array, we’re screwed?” Zac asked.

“I am not sure. I’ve asked the blue one to gather information. Such a search might draw some ire from the Undead Empire, but we’ve already passed that point. But I would personally guess that it would take some time to activate such a huge array.” Ogras shrugged. “Also, there’s some good news.”

“Oh? What’s that?” Zac asked, happy to take any good news he could get.

“We’re not the only ones worried about the Undead Empire’s actions. There have been reports of multiple alien armies arriving in the contested area, mainly from the neighboring incursions,” Ogras said. “Most notably, the insane cultists have arrived in full force. Massive battles took place yesterday where a few of the smaller Hordes were eradicated to the last Zombie.”

Zac nodded. “Makes sense; if the Undead Empire activates that array, it is probably game over for all the other invaders as well. They would have to leave the planet immediately.”

“Exactly. And they’re not the only ones joining the battle. The insect people have amassed huge armies that have taken down at least three Zombie hordes as well. There are millions of them fighting like they’re possessed,” Ogras said. “They’ve marched for weeks to finally join the war.”

“What about the Dominators?” Zac asked. “Are they still banking on us doing the work for them?”

“The Marshalls are not sure,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “Their network is quite impressive, but it can’t cover the whole area, especially not now when large parts are cut off from teleportation.”

“I don’t think the Dominators can just sit still any longer,” Kenzie added from the side. “If they don’t do anything, they will lose everything as well. They need to at least stall the undead until we can battle them.”

“We just assume they are staying in the shadows, though,” Ogras said. “No point in basing our plans on our enemies assisting us.”

“Sounds fair enough. So, where are we heading?” Zac asked as he glanced down at the ground moving rapidly beneath them.

Ogras pressed a few buttons, and a map appeared on the tablet he was holding.

“Alea’s outpost was in this small town, Hanliun, when the area got blocked. The main army was a day’s march away, harassing one of the main hordes together with the Sino-Indian Alliance,” Ogras started narrating.

“There was such a distance between the camp and the army?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Remember, the Zombie horde numbered over a hundred million, and most of it is shrouded in Miasma. They didn’t want to risk the lives of the noncombatants, and having a headquarters that was constantly on the move would become a problem,” Ogras explained. “So they kept a healthy distance and communicated through crystals, though they might have become blocked as well by now.”

“We cannot know for sure what happened after they lost contact, but I believe they would retreat from the area,” the demon continued. “The only path that makes sense is northwest toward the closest teleporter in Baoqui. What they don’t know is that Baoqui’s teleporter is blocked as well.”

“So we head to that town to meet up with them?” Zac asked.

“Yes, though they would likely reach that place a few days before us, judging by the speed we’re going. We could try to anticipate their next move, but there’s no obvious direction they could take after reaching Baoqui.” Ogras sighed.

“So if we take the safe route, we’ll lose time,” Zac murmured.

“At least a day.” Ogras nodded.

“But if we take a chance, we might miss them completely,” Zac concluded.

A full day could make a huge difference, depending on their situation. By that point, they would have been fending for themselves for almost ten days. He might be able to rely on his extremely high Luck to pick the right direction, but was he willing to bet his people’s lives on it?

“We’ll take the safe route for now,” Zac eventually decided. “But we might adjust as we get closer. Perhaps we can increase the altitude on this thing enough that we can see them from a distance?”

“I am sure there are restrictions for that,” Tylia said, speaking up for the first time in a while. “I have heard that low-grade flying treasures rely on the energy from the ground. The energy is sparser in the sky, so they have built-in restrictions so they won’t fall out of the sky.”

Zac looked over at the demon, who nodded in confirmation.

“Well, we’ll see how far up it will allow us to go later, then. By the way, have you ever seen anything like this?” Zac asked Ogras as he took out one of the top-grade crystals with the green shimmering lights within.

The demon stretched out his arm to take the shimmering crystal with interest, but he was preceded by the Tal-Eladar, who snatched it up with shock in her eyes.

“High-purity Beast Crystals!” Tylia blurted out as her eyes widened.

BAOQUI

“Young Lord... the Tir’Emarel Clan would be happy to buy any such crystals you have in your possession,” Tylia said, her eyes not leaving the crystal for a second.

Zac knew he had hit the jackpot when he saw Tylia’s reaction. She wasn’t even a Beast Master, yet she had such an overblown reaction.

“Those are pretty good things,” Ogras said with a whistle. “Just the normal-purity ones are even more valuable than attuned crystals; the high-purity ones are treasures.”

“What are they good for?” Zac asked, though he had a pretty good idea already.

“Beasts can’t use Nexus Crystals for leveling for some reason. They can stay in a mine and benefit from the increased density of energies, but they can’t directly absorb the energy from the crystals themselves,” Ogras said. “But they can directly benefit from Beast Crystals.”

“But I can’t sense any energy in these things?” Zac interjected.

“I don’t really know how it works, but the beasts eat these things like food and slowly digest them. It helps them gain levels while also purifying their bloodline to a certain degree,” the demon continued.

“High-purity crystals even help with the foundations of creating a Beast Crystal in the future,” Tylia added from the side. “Feeding your contracted beast crystals will essentially help it grow faster, and you can still give it other treasures to

help it improve. The two don't clash. Buying Beast Crystals is a major cost for most classes working with beasts."

"So are they rare?" Zac asked.

"Not exceedingly rare, but far more uncommon than normal Nexus Crystals," Tylia said. "I'd say the crystal in your hand is worth around a million Nexus Coins. Lower purity crystals are not worth as much, though."

Zac whistled in surprise, knowing that there were almost two hundred such crystals in his Cosmos Sack. Better yet, there were thousands upon thousands of crystals left in the mine. Even if the worst crystals weren't worth as much, he was sure the value of the mine was multiple billions. It was a true treasure trove.

The crystals would also come in handy in case his experiment with the newborn Ayn Hivequeen worked out. The former pet shop employee had already gotten a beast-related class, but she hadn't been able to form a connection with the queen yet. But with the help of the experts among the Tal-Eladar, he was sure he'd be able to groom even more Beast Masters over the coming years. Perhaps he could trade some crystals for knowledge in beast rearing.

Of course, the real prize from that cave was likely the **[Primordial Breath Amanita]**, but Zac wasn't sure if discussing it with a Tal-Eladar was the best idea. He'd wait until he was alone with Calrin or Khar, the golem in charge of the Merit Exchange back in Port Atwood.

Tylia kept trying to find out where Zac got his hands on the crystals or at least buy them from him, but he ignored her attempts as he focused on recuperation. He was still far from fully restored, with multiple bones broken in his body.

Luckily, the flying disk was essentially on autopilot after activating it. A connection had formed in his mind, and he didn't need to keep his hand on the control array. It zapped through the air with great speed, flying at an altitude of a few hundred meters.

Ogras was even worse off than Zac, so the demon had closed his eyes in meditation as soon as he had explained the situation to the others. He had looked mostly fine since returning from the Technocrat incursions, but Zac had noticed the small tremors in his hands signaling that he was in great pain.

The others simply spent most of their time cultivating. Kenzie switched between cultivating and reading the crystals on formations. She had already finished the first crystal, but after that, her progress had slowed to a crawl. This was nothing odd, of course. The eight crystals held the condensed knowledge on the art of arrays from a D-grade sect. It wasn't something that could be digested in a day or two.

Zac wanted to go through the various things he had looted from the Technocrat incursion together with his sister, but he knew that now was not the time. Not even Ogras was completely clued in to the details of their relationship with the Technocrats, so he could only wait until they were alone.

The days passed in silence as they crossed the vast lands of Pangea. The cost of travel would ruin the average cultivator on Earth, but the expense wasn't even noticeable for Zac. Since he couldn't cultivate, he instead spent most of his time pondering the Dao. He had been in multiple intense fights lately, and he felt close to improving multiple Daos.

He had gained multiple sources of insight to the Seed of Rot recently, and he felt that he might even push that Dao to the Peak soon enough. The biggest contributor was the skill he'd gained, but there was also the battle with the roach. Even the final axe from **[Deforestation]** felt slightly related to his Dao of Rot, though that axe seemed to be based on some higher Dao.

But as four days passed, he unfortunately didn't manage to push any of his remaining Daos to the Peak. He did, however, feel that he'd made decent progress, and if he just got the opportunity to sit down and meditate in peace for a month or two, he'd be able to evolve at least one of them. Of course, getting the chance to sit back and meditate with the current chaos was a distant dream.

The silent cultivation ended as the disk was starting to close in on Baoqui. Everyone looked back and forth across the horizon, hoping to find a glimpse of their people. But even if they were hundreds of meters in the air, they could only see so far. They would likely only be able to spot the people if they were a few hours away at the most.

The environment around them was still barren, with neither their own people nor the undead in sight. They had spotted quite a few beasts during the past days, though. They were even attacked a few times by flocks of supersized birds, but the disk possessed arrays that rebuffed them without a problem.

The fact that there was nothing to see was both good and bad. Good in the sense that there were no undead forces that had reached all this way so far. Bad in the sense that it started to become increasingly clear that Port Atwood's army hadn't gone in their direction after reaching Baoqui.

Zac was eventually forced to decide whether to take the risk of changing course or keep heading straight ahead. He tried to desperately listen to his gut, or rather, his Luck, for any advice of what to do. But his mind was just a confusing mess. In the end, he chose to not risk it and kept the course.

A day later, they finally reached Baoqui, but there was no sign of movement anywhere. This was not a surprise, as half the town was completely obliterated, turned into dozens of massive craters. Somber expressions marred the faces of the group as Zac commanded the disc to land inside the town some distance from the destruction.

Bodies lined the streets, and there were signs of structural damage on the houses still standing. It didn't look like those who had died were warriors, but rather civilians who were running for their lives. Zac shook his head as the group started walking south, and the group of Valkyries split off to scout the area for clues of their people.

What had transpired started to become increasingly clear as they reached the edge of the town. The town had been conquered by the undead some time ago, leaving none of its

original settlers alive. Then another battle had taken place more recently, where the second party was most likely his own people.

“Battle, pretty intense one,” Ogras said with a somber face. “Real undead elites like the ones we fought during the beast waves.”

“Our people?” Zac wanted to confirm as they stepped through the decimated wall into the battlefield outside.

“Some,” Ogras eventually said as he pointed at two corpses. “Those two bodies are probably ours, judging from their equipment. But most of these bodies died over a week ago, probably when this town fell. They likely became cannon fodder in a surprise attack against our army.”

“At least there are not too many bodies,” Zac said as they walked through the corpses, though he was sick to his stomach at seeing over two hundred of his own lying on the ground.

There were over ten thousand corpses in the area, but it was clear that almost all of them were undead. Zac also spotted a few broken Unholy Beacons and over a dozen Corpse Golems who had fallen protecting them. It had been an intense battle, but one that his people won.

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” Ogras said with a shake of his head, not sharing Zac’s optimism. “These are just the ones who didn’t turn into Zombies after dying. They all have wounds that are too grisly for them to successfully turn. The true number of casualties is likely far larger. Our people might collect bodies to not bolster the undead ranks, or they might have already been turned and joined our enemies.”

Zac’s heart felt heavy as they looked through the carnage. Clues that Ogras was correct kept appearing. Broken weapons were everywhere, and they kept finding broken array disks. They even found large pieces of metallic shrapnel, and Zac recognized their origin. They came from the huge cannons that the Ishiate tinkerers had created.

But that was not the end of the surprises. Large pieces of wooden rubble turned out to be the remnants of multiple

Creator Vessels, though Zac couldn't understand why his army would take out boats on dry land. Only after a few seconds did they realize that Alea and Ilvere had likely summoned them to use the offensive arrays. It was likely the Creator Vessels that had been responsible for turning half the town into rubble.

Another large swathe of the battlefield was completely devoid of corpses, and even all the vegetation was gone. It was a zone of death, and an acrid smell entered Zac's nose as they approached it.

"It's Alea. She was forced to go all out. We should not enter this area," Ogras commented with a frown.

"The tracks lead west," a voice shouted from the distance, coming from one of the Valkyries.

"We'll head out immediately," Zac said, urgency burning in his chest.

Until now, he had forced himself to believe that everything might be fine, that his people were simply cut off but otherwise unharmed. But after seeing the town full of corpses, he couldn't pretend any longer. Even worse was the knowledge that he would have made it in time to this battle if he'd left immediately rather than heading to the Technocrat incursion. The battle here had taken place two days ago at the most.

Even his decision to farm out his levels while waiting for his people to consolidate their hold over the Underworld Union felt like a shameful display of selfishness at this moment. He had to admit that his own priorities had somehow been eschewed ever since he entered the underworld.

His first instinct was to blame Smaug and his orchestrations to turn their attention toward the Union, but he knew that he himself was the one to blame in the end. He had become complacent after a series of victories, even though he had only closed some of the weakest incursions around. He had pushed back the closing of the incursions in favor of his own growth, not considering the constant threat the invaders were to the people of Earth.

The group stayed in Baoqui for less than ten minutes to gain a decent picture of what had happened before they once again set out on the flying disk. This time, they had no difficulty knowing which way to go since the passage of thousands of people left a clear track to follow. If that wasn't enough, there was also a constant line of slain Zombies strewn along the path like a trail of breadcrumbs.

The group had been mostly silent while rushing toward Baoqui, but after witnessing the aftermath of the desperate struggle, the atmosphere on the disk had turned extremely oppressive. It was like a pressure cooker that threatened to explode at any moment.

The hours passed, and they had soon enough flown for a whole day, but no one could sleep since they knew they were closing in on their people. The tracks looked fresh, and they started seeing groups of undead rushing in the same direction, seemingly trying to catch up.

An hour later, they finally saw activity on the horizon, but no one in the group looked even a bit happy. The reason was simple. What entered their eyes was a vast battlefield, where a group of people desperately defended against two far larger swarms of enemies.

“Ready yourselves for battle,” Zac said with gritted teeth as days of accumulated bloodlust started to seep out of every pore of his being.

FINAL STAND

Ilvere roared in defiance as the huge ball belonging to his weapon shuddered with power, and its trajectory suddenly turned impossible to predict. One second, the chunk of metal looked as though it was so light that it might as well be a mirage, but the next moment, it gave Alea the impression she was gazing upon a towering mountain.

The two opposing impressions kept swapping until they superimposed, making the weapon emit a shocking energy. The weapon slammed into the Corpse Golem that was guarding one of the Unholy Beacons that the undead army wanted to move to the vanguard to empower their assault.

Alea frowned when she saw the undead abomination effortlessly catch the ball in its arms as though it didn't contain a shred of momentum. But the next moment, the Corpse Golem exploded, its body parts flying out like projectiles in all directions.

The wrecking ball started moving again and slammed into one of the Unholy Beacons with enough force to cause a crack, but it wasn't enough for it to break altogether. But it was just enough to topple it, and when the tower crashed into the ground, it released a burst of errant energies that killed the nearby Zombies. A few unlucky undead warriors were killed by getting hit by the remaining body parts of the four-meter-tall golem as well, making Alea shake her head in wonder.

“Not quite there,” the demon warrior muttered with annoyance, for some reason not happy, even though he had managed to destroy one of the Unholy Beacons.

Alea wanted to rebuke the man for experimenting with the skill he got from Lord Atwood in the middle of the battle, but it clearly produced results. She instead focused on the sea of Zombies ahead. Things were getting desperate, and she had no time to worry too much about others.

The ambush at Baoqui had cost them most of their resources, not to mention the three thousand people who fell in battle. The undead had likely planned on ending it all when they finally reached the town, but they had underestimated just how tough it would be to break the warriors of Port Atwood.

Six days of constant harassment had pushed them all beyond what they thought was possible, but many had risen to the challenge and grown tremendously. Hundreds of people had died during the death march, but just as many had gained Dao Seeds that allowed them to unleash twice the destruction as before.

Besides, the undead hadn't expected them to carry eight ships possessing sieging capabilities. Over half of their forces fell to the immediate bombardment by the arrays on the ships. Alea hadn't heard of the Allbright Empire that Lord Atwood got his shipyard from, but their craftsmanship was impeccable. Unfortunately, they had run out of hidden cards by now. The ships had been destroyed, over half of them left behind them the past two days, as they were beyond salvage.

The Ishiate cannons had all been destroyed as well, and only a third of the tinkers remained alive. The undead had learned their lesson after the first time the large brass cannons were unleashed, and they'd mounted a sneak attack to take most of them out. If it weren't for one of the mad scientists rushing forward and directly detonating one of the bombs to kill all the attackers, along with himself, they would have lost all of the beastmen.

Alea was running out of poison as well. She better understood the mentality of Lord Atwood after this past week, why he had pushed himself to never leave the battlefield during the beast waves. Because every time you stepped back to rest, someone would have to offer their life in return. Such was the burden of the leader.

Alea only had enough accumulated poison for one or two large battles, but there was no point in worrying about the future when it wasn't even sure that they would survive the next hour. The army in front of them had appeared out of nowhere, dashing the hope that they finally had killed all of the true undead elites hunting them.

The army consisted of over ten thousand elite Zombies, but that wasn't the real problem. There were almost a hundred Corpse Golems and two hundred Corpse Lords, each one of them more powerful than her demonkin warriors. She needed to even the numbers somewhat.

She looked over at the shrouded demon in the distance, and Janos nodded as he closed his eyes. Alea wasted no time as she activated **[Odorless]** and unleashed almost all of the stored-up toxins she had concocted to deal with the undead. However, even if she had opened the floodgates to release a tremendous amount of poison, it didn't look like anything happened, and the undead kept pushing forward.

This was Janos' ultimate skill, creating a massive illusion that kept the world going, apart from one hidden truth. In this case, it was the extremely potent poison that rapidly spread among the undead, unwittingly drilling into their bodies. But the undead were no fools, and it looked like reality cracked after just a second, exposing the vast clouds of poison that had encompassed a fifth of the army.

Four hooded cultivators standing by the ten Unholy Beacons in the back suddenly floated up into the air as they pointed shriveled fingers at the mists of deadly poison. Alea was shocked to notice that she lost connection to the poison as the four cultivators somehow dragged it up into the air. A huge skull appeared as well, and it sucked up the poison in one deep chomp before disappearing.

Alea grimaced when she saw the mysterious cultivators countering her skill so easily, but the damage was already done to a certain extent. An enormous amount of Cosmic Energy surged into her body as thousands of Zombies and dozens of Corpse Lords toppled over, creating a large hole in the undead

army. Of course, most of the energy quickly escaped from her body, as she had long reached level 75.

But just as Alea breathed out in relief that her attack was mostly successful, a specter that radiated killing intent rose out of the ground in front of her. It was a hooded skeleton, but it wasn't corporeal. It was mostly translucent and seemed to be wrought out of a dark-green death-attuned energy.

The fighters of Port Atwood had encountered spectral combatants before, but this one was completely different from the weak ghosts that were quickly rebuffed with the help of Divine Energy. The whole area turned cold when it appeared, and Alea's instincts screamed of danger.

She didn't even let the thing take a single step before six pitch-black spikes appeared in the air, all of them aiming to impale the ghost as quickly as possible. The ghost moved like a gust toward her, expertly dodging the first three spikes in an instant. But luckily, she managed to graze the ghost with the fourth spike, and the tremendous pain the attack elicited made the ghost freeze for an instant.

Alea immediately shot the other two spikes into the chest of the ghost, forcibly enduring the searing pain in her own chest as she received the same damage as the one she inflicted. The ghost was clearly in tremendous pain as well, but it only gazed at her as it forced out a snicker as the dead rose all around her.

The eight translucent spears stabbed into her from all directions before Alea had a chance to react, and she couldn't stop herself from screaming in pain, even though not a single drop of blood was spilled. It felt as though her very being was crumbling as her soul was getting ripped apart. She had no way to retaliate or even form a coherent thought as the pain stretched into eternity.

A golden sea suddenly washed over the area, drowning Alea and the wraiths in divine splendor. The eight wraiths were badly wounded by the attack, and thick streams of Miasma escaped from their bodies as they endured the life-attuned attack.

“Don’t force it. She won’t survive,” one of the wraiths finally grunted. “We’ll collect the body later. The Lord wants it.”

The others nodded and shrank into the ground, fleeing the corrosive effect of the divine ocean. Alea couldn’t understand what was happening, still consumed by the inhuman torment of her soul rending. But a warm soothing stream soon entered her body, keeping her fracturing self together for the time being.

Alea opened her eyes and saw a small human holding her hands, continuously infusing her with a warm energy that acted as insulation that kept her mind from dissipating. Around them stood a group of Valkyries who slaughtered any errant Zombie that got close, but luckily, the poison from earlier had killed almost everything in the vicinity.

“You’re... Sui...?” Alea vaguely remembered the name of the purifier who somehow had found their army along with a few hundred warriors three days ago.

Apparently, they were a private army run by one of the towns that formerly stood at the edge of the Dead Zone, but it had long been overrun by the undead. Alea hadn’t really had time to get to know them better due to the constant battle, but any assistance was a blessing to their extremely wrung-out force.

The small girl in front of her had proven extremely helpful, especially after they figured out that she could reach a terrifying power with the help of the combination of the Valkyrie War Array and the Divine Array. She would be useless against the living, but she was a true nemesis to the undead. She only lacked the ruthlessness to take full advantage of her gift.

“Your soul is in a terrible state,” Sui said with a pale face as she had the Valkyries carry Alea away from the front line. “I don’t—”

“I know my situation,” Alea interrupted with a sigh, allowing herself to be moved back to the defensive line.

She felt as weak as a newborn child, barely able to lift her own hand. But she kept a strong face, hoping that the scared soldiers looking in her direction wouldn't understand how bad it was. Their morale was low enough after their ten-day death march, and she did not want to tack on any further.

The group of specters suddenly appeared around the desperately battling Ilvere, who had been forced to take charge of the whole front line after Alea fell. Her heart was gripped in panic when she saw their appearance, but Ilvere did not look worried. He only released a shrill whistle, and he was immediately pelted with attacks.

But shockingly enough, he wasn't attacked by the undead, but rather their own people. Hundreds of arrows fell where he stood, almost blotting out the sky for an instant. Rage started to burn in Alea's heart as she helplessly remained in the care of Sui.

"Don't worry," Sui said. "It's not what it looks like."

Only then did Alea realize that the arrows had a golden hue, looking like the arrows of a celestial. They had been imbued with Divine Energy and didn't pass through the wraiths as expected, but rather caused small golden explosions the moment they hit the incorporeal bodies. The wraiths wailed in pain and desperately scrambled to get underground again.

Ilvere was actually not unscathed from the arrows, and a few of the projectiles had embedded themselves in his body. Thankfully, Ilvere's armor was pretty strong, and the golden explosions didn't have any effect on the living, so he only received shallow flesh wounds. He had simply used himself as bait to attack the wraiths, and he was ready to bear the small pain.

The wraiths had taken some damage from the surprise attack, but unfortunately, it wasn't enough to kill them. Luckily, they were at least forced to retreat, and they scurried back to the rear of the undead army with shocking speed.

The retreat of the squad of powerful assassins lessened the pressure on Port Atwood to a great degree, but they were still

in desperate straits. The air was filled with screams as one warrior after another fell to the relentless assault of the invaders.

The Corpse Lords were just too strong, and three demons needed to co-operate just to keep one of them at bay. The recruits were far worse off, and whole squads had been mercilessly slaughtered the moment the elite undead found an opening in their formations. Alea wanted to help, but she barely could keep herself awake, let alone rejoin the battle.

A wrathful roar suddenly echoed across the battlefield from above, making Alea look up with confusion and hope. A large disk was shooting toward them in the sky, and it seemed to be descending like a meteor. One person standing on top of it wasn't even patient enough for it to land, and he pushed off from the flying treasure with enough force to cause it to almost crash.

The man shot forward through the air like a bullet, crashing into the sea of undead with earth-shattering force. The shockwave caused the whole battle to stop for a second, as only the strongest managed to keep their footing. The Zombies unfortunate enough to have stood close to the impact zone were completely gone, turned into mush at the bottom of the large crater. But the man was completely fine, and Alea could finally confirm her suspicion when he stood up.

Lord Atwood had finally arrived.

ADRIEL

Lord Atwood wasted no time as a storm of energies started to churn around him, and a palpable sense of dread instinctively entered Alea's heart as an extreme killing intent blanketed the area. She wanted to walk up to him, but her body wouldn't listen, so she could only watch him from afar.

A huge woodsman's axe suddenly appeared above him, and then it swung in an effortless motion, drawing a wide arc in front of Lord Atwood. Alea's brow furrowed, not understanding the meaning of the attack, but the next moment, her eyes widened in understanding. An invisible wave of carnage spread out from Lord Atwood, destroying everything in front of him in the blink of an eye.

Only the flanks of the undead army were spared from getting cut into pieces, but the vanguard was utterly decimated, not leaving anything standing. Lord Atwood didn't stop at that point, and he flashed forward with his movement skill, almost taking him out of Alea's vision. Her consciousness was blurring, but she bit her lip to the point that it bled, forcing herself to stay awake to witness the miracle.

The fact that the young master and a handful of others jumped down from the flying treasure to take down the leftovers in the flank barely registered in Alea's mind. Her eyes were glued to the broad back of the one she had waited for these past days.

Tens of thousands of elite Zombies remained, and they hadn't lost too much of their strength, as most of their core combatants stayed in the back. The wraiths also stood there,

protected by the encirclement of Unholy Beacons and E-grade Corpse Golems.

But not even a second passed before another, even more powerful axe appeared above the Lord, this one causing the very air to ignite from its scorching heat. It looked like its swing heralded the end of the world, as a towering inferno ripped across the earth, swallowing the whole undead army.

There were no screams or wails, just the deafening sound of the crackling fire. But the wave of destruction ended just as abruptly as it had appeared, leaving scorched ground and pieces of flesh burnt beyond recognition. Only a small handful of elites remained, protected by the circle of Unholy Beacons and the hooded cultivators within.

It looked like they had managed to erect a strong enough defense, but doing so didn't come without cost, as two of the hooded cultivators had turned to cinders, even though they stood in the middle of the group, and smoke rose from another one.

Alea wasn't worried, though, as she and Sui silently gazed at the destruction in the distance. She knew that this wasn't the limit of Lord Atwood's powers. And as expected, the air above him shuddered before it shattered to let out the enormous hand that would bring an end to all resistance.

It looked different compared to the last time Alea had seen it. It was at least twice as big as before and was covered in dense fractals that resonated with the world itself. Shockingly enough, the burnt cinders below turned into fertilizer, and tall grass frantically rose from the ground, stretching toward the hand in the sky like children reaching for their parent.

The hand moved so fast, it looked like teleportation, almost immediately appearing in the sky above the remaining elites of the undead army. A massive fractal appeared beneath the hand, and it caused the area underneath to be subject to a tremendous strain.

Only the largest Corpse Golems were able to stay on their feet, while the others were forced down on their knees. The incorporeal specters were even more impacted, it seemed, as

they shrieked while Miasmic clouds were released from their bodies. They quickly tried to enter the ground to escape, but they were rebuffed somehow. It was as though the planet itself was rejecting them.

The next moment, something unbelievable happened. The fractal rippled like a pond of water as an enormous mountain emerged from it, its sharp summit pointing straight down at the undead and their defensive array below.

The mountain didn't look like something created by Cosmic Energy, but rather something solid, something true. It emitted an ancient solidity that spread all the way to where Alea was lying. The mountain kept emerging from the array, and the pressure on the undead beneath kept increasing, forcing even the giant Corpse Golems on their knees.

Finally, the mountain hit the defensive array, which at this point shone with almost blinding light as the ten Unholy Beacons poured out a storm of Miasma to reinforce it. The whole area shook from the clash of the two powers, but neither seemed able to gain a foothold. Sui sighed in regret from the side when she saw that the mountain was stopped, its sharp summit unable to pierce the thick shell protecting their enemies.

However, it was clear that the array was barely holding on, as cracks kept appearing before they quickly were mended with the help of the beacons. One small push was all it would take to crack it open.

The enormous wooden hand looked extremely small as it hovered above the mountain, but it still looked like it wanted to help the mountain descend. It floated down and gave a light tap on the array, but Alea couldn't see what happened next, as she was thrown back by an enormous shockwave.

Everything turned white for a second from a burst of pain before she felt the warm sensation of the golden light reappearing, and she arduously opened her eyes to see Sui desperately infusing her with Divine Energy again. People were climbing up all around them, many sporting some light

wounds from the terrifying wave that swept everyone off their feet.

“Wha—” Alea said with a weak voice.

“It’s over,” Sui said with shock in her eyes. “The hand pushed the mountain into the ground. The undead... are all gone. He destroyed them in one fell swoop.”

Alea arduously focused her eyes to see what the purifier meant, and the sight was shocking. The hand was gone, but the mountain and the array in the sky remained. The summit had been pushed at least fifty meters into the ground, and that was after having created an enormous crater where the Unholy Beacons once stood. There was not any sign of the undead who had huddled inside either, but their fate was painfully obvious.

No one moved, some even forgetting to breathe, after seeing the terrifying display in front of them. The air was still a chaotic mess after being subject to both Lord Atwood’s towering aura and the terrorizing power of his attacks clashing with the undeads’ final defense. But one thing was clear.

They had made it.

The huge army full of undead elites had been swept away in less than twenty seconds, leaving a scene of utter devastation. Yet no one cheered or celebrated being saved. Alea gave a weak sigh, as she understood their feelings.

The past days had pushed them all beyond what anyone should be able to endure. They hadn’t stopped for more than a few minutes for almost ten days. They had been harassed, pushed, and almost broken by the unrelenting Zombies. The people around her only managed to keep standing from pure defiance; no one had the energy to celebrate.

So it was with hollow eyes they silently looked at their leader as he quickly made his way back toward their ranks. His aura reached toward the skies as he passed the sea of corpses he had created, but he restrained it as he hurried to Alea’s side. He quickly got down on a knee in front of her, and

Alea felt a flurry of emotions in her heart as he looked into her eyes.

“I knew you’d come.” Alea smiled before the darkness took her.

“Hm?” Adriel said as his hollow eyes turned toward the distance, his eyes moving away from the enormous crystal in front of him.

He was sitting in his large study that was illuminated by thousands of azure lights, giving it a comfortable sheen of undeath. The moans and wails from a few of the still surviving experiments provided a soothing ambiance as the Lich followed the progress of his grand array.

Things were progressing as expected, with only some futile attempts to stop the hordes. But the harassment was of no import, as it only cost them a few million of the newly aligned. It had even turned into a decent grindstone that would hopefully birth a few promising recruits among the unthinking children.

But there were always factors beyond one’s control, and the battle he’d just witnessed through the eyes of his clones was beyond his expectation. The Lich King scratched the desiccated skin that formed a thin layer over his skeleton as he considered the implications of what he had just seen.

“What is it, my Lord?” the hovering ghost attendant asked with worry.

“I finally saw the top human. I was wondering when he would appear.... Interesting,” the Lich muttered. “He killed four of my clones in an instant.”

“What?!” the ghost said with some shock.

“Well, I still haven’t really mastered the skill; they contained only a fraction of my strength,” Adriel said without a care. “Still, a very impressive specimen to release such power while still at F-grade. He would make great material.”

“Do we need to change our plans, my Lord?” the attendant asked.

“No need, Triv; he is saddled with a handful of refugees and is stuck a long way from the fault lines,” Adriel said with a shake of his head. “It’s a shame. I found a person with a semi-complete poison constitution. I have a friend who would pay dearly for that body.”

“Do you want to send one of the generals after him?” Triv probed.

“No, they have their tasks. Besides, the humans seem to have figured out what we are doing. They will have to come to me sooner or later in they want to stop the realignment. There’s no need for us to go out of our way to look for them,” Adriel said as a small smile displayed the blackened teeth in his mouth.

“What about the one who visited us?” the attendant probed.

“Void...” Adriel muttered, some hesitation flashing in his eyes. “Very strong.”

It had truly been a surprise to see the native insectoid appearing in his own palace, completely calm as though he were taking a stroll in his own boneyard. But the Lich soon found that the man’s confidence wasn’t without reason. He was extremely powerful, a top-tier progenitor with a higher level than himself. Fighting him outside his own domain would be a risky venture, and killing him inside would not come without a cost.

“Should we agree with his proposal?” the ghost asked as he saw his leader fall into silence.

“No need,” Adriel said with a shake of his head, waking up from his stupor.

“His aura... It’s from that place, though. Is it not better to extend some courtesy and delay the realignment? It shouldn’t affect our goal too much,” the ghost said.

“It’s true, the insectoid is connected to that family, but not as you expect,” Adriel said with a small smile. “My teacher

found out some more details. His connection is to an exiled bastard who has not been part of the family for tens of thousands of years. He turned to the unorthodox path, so no one in the family will stand up for him. In fact, they have tried to kill him on numerous occasions out of embarrassment.”

The ghost nodded in understanding, no longer worried about the implications. That family was a bit troublesome, but it was no problem if the one called the Great Redeemer was long excommunicated. His Lord might even stand to gain a new friend by making things hard for the so-called Redeemer, as the ironclad rules of the old families were not just for show.

“On another note, Threzz has requested permission to fight the Church. Four of his subsquads have been decimated by them,” the attendant added, taking the opportunity to go through the docket now that his master was out of his reverie. He hated being interrupted while watching his crystal, and many had paid dearly for ruining his fun.

“No. Let them prance around for now. Activating the array comes first. But give him three new hordes, and promise him the vanguard when we conquer the entrances,” Adriel said.

“Should we not focus on taking control of one of the entrances?” Triv said with confusion. “We are still not in control of a single one, while the Church has three.”

“The treasure has yet to mature. It is still absorbing the Origin Energy of this infant planet. There are a few months before the realm closes its doors to protect the treasure as it comes into being. The world will have realigned before then, allowing us to fight with an advantage.” Adriel snickered. “The efforts the bodysnatchers are going through now will only benefit us in the end.”

CATHARSIS

Zac looked down at the unmoving form of Alea. He had seen her getting attacked by the group of wraiths while he stood on the flying disk, unable to do anything to save her. The feeling of impotence had quickly turned into rage. But his smoldering rage was finally overcome by a sense of panic as he saw her close her eyes in his arms. His mind was a mess, and he didn't know what to do.

“Alea? Alea!” he said with horror before quickly turning to Sui. “Can you heal her?”

Zac didn't understand why Alea and Sui were together, as she had been on the other side of the Dead Zone the last time he saw her. But right now wasn't the time to ask.

“She... Her soul is wounded, almost to the point of crumbling altogether,” Sui said, not daring to meet Zac's burning gaze. “It's beyond my power to heal something like this. I am sorry.”

Zac took a deep breath to calm down and collect his thoughts. He knew just how terrible wounds to the soul were. He remembered the small wound he'd gotten when he'd tried to clash with the Splinter of Oblivion. It had almost killed him, and that was nothing compared to the soul failing altogether. But he refused to give up like that.

“Can you keep her stable for now?” Zac asked.

“I... My power is limited...” Sui hesitantly said.

Zac immediately took out most of his Divine Crystals, all of them E-grade. The Miasmatic haze in the area was

immediately pushed away, replaced with a refreshing atmosphere. Even the furrowed brows of the unconscious Alea smoothed out slightly, indicating that the crystals helped a bit at least.

“How is she?” a voice asked from behind, and Zac looked over to see Ogras standing behind him, the metal casing around his missing arm taken off, allowing a large tentacle shadow to slither around the area.

“Her soul’s wounded. It’s bad.” Zac sighed.

“Shit,” Ogras spat and looked up in the distance. “I’ll go kill some dead things in the rear. You should send her back on the disk. Perhaps the blue one can get his hands on something to salvage the situation.”

Zac perked up at the idea and immediately called for his treasure. It had essentially crashed into the ground after he jumped off it, but it was sturdy enough to take a hit or two. All the passengers were fine as well, since all of them were powerful enough to easily jump off in time.

He wouldn’t need the disk for the time being since he would have to lead the army back to the closest teleporter to make sure there were no more losses. He quickly broke his connection to the disk after it arrived and called over the squad of Valkyries who had arrived with him.

“Escort Sui and Alea back to Port Atwood as quickly as possible. Have Calrin get his hands on treasures that would help heal or at least stabilize her soul,” Zac said.

He knew that it was far from certain that the Sky Gnome would be able to get his hands on a treasure that could heal a badly wounded soul. Healing the soul was far more complicated than healing a broken body, and the requirements of the pill were on another level entirely. There was one such item among the treasures Yrial had inside the trial, but he wouldn’t be able to get back inside for a decade.

The lotus in his cultivation cave would perhaps be able to help as well, but it was still just a sapling and didn’t generate any energy so far. It would be years before it grew to sufficient

size, even if it was constantly nurtured by the Cosmic Water and the Nexus Vein.

“Wait, my people,” Sui hesitantly said.

“I will clean out the undead and allow everyone to rest before returning to Port Atwood. We’ll join you in a few days,” Zac said before nodding at the Valkyries.

They immediately moved the Divine Crystals to form a bed on the deck, and gingerly placed Alea on top of them. Sui hesitated for a bit before she stepped on top of the disk as well.

“It seems I keep owing you more and more,” Zac said with a tired smile as he looked at her.

“This is just what I should do. You do not owe me anything,” Sui hurriedly said as she started to infuse her energy into Alea once more.

“Wait,” a voice suddenly echoed from behind, and Zac turned around to see Tylia hurrying over.

Zac’s eyes lit up when he saw the Tal-Eladar. He had forgotten that she wasn’t a Beast Master like most of the people in her clan, but rather a healer. She differed from Sui, who had a purifying class that was especially adept at healing death-attuned wounds. She was actually closer to his own attunement, having a class related to nature.

But more importantly, she had already evolved to E-grade, and her means should be superior to Sui’s.

“Can you help her?” Zac hurriedly asked as he indicated the Valkyries to not set out just yet.

Tylia sat down next to Sui and closed her eyes while her hand started to radiate a green light while touching Alea’s forehead. The small purifier gawked at the unfamiliar form of the Tal-Eladar, but she didn’t say anything. Zac didn’t even dare to breathe loudly as Tylia performed her inspection, but his heart started to rattle when he saw her frown. A few seconds later, she removed her hand with a shake of her head.

“I cannot heal her either, I am afraid. I can only help keep the pieces of her mind together,” Tylia explained.

“Is there nothing that can be done?” Zac desperately asked.

Tylia seemed to consider the question a few seconds before answering.

“Well, luckily, she’s only F-grade, so her soul is relatively small. It would be much harder if she had evolved already. A D-grade healer should be able to slowly piece together her soul. A healing treasure that could mend souls would be even better,” Tylia said. “It’s just...”

“It’s just what?” Zac pressed.

“I am not sure she’ll even survive the trip back to Port Atwood. And even if we manage to keep her stable during the trip, then what? A treasure that can mend a fractured soul is not something you can get through normal channels,” Tylia said.

“Please do what you can,” Zac said with gritted teeth. “If you can’t find a means to heal her, try to stabilize her condition at least, through any means necessary. I’ll figure out a way to get a healer or a treasure.”

Zac turned to the squad captain among the Valkyries who would take them back, and immediately transferred 200 million Nexus Coins to her. The woman’s eyes widened in shock, but she quickly understood that it was to make sure Calrin had the resources to buy a treasure if it popped up. Zac nodded to the squad captain, who controlled the disk, to fly away at top speed.

“Die!” a sudden shriek erupted from just a few meters away, and Zac looked over with confusion.

A ghoul that was just skin and bones was rushing toward him with a sword in hand, his eyes radiating endless madness and killing intent.

Zac frowned, unsure how an undead was able to make it all the way to the center of the army. His first instinct was that the undead was an assassin, but the ghoul seemed frail enough to topple over from a gust of wind. Zac’s danger sense was also completely unresponsive. Still, just seeing an undead

made his rage flare up again, and he immediately took out his axe again.

“Wang Fang!” another voice shouted from nearby. “Stop!”

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place it as he swung down his axe, its range increased with a fractal blade from **[Chop]**. The ghoul shrieked as he tried to defend against the strike, but he was completely helpless and was immediately bisected from the attack.

A trickle of Cosmic Energy entered Zac's body, making him shocked how low leveled the undead assassin was. It even doused his reignited anger a bit, replacing it with confusion.

“Ai,” the voice from earlier exclaimed as a young Asian man ran up to the ghost. “You fool.”

“What now?” Zac muttered in annoyance as he looked at the man running toward him.

“Wang Fang wasn't a saint, but you did not need to kill him.” The man sighed. “He was ill, both in body and mind.”

Zac blankly looked back and forth between the Zombie and the man until he finally spotted a familiar flask attached to the Zombie's belt. Only then did things click in his mind. Wang Fang, the man who had snatched his flask of Cosmic Water in the Dead Zone.

He didn't know what to think when he looked down at the malnourished form of Wang Fang. Zac had truthfully thought that the man would have died long ago from Cosmic Water poisoning, but he had somehow held on until now. From the rage in his still-open eyes, Zac could only assume that the man had already figured out his real identity as well.

Zac shook his head in bemusement before turning to the man who had tried to stop him. He didn't recognize him, and curiously enough, he didn't wear the standard gear of the Atwood army either. The young man wore similar battle gear as himself, though the arms of his green robe were a lot wider.

But the most striking thing about him was the countless scars on his face and sloppily mended tears in his clothes. His state was even more wretched compared to Zac's before he

was able to improve his race and remove most of his scars. This was clearly someone who had lived in constant battle since the integration, though his power was a bit above average at best.

“Just who are you?” the man asked with a frown. “What gives you the right to execute one of my citizens and send away the only Purifier when we’re in the middle of a sea of the undead?”

“I am Zachary Atwood,” Zac simply answered. “And her skills are needed to keep Alea alive.”

The man froze when hearing Zac’s response before he calmed down with two deep breaths.

“Lady Alea has saved quite a few lives, perhaps more so than anyone else here. It’s good that Sui’s helping her,” he finally said. “I am sorry for my response; we have many wounded, and I lashed out. I am Ling Tian, and it is an honor to meet you.”

“Ling Tian?” Zac repeated with surprise. “The Ling Tian of Eastern Hills?”

“Yes, have we met before?” Ling Tian asked with confusion.

“No, but I passed through your town once while traversing the Dead Zone. I heard good things. Do you know John from your town? I forgot his last name,” Zac asked, feeling the world was pretty small after all.

“Yes, he’s here. He’s still defending our rear.” Ling Tian nodded. “Thanks to your intervention, the main threat is dealt with, and Lord Ilvere is rounding up the stragglers. But there are still some of the weaker undead harassing us from behind. Normally, they wouldn’t be a problem, but our people are wrung dry.”

“How many Zombies are there behind us?” Zac asked.

“Hard to say; there were a million at the start. Your army killed hundreds of thousands, but the undead have also gotten reinforcements. I’d say there’s three hundred thousand of them

remaining unless there are more in hiding,” the young man said after thinking it over.

“Not too many...” Zac mumbled before looking up at Ling Tian. “We’ll destroy that horde before giving the people here a well-deserved rest. How’s the stock of healing pills and food?”

“Destroy?” Ling Tian blurted in shock. “That’s a sea of Zombies over there!”

“The pills?” Zac only repeated.

“We ran out two days ago after the battle at Baoqui.” Ling Tian sighed.

Zac nodded and threw Ling Tian a Cosmos Sack.

“Could you do me a favor? Distribute the pills in this sack to help our wounded. I’ll go help my friend with the Zombies,” Zac said and stood up.

“Wait. I can help as well! I can still fight!” Ling Tian said, looking up from the Cosmos Sack in his grasp.

“No need. Healing our people is the most important,” Zac said with a shake of his head before some anger flashed in his eyes. “Besides, I am still pretty pissed off. I need the targets for myself.”

Unbridled bloodlust started to seep from Zac’s whole body as he spoke, blanketing the area. Ling Tian took a step back in shock, and even his own people looked over at him with fear in their eyes.

It was true what he said. He had kept it together as best he could, but seeing Alea’s pitiful state had ignited a furious fire in his heart that threatened to consume him. If he didn’t get an outlet for this wrath soon, he felt he would literally explode. So he wasted no more time before rushing over to the rear, where a thick sea of darkness had created a line of demarcation that the Zombies were unable to pass.

Any Zombie foolish enough to enter the sea of shadows was immediately stabbed by multiple shadow spears, giving the defenders a rest from their desperate defense. But Zac had no intention of playing it safe, so he simply leaped over the

large shadow and landed in the middle of the elite Zombie horde with a crash.

The rotting Zombies shrieked and immediately threw themselves at him with reckless abandon. Teeth and claws tried to rip him to pieces, and Zac let them try their best as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He didn't know whom he was angry at. Was it himself, for delaying the rescue? At the undead for pushing his people to such a pitiful state? Or the System that set the stage for these bloodbaths just for the off chance that someone worthwhile would rise from the mountain of corpses? He had no answer, but then again, he hadn't jumped into a sea of Zombies in search of answers.

He was looking for catharsis.

EVIL STARS

Zac wasn't actually in great condition after unleashing his three strongest attacks in short succession. He had used almost two-thirds of his Cosmic Energy, and his body hurt all over. The upgraded **[Nature's Punishment]** was responsible for the largest part of the cost, whereas **[Deforestation]** was the source of the strain.

He had barely managed to heal up his body while he traveled on the flying treasure, and using the first two swings of **[Deforestation]** had caused a few of his old wounds to open up again. But with his massive Vitality, he would sooner or later get back in shape, and the pain wasn't something that would hinder him in dealing with some weak Zombies.

The fact that **[Nature's Punishment]** had reached Peak mastery had shocked him somewhat. It was the second skill to reach the apex, and Zac would have thought that he would evolve **[Loamwalker]** or **[Axe Mastery]** before he pushed that skill to Peak mastery. He did use his movement skill almost constantly in his human form, whereas he had barely used **[Nature's Punishment]** more than ten times.

Truthfully, he barely remembered jumping off the flying treasure. His wrath had pushed through the roof upon seeing his significantly smaller army getting harassed, yet it managed to increase even further when he saw Alea getting ambushed. He had barely managed to restrain himself from unleashing the third strike of **[Deforestation]** in his fury, instead opting to finish the elites with **[Nature's Punishment]**.

Thinking about a skill reaching Peak mastery made Zac remember that he hadn't actually tested **[Chop]** and its extra blade. So Zac finally started to curtail his churning emotions, even though he just wanted to go crazy, and instead opted to see the capabilities of the skill. So he summoned **[Chop]** and grew a five-meter blade to clear out the area around him. The next moment, the blade detached and started to hover by him like a silent sentinel.

The Zombies didn't care in the slightest about their fallen brethren, and they unhesitantly stepped over their corpses to get to the source of the life force. This forced Zac to keep summoning new blades and shoot them off into the Zombie horde, each blade causing a tunnel of carnage before it ran out of steam. But he mainly focused on the permanent blade, and he was currently using it to constantly sweep the Zombies that were lucky enough to survive the thinning out of his other blades.

He quickly realized that he could both choose to control the fractal edge by splitting his attention or to simply let it float in his proximity and attack any enemy that got close. His limit was roughly fifty meters, and it was almost as quick as the blades he shot out like projectiles. If he wanted to, he could have it spin around him at a rapid pace, killing anything that got too close.

But Zac eventually let it guard his back autonomously as he kept pushing through the Zombie horde. He didn't want to rely on the flying blade alone, as the battle caused his rage to resurface. He knew it was due in a large part to the splinter manipulating him, but he didn't care at the moment. He let the rage flow through him as he became a tool of slaughter.

Constant roars of the Zombies echoed across the area as Zac flashed around with **[Loamwalker]**. Any time he appeared, he would release a couple of blades with **[Chop]**, each attack clearing out over a hundred Zombies. He wouldn't immediately leave, but instead launch a furious assault with **[Verun's Bite]** at melee range at all the surviving Zombies in the area.

He was long covered in bile and rotten flesh, but he didn't care. He just kept swinging his axe, not thinking, not feeling. He didn't know how long he fought or how many Zombies he killed, but he finally stumbled, realizing he was running dangerously low on Cosmic Energy.

"You once asked me to remind you if you were becoming a bit murderous. I think this would count. Got it out of your system?" a voice reached him from the side when he finally slowed down his rampage.

Zac blinked and took a look around and found that Ogras had appeared amongst a clump of shadows. There were still Zombies around, but it could no longer be called a horde. There were rather islands of Zombies in a sea of destroyed bodies, with perhaps 10% of the original number remaining.

"I did all this?" Zac muttered with some confusion.

"Don't flatter yourself. We took care of more than half of them while you went on your rampage," Ogras snorted. "But you seemed disinclined to cooperate, so we stayed out of your path. Let the others deal with the remainders. Some people still have some fight left, and these things give a decent amount of Cosmic Energy and money for the recruits. Don't hog it all for yourself," Ogras said with a smile.

Just as Ogras spoke, he spotted a familiar figure effortlessly fighting against a clump of a few hundred undead. Kenzie was killing them at an impressive speed as she shot out various skills at a rapid pace. Each skill seemed to be quite basic and something that cost next to no Cosmic Energy, yet the elite Zombies kept falling to never stand up again. At her current pace, she would need less than a minute to clear the pack.

"It's quite odd," Ogras muttered as he followed Zac's gaze.

"What is?" Zac asked, afraid that the perceptive demon had found a clue of Jeeves.

"It's hard to explain," the demon hesitantly said. "But her fighting style is odd."

“Odd how?” Zac asked as he looked at his sister downing one Zombie after another.

It was efficient, but nothing too impressive, to be honest. He would personally be able to turn that whole pack to goop with two swings of his axe.

“Don’t you see the flow? She is never in danger. It almost looks like the undead are cooperating with her, trying to get themselves killed,” Ogras said with some incredulity.

Zac initially didn’t understand what Ogras was talking about, but he almost immediately got an explanation of what the demon meant. While Kenzie was focusing on the Zombies ahead of her with a flurry of attacks, two more undead tried to rush her from behind. She didn’t even look back and carelessly waved her hand above her head, shooting out two small fireballs toward them.

The aim of the first spell was perfect, and it hit one of the Zombies straight in its throat, but the other one was unfortunately aimed toward the ground and wouldn’t be able to do any damage. But just as Zac considered throwing a rock to kill the other attacker, something shocking happened.

The first Zombie fell backward from the attack, felling the second one, who was a few steps behind. Both the undead fell down on the ground, and the unharmed Zombie coincidentally fell into a position where the second fireball hit it straight in its head. The two struggled for a while, but Zac could sense that the fireballs were infused with the Seed of Tinder, and there was no way they would survive.

The remaining Zombies ahead were soon killed by Kenzie’s real attacks, and she moved on without giving the two Zombies behind a single look. It all looked like a great coincidence things worked out, but Zac knew better than to believe that. It was no doubt Jeeves who helped her out.

At least he hoped that was all it did. If it was actually taking control of her, it was a whole different issue. It was something that had bothered him ever since they fought the Cyborg. Jeeves and whatever was planted inside the foreman might have come from the same people, and they had no idea

if there were some fail-safes in the AI that would turn Kenzie into a monster.

“Do you see what I mean?” Ogras said as he slowly shook his head, clearly having a hard time believing what he’d just witnessed. “That girl is another type of monster. What kind of scary woman was your mom to give birth to evil stars like the two of you?”

“Well, Kenzie was always the smart one.” Zac coughed, not sure how he would lie his way out of that one. “I guess she got pretty good at fighting Zombies during her time at the Dead Zone.”

Kenzie noticed the attention soon enough and stopped her onslaught, instead opting to walk over to the two.

“Are you okay?” she said with worry in her eyes. “I’m sure Alea will be fine. I bet she will be back on her feet by the time we get back to Port Atwood with these people.”

“I’m okay.” Zac smiled, but he wasn’t sure how he really felt.

His rage had subsided after exhausting himself against the Zombies, but he was choked up by a feeling of impotency. There were too many things to do, and it felt like he was spread so thin that he would fall apart. Worse yet was that his people kept dying and there wasn’t much he could do about it.

“How are the rest?” Zac finally asked, even though he was afraid of the answer. “How many did we lose?”

“Half.” Ogras sighed. “Just above half of the people who set out from Port Atwood are still alive. Most of the casualties happened two days ago, but there were constant losses during their escape.”

“Half,” Zac numbly repeated.

“The good news is that our fighting capabilities haven’t decreased nearly as much,” Ogras said. “Most of the casualties were the recruits and the noncombat classes. Only twelve of your Valkyries and seventeen of the demon warriors died. And you know that the most effective way to get stronger is by

pushing oneself beyond one's limits. The survivors can no longer be considered recruits; they are a true army now."

"Still." Zac sighed. "Thousands of our people have died. And for what? The Undead Empire didn't even lose a general, and their horde is currently on its way to finishing the array."

"People fall against the invaders every minute all around the globe," Kenzie said with a shake of her head. "We can't let it weigh us down. We do what we can, and the cards will fall where they will. It's not your duty to save the world alone; we're all in this together."

Zac looked with surprise at his sister, not expecting such a viewpoint from her. He would have thought she would be even more broken up about it, as many of those who fell were people that Kenzie had socialized with during her stay at the Academy. Meanwhile, Zac hadn't even met most of them.

But he soon realized that while Kenzie hadn't battled nearly as much as himself, she might have lost even more. He knew she had been forced to witness one person after another dying around her. First the Tutorial, where less than half survived, then being dropped off right next to the Dead Zone.

She never spoke much about her time there, but her occasional comments had pictured a pretty bleak existence even before that old dog had started to lust after her. Most of the friends she had made in the last year had already died. Zac was much better off in that regard. He hadn't really lost anything so far, which might be why these deaths felt so heavy on his shoulders.

"We'll let everyone rest for eight hours," Zac said, changing the heavy subject. "After that, we'll change course and head for Erdenet."

The army of Port Atwood hadn't known about the much closer teleportation station owned by the Sino-Indian Alliance, and they were currently heading for an array that was weeks away. Zac couldn't spend that much time protecting the army, so he would change course. The return trip would still take over twice as long as it had while he zapped here on his flying treasure.

He didn't have the time to divert his attention too long, and he needed to get back to closing incursions. Whittling down millions of low-leveled Zombies was a waste of his time, and his strength was better spent on putting out the other fires on Earth that others were unable to deal with.

Ogras and Zac went back to the army, but Kenzie wanted to help out with cleaning out the remaining undead in the area, so she stuck around. When the Port Atwood army heard that they finally would be able to rest, most of them simply crumpled down on the cold ground, not even bothering to take out anything to sleep on.

In just seconds, snores echoed across the area, while a small group kept watch in all directions. Normally, there would also be a group responsible for looting the army, but the Zombies carried nothing of value. Zac and Ogras stayed in the middle of the army, each taking out a few crystals to regain their spent Cosmic Energy as quickly as possible.

“That was in the nick of time,” a rough voice came from close by, and Zac opened his eyes to see Ilvere and Janos walk over.

DANGERS OF TECHNOLOGY

Both Ilvere and Janos sported a new collection of scars, but it looked like both of them would be fine after some rest.

“Not quickly enough to prevent Alea from being wounded.” Zac sighed after hearing what Ilvere said.

“That lass is strong; I believe she will be able to overcome this,” Ilvere said as he thumped down on the ground in front of Zac and Ogras.

Zac only nodded, though he knew that the situation, unfortunately, wasn't that easy. Being strong-willed wasn't enough to survive a fractured soul.

“Just what happened here?” Zac asked.

Ilvere grimaced as he recounted what the group had encountered since the teleporters went dark. Zac frowned when he heard how arduous their past days had been, and pangs of guilt once again rose in his heart. He knew that he couldn't be responsible for all the ills of the world, but he still felt that he was somehow to blame.

“I guess we're lucky we weren't deemed important enough for one of the true generals to act,” Ilvere said with a depreciating smile. “Otherwise, we would never have made it this far. They have a lot of strong guys in their ranks.”

“It's still amazing you managed to hold on this long,” Zac said with genuine appreciation.

“The lass was a large factor in our survival, as was the Barkeep,” Ilvere said.

“The Barkeep? Ryan?” Zac asked with confusion.

“That boy is a real hero.”

Zac blankly looked at Ilvere for a few seconds, having great trouble reconciling the young man who had been hiding out in his apartment with the epithet “hero.” Did the Barkeep class possess some hidden and amazing attacks against the undead? Or did it allow him to become the fabled drunken fist?

“We have been constantly fighting without stopping for over a week. Some people we had to carry for a while since they were truly out of energy, but we normally would have no way of marching for nine days without sleep. Luckily, his brews helped us stay conscious up until now. Of course, many will be in a weak state for a while,” Ilvere explained.

“That’s okay.” Zac nodded. “We should be fine unless the Lich King himself comes knocking.”

The two demon generals soon excused themselves, as they desperately needed to sleep as well. They were amongst those who hadn’t slept a wink for the duration, and they had always stayed in the front lines to keep their people safe. Zac and Ogras didn’t speak much either, instead opting to recuperate in case another wave of attackers arrived.

Thankfully, they were completely unaccosted, and the army set out without trouble eight hours later. A lot of people were sporting various degrees of wounds and traces of exertion on their faces, but they no longer seemed like Zombies themselves. Between the healing pills Zac had brought and proper rest, they were in far better shape compared to before.

The army kept the highest pace they could through the wildlands, but there was no way such a large group could move as quickly as Zac was able to proceed on his own. So he spent his time going back and forth around the army, killing anything that might prove a threat to them. They had already lost so much, so he didn’t want to lose a single man on the final stretch of their return.

Thankfully, it quickly became clear that the undead had given up on taking out his army, as Zac couldn't even find the shadow of a single elite undead in the vicinity. There were still a few Zombies and quite a few beasts, but nothing that indicated an army in the area.

Zac could only guess that some of the ghost scouts had seen the final battle, and the generals felt the price was too high to keep targeting them. Besides, the death march over the past ten days had created quite some distance between themselves and the three main hordes.

Since there was no immediate threat, he could relax somewhat, and he took the chance to figure out various things. His first idea to save time was to find a town, or at least the ruins of one, to see if he could gain control of it to buy a teleportation array.

Unfortunately, there was no response after finding three abandoned towns, and he wasn't able to find a populated one either. This whole area seemed to be made from former tundra, either from eastern Russia or Mongolia, and there had barely been any people in these regions even before the integration. Now with strong beasts walking the plains, it was no surprise that the few places of civilization he found were long deserted.

After a day's travel, it started to become increasingly clear that they might just have to walk the whole way back, but that didn't mean that they couldn't utilize their time efficiently. So Zac took his sister some distance away from the army and, after looking around, placed down a few array disks to isolate themselves from prying eyes.

"What's going on?" Kenzie asked with interest when she saw how careful Zac was.

"Here," Zac said as he took out a few of the Technocrat items. "Are these of any benefit to Jeeves?"

He had taken out one of the scout drones and one of the laser weapons that had been attached to a battle droid. Kenzie gingerly picked up the two items and curiously looked at them. Zac was about to explain what they were when a red light shot out of Kenzie's eye and quickly enveloped the two items.

“Wha—” Zac exclaimed as he took a step back.

“Pretty cool, right?” Kenzie said with a wide smile.

“You looked like a Cyborg just now,” Zac said with a stern face. “What’s going on?”

“Well, you told me to avoid showing off my skills yesterday, right?” Kenzie said with a shrug. “So we have been trying to figure out ways to make Jeeves’ abilities look more like normal skills.”

His sister was referring to the fact that he’d warned her about relying on her AI too much. Her performance against the leftover Zombies had been a bit too eye-catching, and people had started to talk. Luckily, his own power was enough to justify Kenzie’s skills for most people, as they assumed he had given her various treasures and help. But he still didn’t want to take any risks where the secret about Jeeves would leak.

Using a beam that shot out of her eye to scan items felt pretty damn far away from the goal of staying incognito, so he didn’t understand what she meant. She had looked like a robot when the red light exited her pupil. But Zac realized on second thought that he had actually sensed a bit of Cosmic Energy in the ray, something that never was the case with technology.

But Zac didn’t have time to ask how she’d made that happen, as the drone suddenly started to hover above Kenzie’s hand.

“Wow, so cool,” Kenzie said as the small drone made a few turns around her.

“Is it you controlling it?” Zac asked.

“Yeah, or well, it’s Jeeves who controls it,” Kenzie said. “Do you have more of these?”

“Yeah, a whole lot of them. What are you pla—” Zac said, but his voice got stuck in his throat.

The drone started to disintegrate, turning into lights, and they entered Kenzie’s forehead. In just a second, it was completely gone, not even leaving a speck of dust behind.

“Jeeves ate it,” Kenzie explained, though the comment felt a bit superfluous. “It seems he gets smarter the more types of technology he eats. Do you have more stuff?”

“I do, but this doesn’t feel safe,” Zac said with some hesitation.

Jeeves was probably stolen technology from Firmament’s Edge, and feeding it to make it stronger came with very real risks. It was not like Jeeves followed the Three Laws of Robotics. The AI might turn against Kenzie when it was strong enough, killing her before returning to its creators.

“I know what you are thinking, but I think we are bound for life,” Kenzie said after some hesitation. “We are fused in a way; my soul gives it life. If I die, Jeeves will cease to exist. But perhaps the only way to know how he works for sure is finding Mom.”

Zac slowly nodded, but he couldn’t help but have a bad feeling in his heart. He could only hope there would be some answers inside the Mystic Realm since there was no way that place had no connection to Leandra. He handed over part of the things he’d looted from the Technocrat incursion for Kenzie to go through in the end. He also made sure that she wouldn’t absorb things that might be crucial in operating the large forges or the mechas.

Unfortunately, it seemed that he had made a mistake in not looting the corpses of the Technocrat incursion. According to Kenzie’s preliminary findings, it seemed that a lot of the technology relied on subneural chips to act as interfaces between the Technocrats’ brains and the drones and such.

Kenzie would still be able to control the items with the help of Jeeves, but it would be difficult for others to handle Technocrat technology in the short run. Perhaps they could refit some things to be controlled by normal computers instead, as implanting chipsets into one’s brain seemed like the kind of modification the System frowned upon.

After handing over the Technocrat items to his sister, he resumed his vigil around the army. Ogras sometimes joined

him, and they mostly discussed their next step after dropping off the army at a usable teleportation array.

“What do you think, can I take him down?” Zac asked during one of their discussions.

“Hm... it would help if we could fight his top general,” Ogras mused, understanding that Zac was referring to the Lich King. “Seeing his strength would give us a hint of the power of the Lich himself. But truthfully...”

“What?” Zac probed as the demon trailed off.

“You have accumulated far more power than is the norm for an F-grade, and taking down most incursions will be easy,” Ogras said. “But the Undead Empire is endlessly vast, and we don’t know their means. You will not only be fighting a true undead elite, but also his army and defensive arrays. There is no way he’ll leave the safety of his base as things stand. They can just wait it out until they kill this planet.”

“So you think I need to evolve first?” Zac sighed.

“Well, at least go to the tower and get that title. We might also find other useful items there that will help us,” Ogras said, once again bringing up the Tower of Eternity.

“The tower?” Zac frowned. “There is no time for that. Honestly, I’m thinking of skipping going altogether and instead pushing for as quick an evolution as possible.”

“What? No!” Ogras shouted. “Don’t be crazy! Remember, getting the title is not the only reason we’re going. You’re supposed to find a patron force as well, in case the Great Redeemer finds his way here.”

“The terraforming might be completed any day now. I can’t gallivant off-planet for weeks while our planet is collapsing!”

“Visiting the tower does not take that long,” the demon said with a roll of his eyes.

“How long does it take, then?” Zac asked with confusion.

He had already heard that there were eighty-one known floors, and Ogras had once divulged that he had been stuck on

a floor for a month before passing it.

“Between one day and a year,” Ogras said.

“A YEAR?!” Zac shouted. “There’s no way we have time for that!”

“Just listen,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “The tower itself only takes one day at the most. But you are not transported directly to the tower.”

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

Zac hadn’t really delved into the subject of the Tower of Eternity before, as he had expected Ogras would go over it before they set out. But it seemed it was time to get a better picture of how that place worked.

“You get teleported to the Base Town. Or at least the Base Town of your sector,” Ogras said. “It is a huge town that extends around the tower itself. After using the token, you will be able to stay a year at the longest, though you can leave early. The tower itself takes up to ninety-nine days, but it is in a special space, so only one day will pass in real time.”

“So we could be back just one day after activating the tokens?” Zac asked with intrigue.

“Yes, but we should stay longer if time allows it. Entering the tower itself can only count as half the benefit of that place.”

AN OVERDUE MEETING

“What’s the point of delaying the stay?” Zac asked with a frown.

“There are all kinds of reasons. The Tower of Eternity is the gathering place of young elites and a way for forces who would never be able to contact each other to interact. It’s a great opportunity for trading or making connections. Some of the larger forces have a permanent presence there, hosting auctions or the like,” Ogras explained with excitement glimmering in his eyes.

“Auctions?” Zac said, his eyes lighting up. “You think we might be able to find a soul-mending treasure for sale?”

“Perhaps,” Ogras said with hesitation. “But you should know we’re just country bumpkins compared to most people who are there. And while there are restrictions on the wealth they bring, it’s over a hundred times more than what we have managed to scrounge together. Some bring tens of billions in spending money, and soul-mending treasures are always in demand. I brought a billion Nexus Coins I got from my grandpa last time, yet I was only a small fish over there.”

Zac frowned in realization. It was true that his net worth was a few billion even excluding the shipyard and the repository, but a lot of it came from the mountain of gear that he’d looted from Rydel and the hunt. If he easily could convert all that to real money, he would have long done so.

There was a significant pile of Nexus Crystals accumulated from the mining operations, but that would make

up less than a billion Nexus Coins even if he sold it all at Calrin's. A D-grade Hegemon might make more than Zac's whole net worth in a day or two from exploring a Mystic Realm. So the financial prowess of old established forces was something that Zac couldn't even dream of matching up against.

He remembered how Average had offered a billion Nexus Coins just for Zac to back off and let him fight the Star Ox. If he encountered such a scion who wanted the soul mending for himself, there was no way he could compete. Zac suddenly felt quite impoverished for the first time in a long while.

"Don't look so glum," Ogras snorted. "We'll figure something out. Besides, auctions are not only about spending strength. If we gather enough funds to seriously overspend, we'll most likely win the treasure in an auction. Even most rich scions would stop at a certain point unless they really need the item, as they would look like wasteful idiots who are only good at spending their parents' money otherwise."

"Can we rob people over there?" Zac suddenly asked. "In case we get outbid."

He didn't relish the idea of turning to robbery, but if it came down to it, some thievery was nothing compared to what he had already done. If snatching a Cosmos Sack would save his people's lives, then he would do so. Of course, stealing was the last possible solution if they truly ran out of options.

"Rob people?" Ogras said as his eyes widened, clearly not enthused by Zac's idea. "Don't even think about it. There's technically no laws over there, but it's very uncommon for daylight robbery to take place."

"Why not? A bunch of rich targets from another side of the cosmos. It seems like a pretty good place to rob someone," Zac said with confusion. "Chances are you'll never see them again afterward."

"It's not that easy. The Ruthless Heavens will restrict you if you attack someone," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "You can't just snatch the Cosmos Sack and disappear; teleporting out will get a one-minute delay. I've heard that

even a quest might be created to take you down, depending on what you did. Besides, there's the issue of treasures."

"What do you mean?" Zac frowned.

It sounded like the System didn't directly stop you from robbing people, but you needed the strength to survive the ordeal. It was almost like a quest for the robber as well. You could rob someone, but you needed to survive for a minute to keep your spoils.

"The Ruthless Heavens restricts what treasures you can bring to the Tower of Eternity," Ogras explained.

"Like the hunt?" Zac asked with a frown, not wanting to leave behind all his stuff again.

"Not exactly. You can bring as many items as you want, but defensive and offensive tools and talismans are limited to Middle E-grade. Raw materials and other types of treasures can be Peak E-grade, likely since the Ruthless Heavens wants to give young elites a chance to trade valuable items that can help them grow," Ogras said.

"So, what's the problem, then?" Zac asked. "I already have E-grade defensive gear and an E-grade Spirit Tool weapon."

"Yes, but both are at low stage," Ogras snorted. "Made for Peak F-grade warriors and the recently evolved. But what if someone takes out a high-quality Middle E-grade defensive treasure to block your attack, then a dozen E-grade offensive talismans to attack you. Mind you, the **[Void Ball]** you threw at the Technocrat monstrosity was a High E-grade item, not Peak. Imagine a hundred slightly lesser versions of that thing flying your way."

Zac frowned, finally understanding what Ogras was getting at. If some rich guy snatched the soul-healing treasure out from under his nose, it was also possible that he'd brought some extremely strong defenses, since he was already wealthy.

"How is that fair?" Zac muttered with annoyance. "So some rich guy can just rip through the tower with the help of his family's wealth? Just throw out thousands of offensive arrays at everything around him?"

“Having a rich family or strong friends is a strength in and of itself.” Ogras smiled. “The Multiverse was never fair, and neither is the Ruthless Heavens. Just look at yourself with all your progenitor titles or the other earthlings with their Tutorial title, how is that fair? But the tower tests potential in the end, and external strength gets more and more restricted the further up the tower you progress.”

“But those restrictions don’t apply to the town outside?” Zac asked, understanding what the demon was getting at.

“Exactly.” Ogras nodded. “That’s why there’s so little violence outside apart from the occasional village idiot who doesn’t understand the immensity of the heavens and earth. No one knows what hidden tricks the other people are carrying around. Starting a fight might kill you, even if you’re the young master of a large clan.”

“Okay, you’ve sold me,” Zac finally said with a nod. “We’re heading to the tower as soon as we’re ready. I just want to reach the peak of E-grade in my second class to get the quests, and we need to figure out the Dao Funnel as well.”

“Agreed.” Ogras nodded. “But we’re truthfully running out of time. We can only delay these hordes from completing the Terraforming Array for so long. We will probably need a week or two in the tower to accomplish all our goals, so we can’t just go at the last minute either.”

“I know.” Zac sighed, all too aware of the constraint of time.

Where was the Peak-quality Clone Technique when he needed it? Splitting up into ten people to hit all his targets at once would make his life so much easier. But he knew he was stuck in the middle of the wilderness for the time being, so he could only make the most of it.

Since Zac had figured out his next steps, there was nothing much else to do. He asked his sister to pause on the Technocrat research and instead double down on the Dao Funnel. Meanwhile, the two returned to switching between pondering on the Dao while riding in one of the cars and keeping watch for enemies.

But Zac's mind was unable to properly calm down, and his brain was constantly churning in an effort to solve all the various issues that plagued him and his people.

On the sixth day since setting out, Zac was making some small talk with a couple of the Valkyries and John, the American expat he once met outside Eastern Hills. John had initially been a bit awkward around Zac after reuniting, even apologizing for trying to recruit him into his small Zombie-hunting party back when Zac went under the alias David. But he soon calmed down after seeing that Zac didn't carry himself like some emperor or ruthless warlord.

It was a nice break to just hang around a bit. He needed a break from constantly running back and forth to make sure the world wasn't ending. But a small spike of danger suddenly appeared in his mind, and Zac instinctively looked in the distance, trying to find the source of the feeling. The Valkyries looked at him in confusion, proving that they hadn't noticed anything amiss.

"Is something wrong?" Jenna, one of the Valkyries, asked.

"It's nothing," Zac said with a shake of his head. "Thought I heard something. I'll check it out just in case."

"Do you need us to come with?" another Valkyrie asked with a frown.

"No, that's okay." Zac smiled. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

With that, he activated [**Loamwalker**], disappearing in a flash. He quickly moved toward a small hill in the distance, each step moving him dozens of meters forward.

When he saw the person on the other side of the hill, his eyes widened in alarm as a storm of leaves erupted around him. His axe had already appeared in his hand, as Zac was mentally preparing for a fight for his life.

It was a Zhix warrior who was sitting on a chair, clearly waiting for him. Zac instantly knew the insectoid was bad news because he was completely unable to sense it, even though the thing sat just ten meters away from him, leisurely

inspecting him with interest. It was just like with his meeting with Inevitability, though this clearly wasn't the same person. This Zhix looked older, and it emitted a cultured aura.

There were no weapons that Zac could see, but that didn't mean it was unarmed. It was wearing a robe that was a bit similar to Zac's own getup that he got from Yrial, but the Zhix's was in a maroon hue. It made the insectoid emit a slightly sinister aura in spite of its otherwise refined appearance.

"Do not worry, I am not here to fight you. I am not as prone to violence as my daughter." The Zhix smiled. "Our meeting was long overdue, so I thought we should have a chat."

"Void's Disciple?" Zac said as he kept his distance, not daring to sit down in the empty seat.

"So cautious. Well, it makes sense after your meeting with my child." He snorted.

"Daughter?" Zac couldn't help himself from confirming since that wasn't nomenclature that should exist among the Zhix.

"Well, that's how I see those two. They were the last survivors of a branch that was almost completely eradicated during the War of Emancipation. I raised them from ignorant children scurrying in the darkness to great warriors in service of our Lord. I am not sure if they see me as a father though." The Zhix shrugged. "I only learned the terminology after arriving here, and I figured I'd stick with it since we have diverged from the old to embrace the new."

"So, what do you want?" Zac asked instead of delving further into Zhix pronouns or genealogy.

"I have come to talk to you about the Undead Empire," Void's Disciple simply said.

"I guess you want me to take care of them for you so that you don't get your boss in trouble?" Zac snorted, not bothering to hide his disdain.

“Did Salvation tell you?” the Zhix asked with a shake of his head. “It’s an embarrassing story, that one. He somehow found the inheritance that the Lord left for us. Unfortunately, my ancestors underestimated the power of the Zhix legions, causing us to lose the war. Our Holy land was lost as well, and along with it much knowledge.”

“And you’re not here for revenge?” Zac said with suspicion.

“No, his talent was high, but his mind was already broken before he found the opportunity. He mixed up our grand undertaking with religious doctrine of your old world, making him inadvertently work against his own master,” Void said with disdain. “Perhaps his joining his so-called Unity was the greatest outcome.

“In any case, does my reasoning matter why I want to assist you? You have your path to follow, as do I. I can see it in your eyes and through your actions. You carry the hopes of your people on your shoulders, and only you have the strength to fulfill those dreams. You are nothing like that crafty little beastman who cares more about profits and image than his people,” Void said. “He is currently working toward getting his hands on a teleportation token rather than fighting the invaders.”

Zac stared at Void’s Disciple for a few seconds, not sure what to say. Honestly, what he was saying was true. He knew he had to close the undead incursion as soon as possible, even if it helped the Dominators as well. The alternative was to let the whole planet get terraformed, and that was not something he would allow no matter what.

“I met with the Lich controlling the undead incursion not long ago,” Void suddenly added, making Zac’s eyes widen in shock. “He is quite strong. Taking him down will not be easy.”

“We’re aware,” Zac tersely said.

“I’m sure.” The Zhix smiled. “But are you aware that the array they are building is already functional?”

TIME PRESSURE

“What?” Zac couldn’t help but blurt out. “Impossible; the array is far from finished.”

“It doesn’t need to be finished to work, but it will charge much faster if it is,” Void’s Disciple said.

“Changing the alignment of a whole planet is an enormous undertaking for people at our level, so all hope is not yet lost,” Void continued, throwing over a crystal. “The information is there. I guess that you have between one month and two to take the undead down. When the process starts in earnest, you have a week at best to stop it before the damage becomes irrevocable.”

“And you expect me to believe you will stand down and let the undead go through with the transformation?” Zac asked. “That would ruin your Lord’s plans as well.”

“If the undead succeed, we will stay as long as possible, and hopefully, our Lord will take mercy on us and pick us up. If not, then that’s our fate,” Void said with equanimity as he stood up. “We will not be the source of causing new enmities for our Lord, especially not with a force like the Undead Empire. We are not the only seeds, as you are no doubt aware of.”

Zac’s thoughts went to the Medhin royals, immediately understanding what the Zhix was referring to. There were at least two worlds that The Great Redeemer had planted his seeds of Karma on, and perhaps there were many more of them. It was both a relief and troubling that The Great

Redeemer didn't place all his bets on this planet alone, because that meant that he might still manage to evolve to C-grade even if Zac saved Earth. Forming a grudge with a C-grade Hegemon would result in all kinds of trouble.

"And when do you expect your boss to come and pick you up?" Zac asked, though he wasn't really expecting a truthful answer.

"Some mysteries are best left unanswered," the Zhix smiled, confirming Zac's guess.

Zac tried to figure out what other information he could try to weasel out of the insectoid now that they stood face-to-face, but he was dragged out of his musings to once again get ready for battle when he saw the Zhix move. Energy churned around Zac's body, and he was ready to unleash everything he had at a moment's notice.

"I've said what needed to be said. The rest will depend on you," Void's Disciple said as he calmly looked at Zac. "Of course, if you want, you're welcome to try your hand against me. Killing me will solve one threat to your planet instantly. My children are strong, but they are not able to rein in their bloodthirst. Their carnage would sooner or later result in their demise.

"So how about it?" Void's Disciple's eyes even showed some anticipation as the space behind him shuddered.

The next moment, it looked like a window to the cosmos appeared behind the Zhix.

Zac squeezed the handle of his axe, a pearl of sweat running down his forehead. This truly was an opportunity that was hard to come by. They still had no idea where Void's Disciple hid, and they didn't have any special sight like Abbot Everlasting Peace to track him down again if he disappeared now. The Dominators had been elusive since the integration, only appearing when they wanted.

But as much as he hated to admit it, Zac was afraid. The fight with the Cyborg had utterly crushed his sense of invulnerability, and he wasn't ready to take on the Dominators.

Especially not Void's Disciple, who felt like a far larger threat than Inevitability and Harbinger, even if those two had passed Void's Disciple in levels after the hunt.

Zac eventually lowered his axe and silently shook his head slightly.

"Another time, then." The Zhix laughed as he threw something at Zac. "I will not assist you directly, but your emerging victorious against the Lich King would be in my best interest, so I will help out a bit. This array is specifically designed to interrupt the arrays in the Lich King's castle, though the effect will only last for a second or two. Perhaps it will create an opportunity."

"Is this why you visited him earlier?" Zac asked with a frown as he looked down at the black crystal in his hand.

He was unsure whether to trust the Zhix, but he couldn't find any reason he would lie at this juncture. The best thing for Void would truly be if Zac won, at which point the Dominator could simply stay hidden until his boss arrived and culled the planet. The Zhix didn't answer the question, and he only smiled as he turned around to walk into the cosmos he had opened a door into.

But Zac wasn't ready to just let him go. The whole meeting had been on the Dominator's terms, and Zac only knew what Void's Disciple wanted him to know. He needed to get something more out of him, and his mind immediately turned to one matter that so far had eluded them.

"I thought you wanted to talk about the Mystic Realm since you came all this way," Zac said, throwing out a hook open for interpretation.

The Zhix immediately stopped in its tracks, and a monstrous aura rife with killing intent blanketed the whole area in an instant. It was far beyond what he'd encountered when fighting Inevitability, and Zac unhesitatingly activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**], since he was afraid he would get instantly killed if he didn't go all out from the start.

But the aura disappeared as quickly as it came, and the Zhix took a deep breath before looking into Zac's eyes.

“The item that is being birthed has no fate with you. Only death awaits if you enter the battle for that thing, even if you are our fated fulcrum. The same goes for the Church and even the Undead Empire. That thing can only go to our Lord,” he tersely said before entering the cosmos and disappearing.

Zac stared at the spot where Void's Disciple had disappeared for a few seconds before he took a deep breath to steady himself. The aura Void's Disciple had released was shocking, but Zac was ecstatic with the result of dangling that bait.

The fact that Void's Disciple would stop at nothing to gain the treasure of the Mystic Realm, but was willing to let the Undead Empire terraform Earth, was an extremely important revelation. He wasn't exactly sure what to do with the information just yet, but it was a great clue on how to proceed in their war against the Great Redeemer.

The Zhix's outburst also gave Zac a decent approximation of the power of Void's Disciple. The aura had dwarfed his own, even after he had activated his boost. That meant his attributes were clearly superior. Furthermore, his killing intent was also extremely dense, which meant he was a seasoned warrior rather than someone who had gained his power by hiding in a cave and cultivating.

He needed to become stronger.

“Is everything alright, Lord Atwood?” one of the Valkyries asked when he returned.

“It was nothing after all,” Zac said as he forced out a smile, trying to hide the backlash from activating his skill.

The next day, Zac kept an extremely vigilant watch of the surroundings, but neither Void's Disciple nor any Zhix horde could be found in the vicinity. He still didn't know what to believe about what Void had said, but Zac leaned toward him telling the truth.

The fact that the array was already working was extremely troubling. Zac thought that the terraforming would be indefinitely put on hold as long as Thea's army kept one of the three main hordes from moving. But it turned out that their sacrifices were only delaying the inevitable.

Zac didn't want to take any chances, so he gave himself a four-week time limit before he would have to assault the core of the Dead Zone. He desperately needed to make himself and his people stronger in that short while.

The simplest solution was for himself and Ogras to evolve, but they weren't the only ones who could change the course of the battle. Unfortunately, it turned out that neither Janos nor Ilvere were able to evolve at the moment, lacking the qualifications to upgrade their classes. Zac could only hope that the merits they'd gained through the past battles would be enough to change that.

Having to guide the slow convoy was also starting to get on Zac's nerves, and he even went so far as to change to his undead class to hunt any beasts within wide swathes of the army. He couldn't waste any time and wanted to boost his second class to level 75 as well before trying out for the tower. That way, he would get the most out of his only attempt, as he wouldn't be able to go again like Ogras.

Another issue that made Zac worry was the constant anger in his chest since he'd arrived at the battle to see his people getting cut down. He was still able to control or push it down, but it had become a permanent presence in his mind. Now that Void's Disciple had exposed the looming threat of the massive array, it only got worse.

Being angry in and of itself wasn't the problem; the real issue was that he was being manipulated. He had been consumed by anger in the fight earlier, which was what allowed his skill to evolve. But his rage seemed to have loosened the restrictions on the Splinter of Oblivion, and its wicked energies were constantly seeping into his mind.

However, the change didn't only come with negatives. He had already learned that the funnel that the Draugr lady had set

up in his mind did not only let the energy from the splinter out, but it also refined it somehow. Until now, he hadn't really understood the effect of having the mysterious energy enter his mind, but he finally understood what it did.

It was making his soul stronger.

It was hard to pinpoint exactly what that meant, but he knew that his spirit was more substantial compared to before. It felt like he would be able to endure using his Dao Seeds for longer, and even his Dao Fields had become slightly more intense.

But Zac was worried, even though the boost was a welcome addition now that he was scrambling for all ways to make himself stronger. His mental resilience was quite strong, but the effect of the splinter just kept increasing. What would happen within the next few years? How long would it be until he turned into Anzonil's disciple, slowly becoming insane?

He needed to find some solution, hopefully one that would be able to keep the benefits while dealing with the unwanted side effects. He wasn't able to cultivate, but perhaps there were ways to improve one's mind that worked similarly, something like meditation manuals.

Zac soon enough returned to the car to ponder on the Dao, but he couldn't calm his mind down enough to enter a meditative state. He kept twisting back and forth before interrupting Ogras' meditation to discuss various strategies.

The demon had been shocked to learn about the meeting with Void's Disciple, but his analysis of the information was the same as Zac's. It would be foolish not to operate under the assumption that what the Dominator said was true. But the demon took the situation more in stride, simply saying that the situation didn't change much and that there was not much that they could do while they were stuck in the middle of nowhere.

"You might as well go ahead; you acting like this is stressing me out," the demon finally said in exasperation after being interrupted for the fifth time. "The army will take almost another week until it's back. Use that time to close the

incursions in the underworld or something. I can't help with those anyway, so I will stay behind to protect the convoy.”

“They may be waiting for me to leave, though,” Zac hesitantly said.

“Just go undercover; use your undead form and face changing or something,” Ogras said with a shrug. “We'll pretend you're still around. Besides, we haven't seen any undead activity in a week, and we're far outside the area of the array they're making. It's a risk, but we need to take some risks at this point.”

Zac was hesitant to leave his people at this juncture, but he did feel more confident if the demon stayed behind. Zac had seen the power he was able to unleash, especially after the inheritance. The demon was far stronger today compared to when fighting the Beast waves. Only the appearance of a general would be a match for him if he went all out.

And it was like Ogras said: they were so far away from the undead incursion by now. And if Void's Disciple wanted to kill the people here, he could have already done so by himself. It was unlikely that Zac would be able to stop him at all as things stood.

“I'll take one last look to make sure no one is trailing us before I leave,” Zac finally said. “I'm counting on you to keep our people and my sister safe.”

STASIS

Zac stepped through the Port Atwood teleporter and immediately rushed toward the government buildings. After he'd left under the guise of darkness, he had been rushing without sleep for almost three days. Without adjusting his speed to the slow-moving army, he was able to cover ground quite a bit faster, but he did take a circuitous route to keep a lookout for any threats lurking ahead of the army.

Luckily, there was nothing apart from the occasional beast pack, nothing that would prove to be more than a small training excursion for the Port Atwood army by this point. His relief over the fact that his people were out of the woods was unfortunately overshadowed by the constant worry over whether he would find Alea waiting for him or if he would find a gravestone with her name on it.

"She is alive," Adran immediately said when he saw Zac enter his office. "Calrin and the Tal-Eladar healer have moved her to the valley with the Tree of Ascension. The energy is denser over there, and the tree seems to bring her comfort."

"Anything important that's happened since I was gone?" Zac asked.

"Nothing major that can't wait," Adran said with a shake of his head, allowing Zac to head out without worries.

He immediately set out for the restricted area containing the valley hidden between the four mountain peaks. It had been a while since he last was here, and the area had largely recovered from being drained of energy, then poisoned during

the battle for the Fruit of Ascension. New vegetation was sprouting up everywhere, though Zac was a bit confused when he looked at them.

It almost felt as though Zac was having a hallucination as he walked among the unfamiliar flora. The plants and trees were not of species he had seen before, most of them being various bright colors. The only answer Zac could find was that the poisoned Tree of Ascension had caused a chain of mutations in the area, making the vegetation toxic.

Soon enough, he reached the core of the valley and immediately spotted the Sky Gnome fiddling with a Divine Crystal next to a glass display while Tylia stood next to him. Zac's heart was gripped by fear when he saw the unmoving form of Alea inside the glass case, making it seem like a coffin. But he breathed out when he noticed her taking slow breaths, and immediately walked over to Calrin's side.

"How is she?" Zac asked after greeting the two.

"She is stable for now," Tylia said as she looked down at Alea. "I'm afraid we couldn't find a solution to her fractured soul, though."

"This is a Stasis Array," Calrin explained when he noticed Zac's confusion. "It is used to keep mortally wounded people alive. But it doesn't completely stop the wound from worsening."

"How long does she have?" Zac asked with a sour feeling.

"Five years at the most," Tylia said after some consideration. "But the faster you find a solution, the better. If you wait too long, there will be repercussions even if her soul is healed."

"Like how?" Zac asked with a frown.

"Lost memories or crippled cultivation." Tylia sighed.

Zac silently digested the information, trying to figure out what to do. His backup plan had been to get the soul-mending fruit from Yrial if he couldn't heal her any quicker, but it looked like that option was out. Alea would be long dead before he could access the inheritance trial again.

“How confident are you of getting your hands on an item that can heal her?” Zac asked Calrin, who stood to the side.

“I’m sorry, but there is no chance,” Calrin said with a shake of his head. “I only have access to a few merchants, and I only have the lowest access to their wares. On top of that, there are the restrictions put in place by the System. Even if I manage to expand our business enough to have a monopoly of all commerce on this planet, I won’t get enough credits to get access to people who can provide those types of pills or treasures.”

“So it’s impossible to find a solution on Earth?” Zac said with disappointment.

Ogras had put forward the possibility of finding a cure in the Tower of Eternity, but Zac had hoped that the problem would be solved before that. It would allow him to climb the tower without worries, but it truly looked like there was no better option at this moment.

“Well... there are a few ways. You might find one in the tower,” the Sky Gnome said, echoing Ogras’ idea. “Or if you manage to travel to an established empire. Perhaps you can find an alchemist who can concoct such a pill there. But there is also the issue of cost in the short term.”

“Cost?” Zac asked.

“It cost 25 million Nexus Coins a month to keep this array going,” the Sky Gnome explained. “It continuously uses Divine Crystals and E-grade Nexus Crystals.”

“I’ll pay for it,” Zac said without hesitation.

It was a steep price that might bankrupt most forces on Earth, but Zac didn’t care. Just the Beast Crystal mine alone was worth more than keeping the array running for a decade. And he would just keep getting wealthier as time passed. Besides, now was not the time to get stuck on trifling sums of money.

“Is there anything else we can do to improve her state? What about the Tree?” Zac asked, remembering Adran’s words.

“We are not sure the reason for this,” the Tal-Eladar hesitantly said. “Normally, one’s constitution and soul are two separate aspects. But the tree seems to be helping her somehow. I am not sure about her class, but staying close to it seems to have a positive effect on her. But it is not to the point that it actually heals her.”

“She is working on gaining a poison constitution,” Zac said. “Could that have something to do with it?”

It was a bit of a secret, but he didn’t want to hold any important information back if it might help heal her. Tylia looked a bit surprised, but not overly so.

“Gaining a constitution without having a natural aptitude is extremely hard,” she said. “She must have had a lucky encounter that allowed her to take the first step at all.”

“Would it help if I got something that might complete the process?” Zac asked.

“No idea. This is far beyond my knowledge. But you should know that treasures that would allow you to gain a special constitution or bloodline are even rarer than soul-mending treasures,” Tylia said. “My work here is done. The young human and I are no longer needed; the array is doing the same thing we did, but better. If it is alright with you, I’ll return to the side of Lady Verana.”

Zac nodded with a frown hearing that it might not work, but it was still worth trying, in his opinion. Those kinds of treasures might be rare, but what Tylia didn’t know was that Zac might have just the thing in his possession.

“That is okay.” Zac nodded. “I am thankful for your help. I will remember it.”

“If you want to help the Tir’Emarel, you just need to provide us with some of those Beast Crystals of yours.” Tylia smiled as she walked away toward the exit of the valley.

The Sky Gnome perked up when he heard the mention of crystals, and he looked at the receding form of the healer before his eyes locked on to Zac with an enamored shimmer.

“Don’t look at me like that. It gives me the creeps,” Zac snorted and threw out a Beast Crystal. “I found a mine full of these in the underworld. Keep it between ourselves.”

“Good quality.” Calrin whistled as he went over it. “Are you keeping or selling?”

“I am low on cash at the moment. I am thinking of selling off most of these to have enough money to buy a soul-healing treasure for Alea,” Zac said. “Would you be able to sell them within a week? Roughly 2 billion Nexus Coins’ worth.”

“No problem, Beast Crystals are always in demand. If I only have a week, you’ll lose a few percent, though. But all that wealth... I am sorry to sound callous, but is it truly worth it?” the Sky Gnome said. “You should know, cultivating as a mortal is to burn terrifying amounts of money. If you spend everything on your subordinates, you might find yourself stuck sooner or later.”

“It’s worth it. She has saved my life on multiple occasions. How can I not spend some money to help her back? Besides, don’t I have you to recoup my losses?” Zac said with a smile. “Speaking of that, how much have you earned lately? It’s been some time since the last payout.”

The Sky Gnome looked a bit queasy when speaking about paying dividends, but he sighed after throwing the sleeping poison mistress a glance.

“Our income has been quite impressive lately,” Calrin said. “You have roughly 1.6 billion Nexus Coins in Thayer Consortium’s books. You shouldn’t expect this kind of income again for a while, though. We have made extraordinary profits by unloading our mountains of gear all across the planet and looting the towns left by the invaders.”

“That is amazing work,” Zac said, shocked by the number.

He would have thought that the Sky Gnome would have been able to gather a few hundred million Nexus Coins at most, but Calrin had clearly been able to accumulate massive wealth from the incursions they’d closed above ground. The Sky Gnome had been in charge of gathering everything of

value in those places since Zac lacked the manpower to do it himself at the moment.

“That’s not all. Your actual wealth is far higher. I took over management of the stores in the underworld, but most of the mines, towns, and hidden wealth went to you,” the Sky Gnome continued. “I believe you would be able to gain at least a billion Nexus Coins if we just sold all the stocked-up metals to the System. And finally, there are the town coffers of Port Atwood.”

“How much do I have there?” Zac asked curiously.

“No idea,” Calrin said with some annoyance. “The floating eye controls those assets, and she’s keeping me at bay.”

Zac nodded in understanding, pleasantly surprised by the situation. He had felt like a pauper after handing over most of his Nexus Coins to keep Alea stable, but his assets were quite a bit above his expectation.

Between the Consortium, his underworld assets, and the Beast Crystal mine, he was almost at 5 billion Nexus Coins in liquid assets. It was a huge amount of wealth for someone in the F-grade, and it should be enough to buy a high-grade soul-mending treasure with money to spare. Just hearing that number was like having a weight lifted from his shoulders, but the funds were only half the problem.

He actually needed to find a treasure to buy as well, and there were no guarantees he would find it when visiting the Tower of Eternity. So he needed some backup plans too.

“Have you heard of the **[Primordial Breath Amanita]**?” Zac asked.

“Huh? Amanita? A mushroom?” the Sky Gnome muttered with a slight frown before taking out a huge book from his Cosmos Sack. “Let’s see.”

It was one of the binders he had used to identify the treasures Zac had brought with him from the hunt, and this one seemed to be centered on various subterranean treasures.

“Here it is, Primordial Breath Amanita. A treasure that can help evolve bloodlines and constitutions. Extremely poisonous

to ingest without proper preparation, but it releases a harmless gas that gives some of its benefits. Very beneficial to plant in cultivation chambers,” Calrin read out loud before looking up at Zac. “You found one of these things?”

Zac simply nodded in response.

“It’s a pseudo D-grade treasure, just like this tree and the lotus you asked about some time ago,” Calrin said. “New planets are simply a breeding ground for miraculous treasures. These things usually take thousands of years to reach maturity.”

“Do you think we can feed that thing to Alea?” Zac asked.

“No way. We would need a skilled alchemist and the knowledge to prepare it,” the Sky Gnome unhesitatingly said. “But we could plant it in the area.”

“Wouldn’t it clash with the Tree of Ascension?” Zac asked.

The gnome nodded. “We would need to plant it in the underground. If we go deep enough, it should be okay. From there, we’ll create a chimney to release the gas it emits around here, allowing the girl to benefit from it.”

Zac’s eyes lit up, and he felt it was a feasible idea. He would even be able to create a secondary outlet leading to his own cultivation cave if he planned everything correctly, making his hidden cave even more magical. He didn’t have any bloodline or constitution as far as he knew, but that might simply be due to ignorance. His mom obviously wasn’t a simple character, and having a bloodline wouldn’t be anything surprising.

“Can you handle that?” Zac asked as he took out the large box containing the mushroom. “Discreetly, of course.”

“No problem,” Calrin said. “I’ll have it ready in a few days. But if you decide to harvest it, remember to sell it at ol’ Calrin’s, okay?”

“Thank you. I’m heading to the underworld for a week,” Zac said as he gave the sleeping Alea a final look. “It’s about time I get to work again.”

CRUSADE

Zac was back in New London soon enough after changing back to his Mr. Black persona, and he was relieved that nothing too alarming had happened while he was gone. The two incursions who had previously traded with the Union had begun raiding settlements in the area, but Zac was already about to deal with them in any case.

Verana and her Beast Masters didn't need a lot of prodding, as most of them were bored from staying put in New London or taking stock of the various properties that had previously been owned by the Union. They got ready for war in less than an hour after hearing that they were going to battle with the Abyssal Demons. Zac knew that closing the incursion of an elite demonkin species would likely count as a great achievement for their people, and eagerness could be seen on their faces as they streamed toward the teleporter.

The demons who Zac initially brought to the underworld still hadn't entered the real underworld due to the presence of the Abyssal Demons. Some of them had stood ready in the hidden cave beneath the Underworld Nexus, whereas others had helped Mr. Trang in scouting out the massive continent above. Those who had been stuck in the darkness for weeks were all too happy when Zac instructed them to secure the Technocrat incursion as soon as possible. He'd only had time for a quick sweep after the fight, and there might be more things of value in the area.

Six hours later, Zac and his punitive army stood some distance from the demon incursion. They had long been

spotted by some flying bat-thing, which apparently was the demon version of a drone, according to Verana, and the demons were waiting for them. There was no way that they would manage to sneak attack these guys.

The Abyssal Demons had built a decent-sized city in the open underworld, which formed a half-circle against a mountain wall. Zac couldn't really see, but he suspected the demons had dug into the wall for resources, as large plumes of smoke rose from the back of the town, indicating there might be furnaces or some other sort of industry there.

The town itself was covered in a reddish glow from an array, and it seemed quite sturdy. Billy was not available this time, so Zac turned to Verana for ideas on how to get in. He would no doubt be able to crack it open with **[Nature's Punishment]**, but he wanted to fight in his undead form.

"Grub can probably cause a crack in the array, which would allow you to sneak inside. But he would get killed even before he got close," Verana said with hesitation.

"I can protect him," Zac said as he looked over at the wall in the distance. "Unless they have someone over level 100, my shield will hold."

"Okay, so jump on board." Verana smiled as Grub appeared out of nowhere, and the furry beast quickly grew to its real size.

Zac had already learned that most Beast Masters could keep their pets in some sort of stasis in their bodies. However, the tamed beasts couldn't cultivate while in stasis, so most of the time, they were kept in the open. It did, however, allow them to conjure their pets in the middle of a fight, surprising the enemy.

Slither woke up from its nap on Verana's shoulder, and it started to rapidly grow as well. It ballooned into a terrifying beast reaching over thirty meters in length. Even Zac's hair stood on end when he saw the transformation, but he quickly jumped on top of Grub's head and took out his replacement shield. It was nowhere near as good as the large tower shield

he'd found in the hunt, but it would allow him to activate his skills.

Zac nodded down at Verana, who raised a thin sword.

When Grub saw his master's signal, he opened his impossibly large maw and emitted a resounding bellow before it slammed its mouth shut, releasing a shockwave from the collision of its large slabs for teeth.

It started rushing forward with a speed that belied its short, stubby legs, and the army behind started to follow as soon as there was a comfortable distance. Hundreds of purple fireballs rose from the demon town to meet the charge, and Zac quickly summoned [**Immutable Bulwark**] and expanded it to its largest possible size.

Even then, it wasn't enough to properly protect the huge beast, so Zac infused the shield with the Seed of Sanctuary to make it even larger. However, Grub wasn't completely helpless himself, and he deftly dodged quite a few of the attacks to lessen Zac's burden.

The next moment, Zac's vision swam, and he suddenly found himself looking around in confusion. His surroundings had changed, but he quickly realized that he was right above the expansive town. Grub had somehow teleported, just like when the two had fought the first time he met Verana, and it started to descend with amazing momentum.

Zac quickly readjusted his shield as he unleashed his Dao Field rife with Heaviness. He wasn't able to infuse the large beast directly, so he could only slightly increase their momentum with the help of his Dao.

Grub didn't need much help, as he landed like a furry meteor on the shield, and it immediately cracked to let the two through. Unfortunately, the array seemed to have impressive healing capabilities, and the damage had almost completely healed by the time they landed with a tremendous crash that toppled a dozen buildings around them.

Zac quickly activated [**Fields of Despair**] as he looked around for the control crystal that supported the defensive

array. Destroying the control crystal wouldn't destroy the whole array, but it would no longer be supplied with energy. From there, Verana and the others should be able to quickly whittle down the array to gain entry to the town. That meant that Zac and Grub were isolated inside the town for now, but he wasn't too worried about it.

He soon spotted a command platform with an enormous Abyssal Demon wielding a jagged two-handed sword on his back. To his side, there were two skinny, for the massive Abyssal Demons, demons who stood in front of a large crimson crystal, continuously infusing it with power. A third demon was quickly exchanging a handful of crystals to replenish the lost energy from Grub's descent.

Zac prodded the large beast, and it immediately understood what Zac wanted to do. Unfortunately, it seemed it was unable to teleport once again in such short succession. With a lack of better options, it started to rush straight ahead with undeniable momentum. The beast also started slamming its teeth to cause massive shockwaves that spread like waves of destruction toward the demons, who hurriedly got down from the wall to form a new defensive line.

Dozens of attacks soared toward the charging beast, but Zac immediately activated [**Immutable Bulwark**] once more to erect a shimmering wall covering the two from all directions, effectively turning Grub into a fortified bulldozer.

Screams and wails echoed across the battlefield as Grub's attacks and [**Deathwish**] started to cause mayhem, but a sudden sense of danger made Zac immediately perk up and infuse himself with the Dao of Hardness. His eyes immediately found the demon leader, who had gripped his sword and swung it in a massive arc that seemed to make the air itself crackle.

Zac's eyes widened, and he immediately changed his tactic to infuse his bulwark with the Dao of Hardness instead of Sanctuary. It shrank the shield considerably, leaving Grub's flanks open, but it significantly increased the sturdiness of the shield.

A tremendous arc of pure power shot out from the Demon Lord's sword, and it ripped through the air with terrifying momentum. Even buildings were cut in two and crushed from the residual shockwave as it sped toward them, but Zac was ready to intercept the strike with his skill.

The whole town shuddered when the blade of energy slammed into Zac's bulwark, and he immediately lost a surprisingly large chunk of Miasma. But Zac breathed out in relief when he realized the power of the swing was well within his limits, and the bulwark wouldn't crack like when he'd fought the Cyborg.

However, the next second, a large wound appeared across his chest, and the black ichor in his body started to freely flow down his chest. Even Grub received a nasty wound across its side, and he bellowed in pain as he glared around in all directions to find who hurt him. Zac's eyes met the Demon Lord's in the distance, and he immediately changed strategy. It wouldn't be so easy to charge the platform like this.

"Big guy, head toward the gate and blow it up, okay?" Zac said to Grub beneath him, and it bellowed in understanding.

The Demon Lord kept shooting out his odd attacks, but Zac deftly controlled his defensive skill to swap between the large coverage and the smaller but sturdier one. But wounds still kept accumulating across their bodies, and Zac realized there was no way for him to completely block out the damage.

Zac wasn't exactly sure what was going on, but he had a suspicion that the Demon Lord had something akin to a Seed of Penetration that had reached Peak mastery at the least. Perhaps it was even a Fragment. Part of the attack simply sidestepped all his defenses, rendering them ineffectual.

Luckily, both Zac and Grub were extremely durable, so the beast made it to the gate without any life-threatening wounds. The gate turned into scrap metal with a tremendous crash as the beast rammed straight into it. The moment Zac saw that Grub was out in one piece, he jumped off the beast and stomped his foot on the ground, and the next moment, he disappeared.

Zac immediately reappeared in front of the control crystal and stomped onto the ground again before those around him could react, activating **[Profane Seal]**. The five towers rose out of the ground as the world turned monochromatic due to the influx of massive amounts of Miasma into the area; the change was so sudden that Zac actually managed to kill one of the captains with a quick swing before the others had time to back away.

The Demon Lord was clearly the largest threat, so the five spectral chains flew directly toward him in a bid to seal his dangerous attacks. But Zac barely had time to destroy the control crystal with **[Hunger]** before one of the chains was riddled with cracks. Zac frowned when he saw it, but he kept using three of the chains to occupy the Lord while he used the other two in quickly dealing with the remaining two mages, who stood next to the crystal.

A torrent of black corrosive clouds also spread out across the field as Zac took deep breaths while he fought, and the clouds intermingled with the Miasmatic haze from **[Fields of Despair]**. Screams of pain and rage already echoed across the cage as a large number of trapped soldiers started to get wounded by retaliatory strikes from **[Deathwish]** when trying to escape the entrapment.

The Miasma inside Zac's body surged as it kept dropping, only to increase again due to the continuous cycle formed between **[Deathwish]** and **[Fields of Despair]**. However, he realized that he would run out of Miasma soon enough, as it was overall quite costly to keep this many warriors trapped.

But the Demon Lord didn't give Zac any time to thin the number of enemies, and he suddenly roared before he literally caught fire, and the conflagration around him pushed away all of Zac's attacks. The chains were unable to pass through the purple flames without quickly melting, and even the clouds from **[Winds of Decay]** were burnt to cinders as they got close.

The demon sneered at Zac as he lifted his enormous sword toward the sky, and the next moment, a hundred-meter version of that very sword appeared above the cage. The sword

emitted a tremendous sharpness, and it reminded Zac of the time when he'd looked at the enormous axe in his Dao Vision.

The sword ruthlessly stabbed into the fractal in the sky, and a large crack immediately appeared on one of the towers. A spectral demon appeared at the same moment, stabbing at the Demon Lord. However, the stab barely harmed the Demon Lord, and he only laughed uproariously, as he seemed to be consumed by battle lust.

Zac wasn't as happy, as a new wound had appeared on his back the moment the sword in the sky stabbed down on the shield he had created. It was the same as the earlier strikes, where part of the force went right through his defenses.

But Zac wouldn't give in against something so minor. The Tal-Eladar had already broken through the town defense array since the control crystal had been destroyed, and Zac spotted Verana riding her enormous snake outside, causing utter mayhem amongst the demonkin ranks.

The fight outside was clearly pitched, as two of the demons outside had actually turned into ten-meter giants to curtail the snake's wanton destruction. The demons didn't seem deterred just because their leaders were locked inside **[Profane Seal]** at all, and they unhesitantly threw themselves into the meat grinder while emitting guttural roars.

Zac didn't have time to worry about that as he rushed toward the Demon Lord as he swung his sword with tremendous force. He had already changed the size of **[Immutable Bulwark]** to that of a normal tower shield, allowing him to use the skill rather than his subpar replacement shield to block the demon's sword.

The fires burned around him, and Zac was forced to continuously release Miasma from his body to not get burnt, but he wouldn't let up as the two exchanged one brutal attack after another. Neither would back down a single step, and both were more than happy to gain another wound if they could retaliate in kind.

Eventually, Zac started to get the upper hand, even though the demon possessed surprising power and the mysterious

ability to always cause some damage. Zac was simply too durable. The Abyssal Demon seemed to have some innate advantages due to his race, but it couldn't match up to the power of pure attributes.

Zac suddenly saw an opening, and he threw away his shield when the demon swung too wide due to exhaustion. Zac quickly grabbed the arm of his opponent and yanked it, making the demon stumble forward. The demon didn't even have time to find his balance before **[Hunger]** fell toward his neck with ruthless finality.

The large horned head of the Demon Lord thumped onto the ground, and the sound symbolized the beginning of the end for the Abyssal Demons.

LUNATICS

Zac looked around the rubble, slightly shocked at the ferocity of the battle. Less than 20% of the Abyssal Demons had chosen to retreat and instead opted to fight with furious intensity against the Tal-Eladar attackers, even after their leader had been decapitated. They were true berserkers, roaring at the top of their lungs as they tried to rip him apart. But the Abyssal Demons were not the only ones who fought with reckless abandon.

“You people are lunatics,” Zac muttered with a shake of his head.

Verana, who was almost completely drenched in blood, had a satisfied look on her face as she oversaw the looting of the town. Zac could understand her happiness since the fight could be considered a resounding win for the Tal-Eladar against the demonkin. Verana had been a goddess of war, causing bloodshed wherever she went, making the battle turn completely in their favor.

After Verana had quickly killed the two generals stuck outside Zac’s cage with the help of her snake and an offensive array, the war was mostly turned into a slaughter. It made a huge difference to have a powerhouse presiding over the battlefield. They could put their thumb on the scale, causing a massive reduction in casualties.

Of course, none of that would have been possible without the help of Zac himself. He’d captured a good hundred elites along with the leader and two of his generals within [**Profane Seal**], substantially weakening their defenses and causing

chaos. While they were trying to get their leader out of the cage, Verana and her Beast Masters could advance without any real resistance.

“Grudges built upon grudges,” Verana said with a wry smile. “The Boundless Heavens thrives on conflict as war forces us to get stronger or perish. You cannot fight it, so you might as well adapt to it.”

Zac sighed, feeling a bit hopeless at the prospect of living a life of constant strife. He was currently struggling because there were threats against his people in all directions, but was that all life was supposed to amount to? Putting out one fire after another while getting stronger. Was that truly the goal of cultivation?

But Zac forced himself to snap out of his brooding as he bought a teleportation array and nodded at one of the Valkyries, who immediately stepped through. A few hundred warriors stepped through the teleporter twenty minutes later, and they looked wide-eyed at the utter destruction around them.

It was the soldiers who worked for the Union, which technically made them his people. They had mostly kept up their previous duties, but they came in handy now. Zac wouldn't entrust them with any important tasks, but scouring the area for lingering threats or points of interest shouldn't be any problem for them.

Zac simply sat down on top of a boulder to overlook it all as he restored his missing Miasma. He also called for Harvath, the demon captain who had kept his squad in the hidden cave system beneath the Underworld Nexus until now. The demon had been in charge of clearing out the Technocrat incursion, but it should be dealt with by now.

The demon arrived soon enough, and he sighed deeply with conflicted emotions as he looked around at the rubble. Zac could understand his feelings, but he didn't know what to say. The two walked over to a secluded spot, and Zac activated an array disk to shroud them from prying eyes.

“Is something the matter?” the demon asked curiously when he saw Zac’s actions.

“I need you to do something, but you can’t let the Tal-Eladar catch on,” Zac said.

The demon’s eyes lit up, and he clearly had no moral compunctions about pulling a fast one on his new allies. Zac smiled when he saw Harvath’s reaction and took out one of his Beast Crystals.

“This is...?” Harvath said with some hesitation as he inspected the crystal.

“It’s a Beast Crystal, an item for nurturing beasts. I found a large mine of these things. I want you to send a group of experienced people to clean out that whole place for me. The mine is nowhere near as big as the Nexus Mine, so it should only take a few days for a strong crew,” Zac said. “The Tal-Eladar would be frothing at the mouth for these things, so don’t let them follow you.”

“Absolutely.” Harvath immediately nodded.

Zac wasn’t sure exactly how the Tal-Eladar would react in regard to these crystals, so he chose not to take any risks with them. The crystals might be extremely valuable for the Tal-Eladar, but he knew that the invaders were extremely low on Nexus Coins since they weren’t able to bring them to Earth. And Zac needed the money now rather than later.

“Extract the crystals as quickly as possible. I hope to use them to trade for a treasure to treat Alea within two weeks,” Zac explained.

The demon’s countenance immediately turned somber, and he quickly memorized the path as Zac imparted it to him. Alea’s situation had already spread among the demons, and they had almost exploded in rage. The poison mistress had proven herself for the demons, and many of them wanted to immediately rush out to fight the undead to the death when learning of the ambush that had felled her.

Zac knew that Harvath would perform the task with utmost efficiency after seeing his expression, so he nodded and let

him immediately head out.

“What was that about?” Verana said with a smile as she walked over.

“Just delegating a few minor tasks.” Zac smiled back.

The cleanup and reorganization took half a day, which was much faster than normal thanks to the help of the vast number of people in the Union’s employ. It was only now that Zac truly realized that the people under his command in the underworld was more than ten times that of his people on the surface.

But Zac wasn’t satisfied with only closing one of the remaining four incursions in the underworld, and he wanted to ride the momentum. He immediately ordered an assault on the human incursion next, since he was afraid they had spies in the cities that would warn them of what had transpired here. He didn’t want to give them too much time to prepare their defenses.

The strength of the Abyssal Demon incursion was higher than Zac had expected, and he would categorize it as firmly in the mid-tier. He was afraid that all the incursions in the underworld were stronger than the norm, which was why he didn’t want to give them any heads-up.

The army set out almost immediately, and they were joined by a squad of elite demons as well now that they were able to show themselves. Smaug, surprisingly enough, requested to join the mission as well, and Zac figured that the man and his arrays would come in handy.

With the reinforcements to his ranks, the battle went just as expected. It would normally be extremely strenuous and costly to assault the incursions that were placed inside large town caves, but having Zac as the vanguard kept the whole army safe, as he blocked out all the attacks from the invaders with the help of his bulwark.

Any time Zac needed to move or rest for a second, Smaug was there, throwing out a handful of balls that created extremely durable shields for a couple of seconds. Zac wasn’t

sure how much money the man was burning during the battle, but if the man wanted to prove himself with the help of his wallet, he was very welcome to do so.

It was better the guy spent some of his money than people losing their lives.

The elites of Port Atwood swept through the whole underworld, and in just five days, only the final incursion remained: the Fire Golems. Zac kept pushing himself to his limit, trapping larger and larger groups in his Miasmic cage in the engagements.

The frantic battles were not without their gains. Each one of them had awarded Zac with a level, pushing him all the way to level 73 for his Undying Bulwark class. It was nowhere near as good as the Technocrat incursion, but he didn't get any quest that gave a large boost to the energy he gained. Besides, the final five levels were quite a bit harder to gain than the earlier ones.

After closing the Fishman incursion, Zac finally allowed himself to take a breather, so he informed Verana and Harvath that he would enter seclusion for two days. He needed to consolidate his gains from his last fights. Besides, his people were wrung dry from fighting three incursions in short succession.

Fighting along with himself didn't help either. It had become painfully obvious that his Undying Bulwark class was just as Yrial described it: made for a leader of the undead. His **[Fields of Despair]** was essentially poisoning the people fighting alongside him, though they weren't affected by the attribute reduction like his enemies. Now that he had **[Winds of Decay]** as well, he was almost as big a threat to his own people as his enemies.

Luckily, the people who joined him against the underworld incursions were among the strongest people in his force, so they weren't too badly affected as long as they didn't get too close to him during battle. But since they didn't have a lot of Vitality, they needed a prolonged rest before they tackled the more threatening Fire Golems.

Besides, Zac believed that his army would have returned by that point, providing him with more competent fighters. So Zac returned to his compound on his island, as that was where he had the easiest time relaxing. The first thing he did was to go through his status screen to see how his progress was before he could comfortably evolve.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 73

Class: [F-Epic] Undying Bulwark

Race: [E] Draugr

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord

Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt – 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step

Limited Titles: Frontrunner

Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Peak, Seed of Trees – Peak, Seed of Sharpness – High, Seed of Hardness – High, Seed of Sanctuary – High, Seed of Rot – High

Core: [F] Duplicity

Strength: 749 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]

Dexterity: 320 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Endurance: 992 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]

Vitality: 471 [Increase: 50%. Efficiency: 140%]

Intelligence: 174 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Wisdom: 255 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Luck: 140 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]

Free Points: 0

Nexus Coins: [F] 184,500,077

He had already put his free points into Strength, but he sighed when he saw the disparity between his Strength and Endurance. He had hoped to decrease the gap between the two attributes, as he did not want to accidentally pigeonhole himself into tank classes when he evolved.

He would pass a thousand Endurance by the time he leveled up, while he wasn't sure he'd ever get to that point with his Strength, even after evolving his Dao Seeds and getting the title from the tower. From how things looked, he wouldn't gain a lot of Strength from his final Dao Upgrades either.

Seed of Heaviness (Peak): Strength +90, Endurance +25, Wisdom +5

Seed of Sharpness (High): Strength +5, Dexterity +40, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +5

Seed of Trees (Peak): Endurance +20, Vitality +90, Intelligence +5, Wisdom +5

Seed of Hardness (High): Endurance +50, Wisdom +10.

Seed of Sanctuary (High): Endurance +25, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +25.

Seed of Rot (High): Endurance +5, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +45.

His Daos were coming along nicely, even though he hadn't evolved any of them from his last three fights. He had, however, gained a few insights that he hoped he could turn into Peak-grade Dao Seeds without the help of his last Dao Treasure. He wanted to save that thing for when they cracked open the Dao Funnel in a week or two.

Closing the three incursions, unfortunately, didn't give him any titles either, but he had made great strides in another department, his skills. The only skill for his undead class that remained at Early mastery was **[Indomitable]**. **[Fields of Despair]**, **[Winds of Decay]** and even **[Profane Seal]** had reached Middle mastery from the intense battles.

His only idea to improve **[Indomitable]** was to fight enemies using mental attacks, but those didn't exist among the underworld incursions. He kept it running constantly since his experience with the ambush that knocked him out, but it didn't seem to improve the skill.

He still hadn't had a chance to experiment with the improved skills, but he had a feeling they would allow him to push the final two levels with greater ease. However, they did not make up for another glaring problem that he found himself facing: he no longer had a shield.

MANUFACTURING A FORTUITOUS ENCOUNTER

The Cyborg had utterly destroyed his shield with its final punch, and Zac didn't have any good replacement. He had been using a much weaker spare during the battles, and he realized that using a low-quality shield weakened his class skills to a certain degree.

This hadn't proved too large a problem against the incursions so far, but Zac was afraid that it would negatively impact him if he encountered a real threat like the Dominators or the natives in the Mystic Realm. He was already leaning toward the idea of his undead form focusing on dueling strong opponents, but that would prove difficult if he didn't have the equipment to match his power.

Zac finally closed down his screens with a shake of his head before he closed his eyes. There was no point in worrying about his gear as things stood. He could only hope to either loot it somewhere or buy a better one when he visited the tower. For now, he would rather focus on the things he could improve, the Dao.

The demon leader's frenzied bladework felt like the final clue that Zac needed to push his Seed of Sharpness to Peak. The demon was a true warrior, and his will to cut seemed to affect reality itself as every swing of his passed through all his defenses. It was this sharp and indomitable will that Zac wanted to incorporate into his Dao Seed since it felt perfect for his fighting style. It also reminded him of the axe-man, whose very being radiated an unquestionable faith in his axe, the surety that anything he wanted to cut would get cut.

The hours passed, and Zac didn't move a muscle, as he was completely absorbed in searching for the truth to sharpness. Finally, he reached some sort of tipping point, and he sensed that his gains were successful. The half of the axe fractal in his chest that contained his Seed of Sharpness gained a burst of intensity, and he felt that the whole fractal was finally balanced.

Both his Seeds of Heaviness and Sharpness were finally at Peak, meaning that the next step was to fuse them. Zac breathed out in relief as he opened his eyes. He was worried that the splinter in his mind would ruin his attempt, but his mind was like a calm pond.

The past day's relentless battle seemed to have exhausted the negative emotions that accumulated from first seeing Alea get wounded and then meeting Void's Disciple. It allowed him to think clearly for a bit and meditate without lapses in focus.

It felt like he had latched on to a small clue on how to survive the continuous corruption from the splinter in his head. The Dao of Oblivion was the purest form of destruction, the end of everything. It seemed that adapting to that Dao through actions would lessen the negative effects to a certain degree.

Shutting himself off from the world to find a calm center might actually have the opposite effect of what he desired, creating a constant conflict in his mind. If he was right, he realized he was already self-medicating to a certain degree, since he was constantly fighting one enemy or another.

There was also the issue of balance. Even if it was true that fighting and killing helped him to get rid of the corrosion in his mind, he couldn't just keep following his impulses to continuously slaughter. He felt there was a real risk that he would end up like a murderous lunatic if that happened.

Zac knew he would have to keep experimenting to figure out the best solution, but for now, he had accomplished his goal. A lot of his plans somewhat hinged on improving this seed to Peak mastery. He wanted to utilize the Dao Funnel before he headed for the Tower of Eternity, and now he had a chance to actually form a Fragment if all went well.

He had already realized that he most likely wouldn't be able to gain more than one Dao Fragment before entering the tower, and he already knew that gaining Dao insights inside the tower itself was impossible without finding a treasure or having an epiphany.

His Fragment of Death was especially far off, with both Rot and Hardness still being at High mastery. His Fragment of Life was a bit closer along, with Seed of Trees already being at Peak mastery.

So Zac chose to focus on the Fragment of Axe, or whatever came before axe in that line of truths. A Fragment of Axe would hopefully increase his offensive power by a huge degree, which would allow him to climb much further in the tower. The other two Fragments might have great potential in the long run, but Zac was forced to look for quick power-ups as things stood.

Even if he didn't manage to fuse his other two Fragments before evolving, it would still allow him to base his upgraded classes on the Fragment of Axe. From there, his Hatchetman upgrade would hopefully be influenced by the life-attuned Dao Seeds, and Undying Bulwark would rely on Rot and Hardness.

Zac would certainly have preferred to gain all three Fragments before evolving the classes, since he believed that would ultimately lead to better choices, perhaps even two Arcane classes. It would also follow the advice he'd gained from Yrial. But he was simply out of time, and the path he chose would hopefully at least provide him with two good Epic-graded classes that would allow him to fight the Dominators and the Lich King.

The old gamer inside him once again felt bad about not being able to grind for a few years extra to push all three Dao Fragments and his skills to Peak. The fact that he was forced to upgrade his class before he had exhausted his potential was truly a waste.

But such was life. There was no such thing as a perfect path in an imperfect world. Perhaps if he were the son of some great Hegemon, he'd be able to leisurely cultivate for a decade

or two before he felt ready to Evolve. But if he did that now, he'd probably condemn his whole planet since so much relied on him getting stronger quickly.

Zac sighed and got up on his feet, immediately walking out of his courtyard. The sound of laughter could be heard from the distance, and Zac immediately flashed over with relief flooding his heart. It was Ogras and Kenzie, who sat by a patio table, having a drink, probably having returned while Zac was meditating.

“Oh, you're out?” Ogras said as he looked up from the table, a glass of champagne in his hand.

Kenzie sat opposite him, one of the information crystals on arrays placed on the table in front of her. Seeing his sister again was like having a weight lifted from his shoulders. He knew that the risk for something happening to the army was small, but it had been a constant worry in the back of his mind since he'd gone ahead of the others.

“I'm glad you're okay. Did everything go as planned?” Zac asked as he sat down on one of the free chairs, grabbing one of the fruits on the table.

Ogras nodded. “We came back twelve hours ago. There was no activity worth mentioning. We were assaulted by a pretty massive wolf pack led by a few E-grade alphas, but it was dealt with easily since everyone was well rested by that point. If there's one thing our people know by now, it's how to kill wolves. More importantly, I've heard you've been busy?”

Zac's brows rose when he heard they had been back for so long. He quickly took out a watch from his Cosmos Sack and realized that he had been meditating for well over a day. It had only felt like an hour or two, but he would need to return to the underworld pretty soon.

“I took care of the underworld incursions,” Zac explained. “I still have the Flame Golems to deal with, but afterward, I'll be able to move the Union and council armies to the surface to help with the situation with the undead. In fact, we can probably start sending people from the Union immediately.”

Ogras nodded in agreement.

“The average warriors are better used for thinning out the Zombies than fighting incursions. I’ll have someone gather up Union warriors with decent potential to bolster the numbers in our army,” Ogras said.

“How’s the study on the Dao Funnel going?” Zac asked.

“I still can’t figure out how it was originally meant to be used. I think we’re missing half of the item, the one that would infuse the gathered energy into someone,” Kenzie said.

Zac was inclined to agree, since the Great Redeemer would no doubt want to keep the collected Origin Dao for himself. It made no sense to leave the key to extract it on the planet where anyone could find it. He would rather keep it on his body.

“But I have an idea,” Kenzie said as she pointed at the crystal. “I think I can set up a certain array recorded in this thing that will help.”

“Oh?” Zac said as he leaned closer with interest.

Ogras didn’t seem surprised as he leisurely kept drinking his liquor, so Zac guessed that his sister had already consulted the demon on this matter while they were on the road together.

“I mentioned earlier that I can crack open the Funnel, but I don’t know what would happen next. I still haven’t made much progress in that department. But I think I have found an array that will allow us to trap the Origin Dao for a while, allowing us to cultivate inside it for a much longer duration,” Kenzie said. “It’s the best idea I could come up with.”

“We never had any means to directly absorb the Origin Dao anyway, so I believe this is fine. It will depend on luck and fate how much we could gain from the experience,” Ogras said from the side. “We’re essentially manufacturing a fortuitous encounter.”

“I agree.” Zac nodded. “We are not in a position to research the Funnel for decades. We’ll have to take the gamble. The issue is how many should be present.”

That was the crux of the matter. How much Origin Dao was actually collected inside the Funnel? Salvation had slain hundreds of thousands of people, but they had no idea how much Origin Dao that would translate into. It would be a problem if they gathered the whole army only to realize that the energy got so diluted, it had almost no effect.

The same could be said about the opposite. What if they found an ocean of Origin Dao inside when only a couple of people were present? It would be a huge waste if almost all of it dissipated and was wasted. Zac was painfully aware of the fact that they didn't have enough powerful people to take charge of important matters. The Origin Dao might be the key to turning the Valkyries and some of the promising soldiers from elites into powerhouses.

"We actually formulated an idea about that on the way back," Kenzie said. "We make two or three layers of arrays. If we notice the inner layer is too small, we'll break it open to open up the Origin Dao to spread into a wider area where more people are waiting."

Zac slowly mulled over the idea, feeling that it wasn't too bad. It would be a shame for the people sitting in the outer layers if they never even got a whiff of the Origin Dao, but he also knew that they needed to ration the stuff if there wasn't too much of it.

"How long would it take for you to set everything up?" Zac asked.

"We have already tasked Calrin with gathering the items for the arrays. I think I will need a week or so to set everything up and make sure everything works," Kenzie said. "He also told us about Alea's situation."

Zac sighed when he heard his sister mention the poison mistress, but he simply nodded.

"Don't worry; aren't you going to the tower soon?" Kenzie said. "Alea might be back on her feet within a month!"

Ogras nodded. "That's true. And even if we don't find what we need there, we still have a couple of years. If we can

get the Nexus Hub to work, we might be able to head to a real metropolis and hire a healer or alchemist.”

“That’s true.” Zac smiled. “So what will you do until Kenzie has finished the array?”

“I’ll help out against the undead,” Ogras said. “I need to confirm a few things in battle before improving my Dao, and I wouldn’t be much use against the Fire Golems. I plan to lead the army back to the Dead Zone tomorrow after they’ve had a day’s worth of rest and I’ve gathered the reinforcements.”

Zac felt a bit bad for the army, who already needed to go back to the front lines when they had just returned. But this was a war for Earth’s future; he couldn’t be softhearted in such a situation. They needed to do everything in their power to slow down the completion of the array as much as possible.

“Good,” Zac said as he stood up. “I’ll head down to the underworld in an hour or two after making the rounds.”

“Be careful. Those invaders seem pretty strong,” Kenzie said with some worry.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll see you in a couple of days.” Zac smiled. “Those golems don’t know what’s about to hit them.”

PLAYING THE PART

Zac was just planning to stretch his legs before sitting down to continue his meditation, but his first session had lasted much longer than he expected. So he could only give up on trying to improve his other Dao Seeds for now and headed toward the town proper. As he walked through the woods of his private domain, he took the opportunity to take a gander at the attribute gains from the evolved seed.

**Sharpness (Peak): Strength +15, Dexterity +90,
Intelligence +10, Wisdom +5**

A smile crept across his face when he saw the stats he'd gained. It was just as he'd hoped, where he got 10 points to Strength and another 50 to Dexterity. He had counted on that Dexterity boost to keep up with his increasing Strength, and it would allow him to keep focusing all his free points into his main attribute for a while longer.

There was still some time before he had agreed to reconvene with Verana and the others in the underworld, so he walked over to the government building to meet with Abby and Adran. He had been so focused on the incursions lately, so he wanted to get a report on Port Atwood's situation. Luckily, everything was going smoothly, especially the agricultural initiative that Zac had infused with extra cash. It would start to yield a harvest for F-grade Herbs in just a few months, though the E-grade Spirit Herbs would take a while longer.

The only issue was that the sea creatures were quickly becoming more and more ferocious, and there had been a couple of incidents lately. This wasn't anything too surprising,

as attacks from sea creatures was a problem that most coastal cities in the Multiverse would encounter. Little Bau, Mr. Trang's terrifying pet, was helping a lot, but it couldn't be everywhere.

Luckily, there were a plethora of defensive structures in the Town Shop, so Zac agreed to let Abby take 200 million from the town funds to upgrade the shoreline defenses for the islands he controlled. With that in hand, he visited Calrin next to get an update on the situation with the Beast Crystals.

"The extraction is finished, but there's also the need to refine the gems from their raw state. But I've made an estimate, and I would say you'd get around 1.8 billion if you sold 80% of your stock," the Sky Gnome said with some obvious avarice in his eyes. "You also have your 1.64 billion in dividends waiting."

"How much do you think a soul-mending treasure or pill would cost?" Zac asked.

"If it was on a proper market, I would say that a pill that could mend a fractured soul of an F-grade cultivator would cost around 500 million to a billion Nexus Coins, depending on the success rate and strength of the item," the Sky Gnome said after some hesitation. "Any natural treasure with similar effect will likely be a bit more expensive."

"That much?" Zac groaned. "It's just to heal someone in F-grade."

"Souls are complicated and require high-quality items to fix without leaving lasting damage." Calrin sighed. "But you should know that such an item might become significantly more expensive in a place like the Tower of Eternity. There is a huge demand for life-saving treasures at a place like that. The price might become double or even higher."

"Still, that means I should be fine unless something unexpected happens?" Zac sighed in relief.

"You should still gather as many Nexus Coins as possible before going," the Sky Gnome said. "There are bound to be a

lot of great opportunities waiting for those with money at such a place!”

“Like what?” Zac asked.

“People exiting with grave wounds, forced to sell precious items at a discount to pay for healing. People desperate to gather enough funds to buy a piece of treasure that would allow them to reach higher in the tower. There are all kinds of scenarios to exploit,” Calrin said, getting more and more excited as he spoke. “A closed market like that always leads to opportunities for arbitrage.”

“I’ll do what I can.” Zac smiled as he left.

It was a good plan, but he needed money for other things as well. Finding a proper shield, for example. He was also interested in finding pills that would allow him to immediately break open nodes the moment he evolved. He already had the **[Four Gates Pill]**, but many other pills had similar effects. His goal was to eat all his prepared treasures the moment he evolved before bursting forth against the undead with unparalleled power.

He soon arrived in New London in his human form, and his arrival caused some commotion when people of the Union realized who he was. He didn’t hide his movements since he wanted people to know about his contribution in the fight against the Fire Golems. People gazed at him with fear or admiration as he walked through the halls with a few Valkyries following behind.

The reason for fighting against the golems in his human form, even though he still needed two levels to reach Peak F-grade in his Draugr form, was that he felt the risks of using his undead form were too great. Undying Bulwark relied on slowly grinding his enemies to dust, whereas Hatchetman could end the fight in seconds.

The golems were the strongest invaders in the underworld, and he was afraid that something unexpected would happen, allowing them to turn the situation around or cause massive casualties amongst his people. It was a bit of a shame that any

Cosmic Energy he gained from the kills would be lost, but he felt it was worth it.

Verana and Harvath were already waiting in a large meeting room when he arrived, and they seemed to have recovered from their slightly haggard expressions after they'd closed down the third incursion together a few days ago.

“Is everything ready?” Zac asked.

“Everything is ready from this side,” Verana and Harvath immediately confirmed. “Will the others from Port Atwood join us?”

“A small group of elites will join me, but most are still focusing on the undead threat,” Zac said. “I don't think a large army will help against a force like the golems. They'll just spew lava over everything, and it will be hard to defend against.”

“It sounds reasonable, though I believe our army should be slightly larger this time. Perhaps a hundred people, with another fifty for support,” Verana said. “The golems are strong, and we will need more than one unit to create defensive layers. Oh, and it would be best if you headed to Glimthain to coordinate a joint assault.”

Glimthain was the main town that the council controlled. It was an Ishiate town and was once upon a time the capital of the technology-leaning faction among the beastmen. It was placed in the open underworld, but it had been a true stronghold even before the integration, making it a natural choice of headquarters for a faction that fought the Fire Golems.

“I was planning on heading there anyway.” Zac nodded. “I have some things to discuss with the council.”

Meeting the council was another reason he wanted to come to the underworld in his human form this time. He needed to enlist the strongest warriors around in the fight against the Undead Empire. Even if he managed to get stronger, he was still just one man, and there were so many Zombies by now.

“We should make our sortie spectacular.” Joanna suddenly spoke up from the side. “They need to know that Super Brother-Man has arrived and that he will end the threat of the invaders.”

With that, she excitedly took out what initially looked like a pike, but Zac realized that it was actually a banner when she fastened a large cloth to it. Zac shot a bemused look at Joanna before he took a gander at the banner’s design. It was emerald-green with black and gold details, and the motif was the four mountain peaks of his island. Beneath the summits, there was a shield with an axe as a motif, looking like a nobleman’s family crest. It looked quite domineering. It almost felt like something that could have belonged to an old European family.

“What’s this?” Zac asked with confusion.

“It’s the banner for Port Atwood,” Joanna said with glee in her eyes. “I learned from Ms. Tir’Emarel that it’s a common practice in the Multiverse as well, and we needed something to display who we were.”

“Please, Verana is fine.” The Beast Master smiled.

“The black and green are representative of your two, ahem, identities, and the gold is there to make it look regal. The mountains are the largest landmark on your island, and the axe and shield represent your authority. Do you like it?” Verana smiled.

“It’s pretty cool,” Zac willingly admitted. “But I’d feel a bit embarrassed if I were to parade such a thing around.”

“You don’t carry this thing; leave that to us. You only need to walk in the front, preferably releasing some of your aura,” Joanna said.

“Fine.” Zac sighed. “If this will get people to willingly follow me into the war against the undead.”

“One thing?” Joanna hesitantly added. “Do you think you could put on a pair of shoes?”

Zac blankly looked at the Valkyrie for a few seconds before he looked down at his feet. He’d never even reflected

on the fact that he never wore shoes any longer while in his human form. He had already figured out a way to passively utilize a small amount of Cosmic Energy to keep his feet clean and not let any grime stick. But it would perhaps look a bit odd if he walked around barefoot.

“You can ride Grub as well.” Verana smiled. “He liked fighting with you; he felt very mighty ramming into the enemies’ line with your shield as protection.”

The two kept coaching Zac on how to make a proper impression on the underworld as the army prepared to sortie. Only a few of the warriors would stay in the underworld, whereas the rest would join the main army in the fight against the Zombies. It only took less than ten minutes before everything was dealt with, and the gates of the Union headquarters opened up to let out the forces of Port Atwood.

A few people started running for their lives as the intimidating procession made its way through New London, but even more people stayed to watch in the excitement. Almost everyone in the area had already learned that people from the surface had arrived to New London and that they were led by Super Brother-Man, but only a few had seen them, since they’d stayed holed up inside the Union headquarters most of the time.

People had been gathering outside the gates since the news spread, either hoping to see the aliens under Zac’s command or to try to buy a ticket out of the underworld. But now they didn’t need to strain to see a glimpse of them as they marched through the main street, full of vigor.

Zac knew of the people’s desire to return to the surface, but Port Atwood hadn’t let anyone leave just yet. He wanted to finish up everything before he led an exodus out of this area. And he couldn’t let everyone just leave. There was a huge amount of wealth down here that needed to be extracted to strengthen Earth’s forces. All these things would be needed not only in the fight against the invaders but also to turn Earth into a powerful planet before the System’s protection ended.

Zac rode in the front, sitting on Grub's head as the enormous beast trudged forward, each step causing a small earthquake. The only people walking in front of him were two Valkyries, each one holding one of the newly created banners. The air around him twisted and bent as he let his aura spread out to a certain degree. Behind him, his armies walked in orderly lines, each soldier radiating a tremendous pressure that made the spectators gasp in awe.

It looked like the demons and Tal-Eladar had gotten caught up in who could shock the spectators more, and each of the demonkin soldiers radiated a massive battle intent with most of them even having released weak Dao Fields. Zac didn't stop him since he knew that such weak fields wouldn't be able to harm anyone in the area apart from putting people under some pressure.

But unfortunately for the demons, it was hard for them to match the glory of the Tal-Eladar, who were assisted by their massive beasts. One tremendous roar after another made the whole area shake as the Tir'Emarel rode their battle beasts behind Zac. Most impressive was of course Verana, who rode on Slither's head, the snake alone taking up the whole road due to its massive size.

The whole thing felt a bit excessive and embarrassing, but Zac followed Joanna's instructions and only sat unmoving with a neutral face. Joanna, who essentially had turned into his PR director at this point, said it was not only about prestige but also about giving the people of the underworld hope. They had been suppressed by the Fire Golems for almost a year, and almost everyone had lost a family member or friend to their actions.

This procession would show them that Earth hadn't given up, that a resurgence was coming.

GLIMTHAIN

Joanna had initially wanted Zac to give a rousing speech as well, but he staunchly refused. Instead, a few Valkyries walked alongside the army and told the news about how only one incursion remained, and that they were heading to war against the Fire Golems.

The procession only stopped when they reached the teleportation station, where the backup from the surface already stood.

“You set things up at Rennbach while I visit the council,” Zac said to Verana as he jumped down from Grub’s head.

Glimthain was quite far from the Fire Golem incursion, so teleporting the whole army there would be a pretty huge waste of resources. Teleportation costs were already by far the largest drain on Port Atwood’s resources, so he decided to send the army directly to the frontier town to prepare. He also didn’t want to cause some misunderstanding by bringing an army on his first visit to the Underworld Council.

Verana quickly agreed, and Zac indicated for the young woman who worked for the Underworld Council to open the array. Her name was Linn, and she had arrived together with the councilors back when they’d visited New London after the Union takeover. Linn immediately complied and entered the array along with Zac and Joanna, while the rest waited for the array to close down.

Soon enough, the trio reappeared in another grand hall, but Zac’s eyes widened in alarm when he saw four enormous

cannons trained on the platform he stood on. They were even larger than the monstrosities the Ishiate tinkers on Port Atwood had created, with their barrels having a diameter of almost two meters.

Zac's first instinct was to take out his axe and quickly destroy them, but he realized that no one was preparing to fire them. It looked like a defensive measure in case enemies stepped through the array. Luckily, they had the ambassador with them; otherwise, the welcome might have been quite different.

"This way, sir," Linn said as she led them past the cannons and defensive line of soldiers, who curiously looked at him.

"Can you take us to the council immediately?" Zac said. "I don't have much time to spare."

"Certainly, they await your arrival," the ambassador answered without hesitation, and the group exited the fortified structure.

Zac and Joanna curiously looked around when they stepped outside the building, and Zac whistled with surprise when he saw what Glimthain looked like. He had always considered the modern faction of the Ishiate to be somewhat steampunk, and this town truly made that impression stronger. Cramped structures fought for space within massive brass walls that were lined with all kinds of brass weaponry.

A glance at the wall told him that at least a hundred cannons were fastened to the wall walk, and even some rooftops were equipped with ranged siege weaponry. He saw multiple ballistae that appeared to be relying on steam pressure, for example. The houses themselves were covered in tubes, and no matter where he looked, there seemed to be one pipe or another leaking gas or water vapors.

The town was well-illuminated by a mix of Day Crystals and gaslights lining the streets, and it seemed to be rush hour, since the streets were filled with people. It was a truly chaotic scene, as there were not only pedestrians, but a mix of modern cars and other odd machines that forced their way through the

jumble. The chaos wasn't helped by the constant eruption of steam whistles and honks from the cars.

“Oh, wow,” Joanna said. “How do people live like this?”

“It took some getting used to,” Linn said with some embarrassment. “Too many have lost their homes, and the town has become completely overcrowded by now. A new town has even started to grow outside the walls, since there simply is no room left within. Those buildings regularly get destroyed during the attacks of beasts in the area, but the inner town is one of the safest places in the underworld due to all the weaponry.”

Zac understood as well that people normally wouldn't live in such an environment, but the dangers lurking in the dark were just too abundant, and it was better to live in squalor than get eaten by a bat or killed by the Flame Golems. The group immediately entered a jeep that waited for them, and it thankfully only needed to drive a short distance to a grand castle in the center of the town.

The castle itself reminded Zac of a larger version of the main hall of Cogstown, the Ishiate settlement under his control. But this castle was far larger, and it was not only equipped with a huge number of weapons pointing at the sky, but there were even three zeppelins slowly floating around it.

“This way, sir,” a guard said as Zac stepped out of the car.

“Zac!” A familiar shout could be heard from the distance just as Zac was about to enter the palace, and he looked over with a smile.

It was Emily, who was running over, dragging along a slightly embarrassed woman in her early twenties. It was no doubt Emily's sister, as she was essentially an adult version of the brat. Zac glanced at her to estimate her strength, and he was surprised to see that there was a faint aura around her.

It meant that even if she wasn't a Ranker, she wouldn't be too far off, and she had likely gained a Dao Seed, judging by the spirituality around her. It looked like not only Emily was a talent when it came to cultivation, but her sister was as well.

Then again, it shouldn't be too surprising that they had good genes, since all three siblings had turned out to be cultivators.

"She's pretty, right?" Emily grinned when she noticed that Zac looked at her sister curiously. "She's very single as well."

"Idiot, what do you mean by *very* single?" Johanna said with some embarrassment as she gently slapped the back of Emily's head. She then turned back to Zac, who looked at the two with some amusement. "I am Johanna Larkin. I owe you a great debt of gratitude. If it weren't for your intervention, I would be without any family."

"It was no problem," Zac said with a sigh, giving Emily a consoling look.

It seemed like the brother had truly fallen back then after all. Emily looked downcast for a second before she looked up again with an intense stare.

"Are you here to destroy the Flame Golems?"

"Yeah," Zac said without any preamble.

"Great!" Emily said with burning eyes. "We will help you kill those guys!"

"You can come, but be careful. We don't have a lot of ways to deal with a room flooding with lava," Zac said as he handed over two large balls. "Use this in case you run out of options."

"What's this?" Emily asked with sparkling eyes as she held the two crystals, which seemed to have a small snowstorm inside.

"Fire extinguisher," Zac said with a smile. "Perhaps it will slow the magma long enough for you to escape in case things go south. I need to speak with the council now; come with me if you want."

"I can't go there. I am just a captain," Johanna said with a quick shake of her head as Zac started, but Emily only dragged her along with a giggle.

"Who cares? Being with this guy is like having an all-access pass." The teenager smiled as she walked over to

Joanna's side.

The four were led into a large chamber with a massive circular table made from steel and brass. There were already thirteen people sitting there, with representatives from all races. Six were humans, while there were three Ishiate and three Molemen. Finally, a single Zhix sat to the side.

Zac was a bit surprised by the somewhat even distribution, as there were at least five times as many humans in the underworld compared to the Molemen and Ishiate combined. But perhaps it was by design so that the humans on the council wouldn't bully the others. Zac was also quite surprised by the presence of a Zhix, but perhaps it simply was a representative for its hive.

The thirteen people took up half the table, giving Zac ample room as he sat down on the other side. Emily unceremoniously sat down next to him, but Joanna immediately dragged her back to stand a few steps behind with herself and Johanna. The teenager shot the Valkyrie a glare, but only received another slap in the back of her head from her sister.

"Lord Atwood, it is an honor to finally meet you," one of the Molemen spoke up. "I am Romal, the current speaker for the council."

Zac had already read an information package on the council during the days he'd stayed in the Union headquarters, and he knew that the speaker was simply a rotating position amongst the council, and it changed person every month.

"It's nice to meet you all as well." Zac nodded. "You should know why I'm here."

"I won't hide anything from you; things have deteriorated quite a bit on the surface. When your councilors met your general a few weeks ago, he spoke about the Great Redeemer, who is still a looming threat to our planet. But we have a more immediate threat that will destroy Earth within two months unless we do something."

“The Undead Empire is currently single-handedly fighting against all the combined forces of the world, and they still have the upper hand. Even the other invaders have joined in battle with us, but the Zombies are pretty strong. We need assistance,” Zac said, immediately divulging his reason for visiting.

“So you’re not here about the Flame Golems?” one of the human councilors said with disappointment.

“No, don’t get me wrong. My generals have already closed the other four incursions of the underworld, and I am here to immediately close the Flame Golem incursion. The reason isn’t simply benevolence. I need your armies to come with me to the surface afterward,” Zac said. “Immediately.”

“I am not questioning your motives, but I am a bit unclear on something,” one of the human councilors said. “Your force is strong enough to close four incursions without you even lifting a finger, something that would be impossible for us. If you still can’t deal with these Zombies, what use are we?”

Zac sighed and explained the situation with the array and the dozens of massive undead hordes that were still drawing the lines for the massive array.

“So you need more armies to take down the hordes and destroy the array, while you focus on the leaders in the middle...” Romal muttered in understanding.

The meeting kept going for a few hours, where Zac essentially reiterated the situation on the surface and the various threats that Earth still faced. It was easy to see that the gravity of the situation was causing some shock to the councilors, but he kept narrating what was going on with brutal honesty.

Of course, there were some details that he left out, such as the disappearance of Abbot Everlasting Peace, the Dao Funnel, and the situation with the Mystic Realm. Everything was to push them toward the decision to join the fight without delay.

All three of the Molemen on the council were in the top five on their ladder, and the lowest rank amongst the others was rank twenty. All, apart from one, were also on the Dao Ladder. These people made a stronger faction than anyone on the surface, barring Port Atwood. Neither the Marshall Clan nor the New World Government could boast of having nearly as many peak elites.

Getting these people to the surface to fight the Zombies was Zac's greatest priority. The hours passed as the two factions ironed out the details until Zac finally left with his group in tow. A small smile adorned his face when he sat down in the car, and he didn't even mind the chaotic swirl of people crammed around the vehicle as it drove through the streets.

Zac was quite pleased with the results of the meeting as he returned to the teleportation array with his group in tow. The council was far more utilitarian compared to the shrewd Marshall Clan, and things were sorted out quite quickly. The Underworld Council would immediately join the battle against the undead provided that the Fire Golems were dealt with.

They even went so far as to promise to bring their whole force, leaving just enough manpower to protect their settlements from the beasts in the area. All in all, they would bring almost two hundred thousand experienced warriors, and they would cover the teleportation expenses themselves.

Of course, Zac knew their choice was not only about saving Earth. They wanted to bring enough strength to secure a corner of the surface, turning it into their own kingdom. Zac could understand their decision, as humans and Ishiate were ultimately not built to permanently live underground, and many would no doubt want to live under the blue sky again.

The council didn't explicitly tell Zac about their plan, but their intentions were quite clear from their line of questioning. Zac himself didn't mind at all, feeling their decision made sense. If it was one thing that new Earth possessed in abundance, it was free space. The expansion in the size of the planet and the monumental losses amongst the four species had resulted in massive stretches of unclaimed land.

The amount of high-quality land was far more limited, though, such as lands close to Nexus Veins or other valuable resources. Those kinds of places were few and far between, though Zac had already claimed a large percentage of those places through closing the incursions.

The armies of the council would also participate in the upcoming battle. They would assault the massive area under the control of the Flame Golems from almost a dozen tunnel systems simultaneously in a bid to spread out the golems' forces. It would hopefully allow Zac to strike at the core with less resistance.

Zac felt the idea was perfect as he stepped through the teleporter to join his forces. The fight against the Fire Golems would essentially be a practice run for their battle against the Lich King and his forces.

HEAT

“Finally out of the tunnels. We’ll arrive in another eight hours or so,” the council liaison said as he walked next to Zac with quick steps.

His name was Murk, and he was one of the Molemen who also possessed a ranger class. He was in charge of showing Zac’s army the correct path in the underworld, as the roads leading to the Flame Golems were pretty confusing. The incursion itself was in a sense placed in the open underworld, but to get to that sector, you first needed to pass a bunch of confusing tunnels.

There was no way that Zac would place the fate of his people in the hands of the council, though, and the Tal-Eladar had over a hundred beasts scouting ahead for them as well. He personally didn’t think that the council had any reason to betray him, but people were unpredictable.

“Come, let’s train!” another voice piped up from the side, and Zac looked over at Emily, who glared at him with some grievance in her eyes.

They had been traveling for over three days, as all the settlements in the near vicinity of the Flame Golems had long been destroyed. The teenager wanted to make the most of the time, so she had insisted that the two would train with their axes. Zac knew part of it was to get her mind off the fact that her brother had passed away, and he happily obliged.

She was someone he had invested heavily in, and he wanted to make sure she’d get strong enough to protect

herself.

“I’ll get you this time,” she muttered stubbornly.

“That’s great.” Zac smiled as he hoisted her up and flashed away with **[Loamwalker]**.

He kept running for a couple of minutes until he found a secluded spot ahead of the army.

“We have twenty minutes or so before they catch up,” Zac said as he let the teenager down.

Emily didn’t hesitate to take out her two tomahawks from her Cosmos Sack, and they both started to radiate with chaotic energies. It was a continuation of her elemental axe-man archetype and a new skill she’d gotten at level 35. This one wasn’t a support skill like the earlier one, but rather a pure offensive skill.

Zac smiled as he took out his billy club and a spare shield and waved at her to start. She immediately disappeared, leaving a scorch mark on the ground, and the next moment, she appeared behind him. One of her tomahawks was already in mid-swing, and it lit up with infernal fire.

Her new skill, **[Elemental Fury]**, looked confusingly similar to her elemental axes, apart from the fact that she needed to use a physical axe for the skill. She could essentially imbue her axes with an element of her choice, and the different elements would have varying effects. The skill allowed her to be flexible and unpredictable, and Zac felt it was a good match to her chaotic and aggressive fighting style.

The flame infusion would imbue her strikes to erupt into large explosions, causing widespread damage in the direction of her swings. There were also earth, lightning, ice, and wind, each with their own effects. The only weakness was that she couldn’t use the same attack twice in a row, at least not while the skill was in Middle mastery.

Zac already knew about the effects of the strikes from their earlier sparring sessions, and he smoothly moved his shield forward to block the swing midway. It didn’t interrupt the skill, but it caused the gout of fire to spread in all directions,

effectively blocking Emily's sight as Zac repositioned himself, and he clubbed her on the back.

The teenager stumbled forward, but she smoothly turned the stumble into a confusing set of steps as she once again tried to take him down, this time using the freezing effect of her ice axe to rob him of his mobility. Zac played along and slightly slowed his speed, but she still couldn't manage to land a hit, as his shield always got in the way.

The fighting reached a stalemate lasting a few minutes, until Zac suddenly emitted a spike of killing intent toward her the moment she launched her attack. Emily's face turned deathly pale, and she quickly jumped five meters back, and she angrily stomped her foot on the ground as she waved her tomahawks in Zac's direction.

"That's cheating! You said you wouldn't bully me with your levels. How is that not using your levels?" Emily sputtered.

"I had much denser killing intent than that by the time I was your level." Zac laughed. "I know you wanted to quickly improve, so you've used a couple of E-grade crystals while down here. But doing so has left you lacking in combat experience."

"I've still gone fighting against barghest every day until recently, and I've even fought against the beasts on Mystic Island," Emily countered with a sullen face.

"I know, but you've had demon guards and Valkyries protecting you," Zac said. "You have not yet gone through a true baptism of life and death. It makes you a bit weak against killing intent. You have honed great battle instincts from training with good teachers, but you do not trust them when faced with a great threat."

"So I should just run straight at someone radiating enough killing intent to blot out the sky?" Emily muttered skeptically. "Sounds like a good way to get killed early."

"It's about instinct and decisiveness." Zac smiled. "You can never hesitate, no matter if you decide to fight or flee. The

problem was that you froze when I released the murderous aura. Your movement skill is pretty good, and your attributes are very high for your level, so you should have a decent chance to escape even if you meet someone stronger. Staying alive is the most important.”

Truthfully, Zac was lying to Emily in his explanation. He was emitting a lot more killing intent than what he'd possessed when he was around level 40. He wanted to inoculate her against dense auras and massive killing intent, which would hopefully allow her to keep her wits about her in case she found herself against a stronger foe.

The teenager slowly nodded in understanding, and she took a deep breath to steady herself. Soon enough, she was back at it, and she used everything in her repertoire as she tried to break past Zac's defenses. She flitted about with surprising speed as she launched everything from fiery blasts up close to wind blades from surprising angles from a distance.

Zac was extremely happy with her performance, and the only thing that he might feel could use some improvement was the lack of ruthlessness. The fighting felt clean and a bit synthetic, whereas he wished for a more efficient approach like the one that the Valkyries utilized.

They did everything in their power to kill their targets as quickly and efficiently as possible, no matter what they needed to do. They would attack groins or other weak spots, utilize hidden weaponry and the environment to their advantage. Emily still lacked that bit, and that was what he was trying to instill in her.

He had already noticed that she was a bit afraid to get hit in her face, the same as Average, which made him target it even further. Last time, he had accidentally knocked her out with a kick, but even before then, she'd often left with a whole number of bruises. Zac felt a bit bad, but he knew that the others on the island, except Alyn perhaps, didn't dare to be ruthless enough against the teenager.

The feral teenager pulled out all the stops, but the results were the same. The army caught up with the two, and Verana

and Joanna shot amused looks at the swollen face of Emily.

“One of these days,” she muttered under her breath, “I’ll make your head swell up to the size of a beach ball.”

“You’ll need to get a lot stronger before you’ll have a chance of that,” Zac snorted.

It was their last sparring session, as they were closing in on the Fire Golems, and the invaders could crop up any time. The army entered heightened alertness in case of an ambush. But there were no signs of them, even though they could see extremely far after exiting the tunnels. The ground was completely silent as well, indicating that there were likely no golems hiding beneath them.

Zac had gotten a wealth of intelligence on the Flame Golems from the council, and the invaders were almost hilariously easy to spot. The smallest golems were over two and a half meters tall, and they all had thick builds. It was like they were made from large black boulders stacked together, and the stones were bound together by magma.

Their natural heat was enough for gouts of flames to erupt from their bodies at regular intervals, and they were essentially portable firework shows. Stealth was truly not their strong suit, which was why they could only ambush people by silently digging new tunnels until they were right next to you. Luckily, the demons possessed a few Geomancers, who were even more skilled than the Molemen at detecting changes in the ground.

But there was no surprise attack forthcoming, and they soon enough reached the area of the Flame Golems. It was very different from the general gloom of the underworld, as the moss and dark pools of water had been replaced with bubbling lakes of magma.

They were still two hours from the incursion itself, but it felt like they were wandering into an active volcano, and the smell of sulfur lay heavy in the air. The weaker people were already starting to sweat from the scorching heat, and Emily was forced to take off her thick furs with some complaint.

The Peak F-grade warriors were still unaffected by the heat that would make a normal mortal keel over in seconds, but Zac knew that most would be unable to exhibit their full power in the upcoming fight. The golems had truly gotten themselves a home-field advantage. Finally, they reached the true core of the incursion, and Zac was shocked at the sight.

“This isn’t what you guys described,” Zac said with a frown as he turned to Murk.

“I-I don’t understand either,” the Moleman said with wide eyes. “Our latest intelligence is less than two weeks old.”

The Flame Golem incursion was situated inside what could best be described as a gargantuan pillar in the open underworld. It was tremendously wide, and walking around it would take over a week. Due to the environment around the pillar, it was posited that the core of it might actually be an active volcano, with a pillar of magma that reached all the way to the surface.

The only way to get to the actual incursions was to enter one of the many tight tunnels and cracks that existed in the pillar.

That was why the council didn’t take the same route as themselves. They’d started in towns on the opposite sides of the pillar, and they would assault the incursion from multiple directions that way. But there was a problem; the tunnel they were supposed to take was gone, replaced with a huge passage full of engraved pillars.

The new passage was hundreds of meters wide, and it reached even higher into the sky. They were quite some distance from the entrance, but they still didn’t have any trouble making out the details due to their size.

The pillars looked almost as large as the towering redwood mountains over at the Cradle of God, and even from the distance they were able to make out large fractals on all of them. Zac couldn’t be sure what they were made for, but he couldn’t imagine it was anything good.

It felt like the invaders had opened the doors wide open, daring them to enter their meticulously created battlefield. Verana and the other leaders of the army wore troubled faces as well, and Zac finally felt compelled to order a halt. The group of battlefield support quickly set up cooling arrays to ward off the heat, as staying this close would no doubt continuously drain people.

“What do you think?” Zac asked the others. “I know it’s a trap, but can you make out any details?”

“It looks like array towers,” Verana said. “The Tal-Eladar does not use that sort of fortifications, but they are a popular solution.”

Zac nodded, feeling the same way. The towers were reminiscent of a set of buildings that he had been able to buy for Port Atwood, though his options were still pretty limited. Each tower was likely an array of its own, and it would be able to launch attacks at anyone close according to some preset instructions.

Such buildings usually had much greater firepower compared to arrays like his own Town Protection Array that could attack a far larger area, but it also had a weakness. As long as the tower was destroyed, the array would break. So it essentially was extremely lethal in a small area, and somewhat fragile.

But there were over a hundred pillars crammed in that small area as far as Zac could tell, and the army would be blasted from all directions if they entered.

“What should we do?” Joanna asked. “I don’t think we’ll be able to defend against that many towers even if we activate our War Arrays.”

Zac silently stared at the towers for a few seconds before he looked back at his group.

“We’ll wait until ten minutes before the predetermined time for our joint assault. I’ll handle the towers.”

ARRAY TOWERS

Most people looked relieved to hear that Zac would take care of the array towers. Charging those things was to risk one's life without the potential for any gains in levels, so they breathed out in relief when they heard they didn't have to do that. However, Joanna and Emily looked worried when they heard that he would charge into that death trap alone.

"You'll handle them?" Murk said with barely contained skepticism. "Do you have any of your old-world weaponry, like tanks? How about I contact the other forces? They might be able to help us."

"It's fine," Zac said with a shake of his head before he turned to Verana. "Where's Smaug?"

"He's hiding amongst the rearguard." The Beast Mistress leered. "He scurried back there the moment he saw the towers."

Zac snorted and walked back to the end of the convoy, and he soon enough found the person he was looking for.

"I have decided I will defend the rear for you, Lord," Smaug immediately said when he saw Zac approach, emitting the aura of a brave warrior. "I am afraid I will just be in the way in such cramped quarters. My arrays cannot distinguish between friend and foe. It is truly a shame, but I will pray for your success, and I will defend your backs with my life."

"Isn't that nice," Zac snorted. "Don't worry; I won't make you go to the front lines. That's not why I brought you here. Do you have any more of those concussive arrays?"

“I can buy five right now, at 20 million each,” Smaug said with some relief in his eyes.

Zac sighed, but he nodded in agreement as he transferred the funds.

The concussive arrays were something that Smaug had procured while they’d fought the underworld incursions. They were array crystals that essentially functioned as superpowered hand grenades. They caused a tremendous explosion in a somewhat contained area, and the arrays were great at utterly destroying fixed structures.

They weren’t as efficient at taking down actual cultivators, though, as they had a small delay that would allow most to move out of the way or activate their defenses. But they would be perfect for taking down a couple of towers each in case things went out of control.

“So you’re really doing this thing?” Smaug hesitantly said as he looked at the rows and rows of tower arrays. “These golems aren’t messing around, and I don’t think that the turrets they’ve built will be anything to laugh at.”

“I have enough cards up my sleeve to feel confident I’ll survive for a while at least, and if it turns out to be too dangerous, I’ll back off.” Zac sighed. “I can’t send my people into such an obvious trap. They’re not strong enough.”

“It’s not just fun and games to be on the top, is it?” Smaug snorted. “At least you’re on the top of the Power Ladder as well, so people don’t try to rob you every two days.”

Zac could only let out a deep sigh in agreement as he walked away. It had been a bit odd to reacquaint himself with Smaug during the trip, as this excursion was the first time they met while he was in his human form. He had pulled out all the stops to ingratiate himself with Zac, doing everything from providing arrays from his limited license, to updating him on rumors or valuable deposits, to even trying to set him up with a few ladies.

His over-the-top enthusiasm was a bit hard to swallow, but it truly is difficult to punch a smiling face.

After he got the arrays, he simply sat down on his prayer mat. It actually kept him cool even in this environment, and it allowed him to smoothly wait out the three hours until the agreed-upon time. The only interruption was that Murk confirmed that the other sides of the pillar were normal, but the closest tunnels had all been closed down or filled with lava.

It had elicited a short discussion about whether they should spend two days or so to head to the closest open tunnels instead of walking into this obvious trap. Zac eventually decided that they would stay the course. The golems had the means to close down the tunnels, and he didn't want to waste two days only to find that their new point of ingress had been closed as well.

A few daring scouts had dared to test the pillars on the edges, and not surprisingly, the towers were fire-attuned. They all shot out balls of lava that were roughly the size of a soccer ball, and they both possessed kinetic force and fiery heat. The only upside was that it almost looked like they were dropped from the top of the tower rather than being shot, so their speed wasn't troubling.

The real trouble came from the fact that one tower could shoot out quite a few fireballs in a volley every five seconds, and there were over a hundred towers. If their army entered together, they would be assaulted by a thousand lava balls in no time, and such an attack would cause massive losses.

The time finally arrived, and Zac hadn't figured out any better strategy than running straight in. He would take down the towers one by one without stopping, allowing him to avoid as many of the lava balls as possible.

A rain of fire from the sky almost completely blotted out the ceiling to welcome his arrival. They looked like fiery drops of rain, slamming down all around him. Zac blanked out for a second at the majestic sight, but he shook his head to snap out of it. He immediately appeared in front of the nearest tower with the help of **[Loamwalker]** and swung a large fractal edge toward the base. The blade was already imbued with his new

and improved Seed of Sharpness, and it cut through the pillar without any trouble.

Unfortunately, that was it. The pillar still stood in the same position, as Zac's swing hadn't actually managed to move it at all. He could only take a few steps back and infuse himself with the Dao of Heaviness as he tried to topple the thing over with a body slam. However, the collision must have looked like an ant trying to topple a tree, and Zac only managed to make the tower shudder a bit.

He could only summon a couple more fractal blades and launch them at the tower as he danced around like a monkey to avoid the increasing number of lava balls landing all around him. It was not exactly how he wanted to present himself, but it was the best he could do without wasting a huge amount of Cosmic Energy. Each blade was infused with the Seed of Heaviness this time, and the attacks slammed into the tower with the force of a truck.

The base was already completely cut through, so the attacks were enough to topple it without any problem. Zac's eyes lit up when he saw that he was able to destroy a tower without much effort, and he hoped that taking down the first tower would have a cascading effect. The towers were clustered quite close to each other, and he pushed it over in the direction of its closest neighbor.

But a shocking change took place the moment the tower started to topple. It lost all its structural integrity in an instant, and it quickly turned into a tube of lava that spilled down straight toward a gaping Zac. Even he didn't want to take a magma bath unless necessary, even though he was pretty sure he could withstand it for a second or two without getting seriously hurt. He flashed away with **[Loamwalker]** toward the next pillar instead, leaving a large pond of lava in his wake.

After the first experiment, he started to get the hang of it, and the second tower only needed three quick swings with the help of his Dao Seeds and **[Chop]**. But the intensity of the lava balls only increased as he got within range of more and more

towers, and he quickly became unable to dodge them all without being forced out of the entrance.

He was forced to bear the brunt of some of the attacks if he wanted to keep going, so he activated [**Nature's Barrier**] to block the handful of the lava balls dropped in his direction. Leaves were obviously not the greatest defense against fire, but with the help of the Dao of Trees, they had an unyielding vitality that allowed them to knock the balls away before burning up.

However, as more and more hits struck his defense, he realized that he would waste even more Cosmic Energy this way than if he simply unleashed a greater strike. After a short deliberation, the energy around him started to surge, and the enormous forester's hatchet appeared behind him. His body strained under the pressure, but a wave of destruction rippled outward, causing one tower after another to fall apart into pools of magma.

What better attack to destroy what looked like a bunch of stone trees than [**Deforestation**]?

The first swing of [**Deforestation**] was all he needed, as it destroyed over half the towers. He had already taken down around ten before that, and the big gap gave him a breather from the relentless bombardment of lava projectiles. There was no need to use his second swing for the remainder, as he saw it. He instead threw out a couple of boulders to avoid stepping in lava and threw out his concussive arrays at the tightest clumps of towers.

Lava kept raining down from the falling towers, but the threat was dealt with thanks to his [**Axe of Felling**]. What remained was to simply take down the final towers with his Daos, and it only took a few minutes of his time. Zac signaled the army it was fine to move forward after the final tower collapsed, and they quickly sped toward him as they vigilantly kept watch for any remnant defenses.

But it appeared that there were no hidden arrays among the obvious towers, and the only remnant threat was the massive amount of magma that filled the whole entrance.

The army seemed to have anticipated this , and the stronger warriors threw out one huge block of stone after another, effectively creating a wide bridge to pass. Zac nodded in appreciation as he jumped up on the bridge from one of his boulders, and the army entered the true incursion together.

A pillar of the purest flames entered their sight the moment they stepped inside the cave where the golems had built their base. Zac first thought it was the volcano that the council had mentioned, but he soon realized it was the incursion pillar itself, and it showed just how closely related to flames these golems were.

The other incursions he had encountered had generally been simply color-coded to match the force, apart from the Undead Empire, who had turned the pillar into a beacon of Miasma, where specters slowly circulated the beam.

The Flame Golems seemed to have the ability to do the same thing, as the incursion was a huge red flame that almost blinded Zac when he looked at it. He swiftly turned his eyes away, a bit leery about whether the sight meant the golems were powerful enough to enjoy special treatment, or that it just looked that way because all the golems were fire-attuned.

Such musings would have to wait for later , as he knew that they needed to act quickly. They hadn't spotted a single golem so far, which made Zac believe an ambush was just around the corner. Besides, his new allies were currently fighting the golems, according to Murk's report, and the longer it took for Zac to take down the leader, the greater the losses would be among the council's armies.

The group kept rushing closer and closer toward the incursion pillar, but they didn't see any structures anywhere. However, the inside of the enormous stone pillar was still a marvelous sight. These golems were not only insidious combatants who had no compunctions about drowning people in magma, but they were also great artisans.

The golems had for some reason decided to spend a massive amount of effort on thousands of sculptures, each of them a lifelike masterpiece. The motifs were almost always of

nature, with everything from large trees to unfamiliar creatures lovingly carved out of transported stones, or even out of the ground itself. The only exception was a huge boulder placed on a hill in the distance, the only stone that looked completely untouched.

Most people thought it was some sort of art, but Zac immediately knew something was wrong, as the boulder actually made him feel threatened.

THE FLOOR IS LAVA

Since the suspicious boulder was placed alone on a hill, it immediately garnered the attention of the others as well, and many exchanged glances in confusion.

“Did they just find a rock they really liked...?” Joanna muttered, seeming a bit discombobulated from the unexpected scenery around them.

But Zac didn't agree, as he trusted his instinct on this matter.

“It's dangerous,” Zac succinctly said and shot out five fractal blades in rapid succession.

His hunch proved spot on because the large boulder suddenly burst into flames as it transformed into an enormous amalgamation of fire and rock. The stone split into around twenty pieces that made up its body and limbs. The golem reached over five meters in the air, and the air for tens of meters around it shuddered from the heat and power it radiated.

Lava seeped out between the cracks in the stone, and it slowly dripped on the ground. Mysterious fractals also appeared on the stones, and the inscriptions shone with a red glimmer that contained obvious power.

“This is what the golems look like?” Emily muttered in disbelief from behind. “I don't want to fight those things. I'll get torched before even getting close.”

“No!” Murk shouted with fear. “This one is way bigger than the ones we've encountered, and the normal ones aren't

covered in fractals.”

“It’s a common cultivation method for golems,” Verana said. “They inscribe their bodies with Cosmic Pathways to allow energy to flow more naturally. This one is one of the generals, or more likely, the leader itself.”

“I’ll test it out,” Zac muttered as he glared at the enemy from the distance. “Give me a power boost.”

Emily nodded, and she threw a burning axe into his back. Zac felt like lava coursed through his veins before the effect stabilized. He chose the axe that gave Strength and Dexterity since he wanted to finish that thing as quickly as possible. Between his own prowess and Emily’s boost, he didn’t fear the golem, even if it radiated a greater pressure than even the Demon Lord did.

He disappeared in an instant, and a row of cracks in the ground was the only clue of his path as he rushed forward with the help of his movement skill. He was right in front of the golem in less than a second, and he felt a scorching heat from the golem’s Dao Field. He felt his skin smarting after just a second, but he breathed out in relief as he guessed that the golem didn’t seem to possess a Fragment.

The effect of the Dao Field was only slightly stronger than his own Peak fields, where the extra boost came from the golem being in E-grade. He immediately released a Dao Field containing heaviness, which hopefully would restrain his enemy a bit.

The golem was expecting Zac’s arrival, and its huge fist looked like a small sun as it soared toward him. Zac immediately summoned a fractal edge and imbued it with Heaviness, opting to clash with the enemy head-on. The clash caused a storm of fire to explode far into the sky, but Zac imbued his body with the Seed of Trees to recover from the small burns.

Cracks appeared in the ground as the golem stumbled a few steps backward from the initial clash, and Zac immediately knew that the golem had around 700 Strength at best. It would be an insurmountable power for most people,

but Zac's effective Strength was over a thousand between his high-grade titles and Emily's boost.

The edge from [**Chop**] detached itself from [**Verun's Bite**], and Zac **controlled** his blade to harass the golem from behind as he mounted another assault from the front. The golem lit up in a blaze of flames in response, and the fractals on its chest started to emit an even stronger red light than before.

The already huge creature suddenly grew to twice its size, and Zac sensed real danger from it. He managed to cut off a large chunk of rock from its leg with a few furious swings as it transformed, but it wasn't enough to interrupt the transformation. The intensity of flames around it had increased by at least a tier, and Zac was forced to dismiss his independent fractal edge.

The blazing heat from the Golem King's body caused constant strain on the blade, and Zac was forced to infuse it with a huge amount of Cosmic Energy if he wanted to keep it going. It was more economical to use [**Chop**] to create disposable blades that only lasted one swing. Zac realized that the transformation had caused the golem's flames to increase in intensity, but Zac was still overpowering it in raw strength.

Chunks of rock kept falling as Zac systematically dismantled it, stoically enduring the accumulating burns on his body. The Golem King furiously tried all kinds of attacks to take Zac out, but it wasn't strong enough to crush him, and the Seed of Trees kept restoring Zac's burns. It released a deep bellow and slammed both its huge fists downward. Zac didn't want to block such a swing without reason, so he quickly jumped up to avoid the strike, aiming a strike at its head.

The two fists caused a massive earthquake in the area, but Zac managed to cut off a decent chunk of one of its shoulders. But a sense of worry crept into Zac's heart as the rumblings didn't abate, but only got worse. Zac finally realized what was going on, and he turned to the people who were keeping a defensive perimeter in the distance.

“RUN!”

Pandemonium arrived a second later as an endless amount of lava spewed up from the ground, creating a tidal wave that crashed in the direction of Port Atwood's forces. It pushed forward with shocking speed, rapidly closing in on the fleeing warriors. Was the golem trying to retaliate by killing his people?

Zac gritted his teeth in fury as he jumped at the golem to launch another mighty swing, but the creature countered with another punch with its barn-door-sized fist. Gravel rained down along the slope from a huge, jagged wound that ran all the way along the golem's arm, but Zac was in turn launched away like a rocket from the eruption of fire the fist released.

A plume of smoke made a streak through the air as Zac was thrown back almost a hundred meters, but he landed on his feet without an issue. He made no attempt to run back up the hill, and instead opted to run back toward his fleeing army. Getting thrown back was just Zac borrowing the golem's momentum, as the huge thing wouldn't be able to push him if he didn't allow it.

He used [**Loamwalker**] to the limit to get back in time, but the distance between his forces and the huge wave of lava kept shrinking. He knew that if that wave hit, there would be serious casualties, as far from all of them were equipped to resist an attack of that magnitude.

But he was one with the earth as his steps took him closer and closer to the wave, and he finally caught up. The wave was simply massive by this point, and it shone with an almost blinding light. But Zac didn't hesitate as he started running on top of the malleable magma, ignoring the pain of his bare soles.

Smoke sizzled from his feet, causing his eyes to tear up from the pain, but Zac only kept running. Unfortunately bad turned to worse when he realized he was starting to sink, even with his tremendous speed. In just two seconds, he was already to his knees, and he started to sink faster and faster. The lava felt like quicksand, and the pain was quickly becoming unbearable.

The fractals on his robe lit up with a beautiful glimmer, but Zac had no time to admire the defensive charge his gear contained as he hurriedly pushed through the lava. Even with the protection of his top-quality gear, he was still subject to tremendous heat, and he felt like a lobster getting boiled alive.

His legs strained as he waded through the viscous magma until he finally broke out on the other side, and his eyes were met with the scene of a few Valkyries desperately erecting defensive shields with the help of their War Array. Zac shook his head as he immediately realized such a wall would not hold against what he'd just forced his way through, and he took out an item from his Cosmos Sack with a sigh.

A refreshing scent spread across the area as Zac activated his Dao Field for the Dao of Trees, and the next moment, a miraculous sight took place. An impossibly dense jumble of thorned brambles spread out for over two hundred meters in an instant, and they grew to twice the height of the sea of lava.

It was [**Bramble Wall**], the second ace in his repertoire that he'd found during the hunt. He had already used his [**Void Ball**] against the Cyborg, but he had kept this item all this time since it was an item of protection rather than destruction.

This was the choice he made. He could have likely destroyed the Golem King if he was given another minute, but that would have cost the lives of a large group of his own people. He had already cut off a third of its volume, and he couldn't imagine that didn't count as a grievous wound. But Zac had forcibly resisted the whispers of malice in his mind and had literally run through fire to protect his people.

Unfortunately, it was all too obvious that a wall of brambles wasn't the optimal defense against lava, and Zac could see how the vegetation was slowly getting decimated, even though the brambles rapidly regrew with shocking ferocity. Zac scrambled for ideas and quickly tried to infuse the roots with the Dao of Trees.

It gave no response, even though the two concepts should have matched. He could only try the Seed of Sanctuary as well since he was out of options. This time, it actually worked, and

the roots lit up with a slightly golden hue, making them slightly fire-resistant. The spread and effect of his Dao Seed were far greater than he expected, and an idea formed in his mind that he quickly confirmed.

**Sanctuary (Peak): Endurance +50, Intelligence +20,
Wisdom +50.**

It was another mid-fight breakthrough. The past weeks had made him better realize the duty of a leader, and his decision to give up his own goal for the safety of his people had inadvertently helped him push through the final step. He had already been close to evolving the seed due to the two iterations of Dao Visions, but this fight gave him the final push.

The bramble wall was still getting scorched by the sea of lava, but the roots managed to last far longer with the help of the Dao of Sanctuary. It even slowly gained thickness due to the regrowth. Zac breathed out in relief, knowing that his army was safe for now.

“How can we help?” Joanna asked from behind.

“I think the Golem King used a skill that was massively empowered by the environment. We’ll just wait it out. Have people move back just in case,” Zac said before he jumped up on the wall of brambles to see what was going on.

The Golem Lord still stood in the distance, and it looked like it was infusing power into the ground, making it spew out more and more magma like a real volcano. Zac frowned at the scene, knowing that their time was limited. The bramble would only keep regenerating new roots for twenty or thirty more seconds, while the Golem King seemed to be just getting started.

“Throw your [**Extinguishing Arrays**] over the wall! Buy me a couple of seconds!” Zac shouted as energy started to surge in his forearm.

The huge fractal hand emerged and shot toward the golem with blinding speed. The creature immediately noticed the new threat, and a large fractal appeared in the air behind it. Out of

the fractal, a white-hot flame emerged, and it actually appeared to be alive as it took a slightly humanoid shape, forming a head and two fanged arms.

“An elemental!” Verana shouted with some surprise. “Is that thing a Summoner?”

Zac frowned as he looked at the inscribed hand, which was suddenly beset by a barrage of flame attacks of the elemental. His own hand started to blister and crack from the transmitted heat, but he gritted his teeth as he flooded [**Nature’s Punishment**] with the Seed of Trees, allowing it to continuously regenerate its burnt parts.

It finally managed to arrive above the elemental and golem, who still kept infusing the ground with energy. The large fractal beneath the hand appeared next, just like it had during the battle against the undead. No mountain emerged from the fractal, but something else entirely.

It was instead an endless torrent of water that spewed out of the fractal, making it look like the other end of the array was at the bottom of an ocean.

DELUGE

An unceasing deluge of water rushed out of the array in the sky, crashing into everything below in an instant. This was the true power of reaching Peak mastery of **[Nature's Punishment]**. Nature took many shapes and forms, and the earth was just one of them. Another type of punishment of nature was the relentless waves on the ocean, crushing anything in their path.

Just like the Golem King had his ocean of fire, so did Zac have an ocean of his own.

The elemental had summoned an enormous wall of flames to block out the water, and the clash of the two opposing forces caused thick clouds of steam to spread for kilometers in every direction. Some of the water also spilled over on the sea of lava, which helped to cool it down somewhat. Zac's vision was completely blocked out in just a second, so he could only keep pouring energy into his skill to keep it going while maintaining vigilance for surprise attacks through the haze.

Zac was starting to worry that his bramble wall would crumble before he finished the fight, but a high-pitched shriek echoed across the cave after ten seconds or so. The wail caused Zac's mind to blur for a second and almost made him fall off the wall of brambles. But luckily, he had learned his lesson after encountering the mental bell, and he had kept **[Mental Fortress]** active and fully charged during the whole battle.

It only took an instant for him to once again stabilize his mind, and he sensed a stream of Cosmic Energy entering his

body. Something had been killed by his attack, and Zac guessed it was the elemental, judging from the shriek. However, the surge of energy only felt like one kill, and Zac guessed that the Golem King was still alive. Eventually, he couldn't maintain his skill any longer, and the torrential downpour ended.

The problem was that he couldn't see anything past a few meters ahead due to the massive amount of mist in the air. He hadn't really thought about this problem when he'd decided to attack with water; he simply wanted to cool down the lava and extinguish the burning golem. But the golem could be anywhere at this moment, as the elemental had staved off the water for almost ten seconds, giving the golem ample time to move out of the way.

An attack could come from anywhere as things stood.

“Stay together; shout out if you sense something!” Zac shouted to the people below.

It at least became apparent that the golem no longer was infusing energy into the ground to pour out more lava, as the moving wall of molten stone had stopped, and large parts had already cooled down enough for it to become solid again. Zac briefly considered running back on top of the lava to scout out the area, but he soon enough gave up that idea.

The golem had already shown its willingness to target his army, and he needed to be close by in case it was preparing another assault.

“Do you have any means to sense where the golem is?” Zac asked Verana, who stood next to him.

“I'm afraid not,” Verana said with a shake of her head. “I think it's best to simply wait a few minutes for the haze to disperse before deciding what to do next.”

Zac had to reluctantly agree, even though it felt like giving the enemy time to prepare their next attack. After two minutes, the bramble wall started to rapidly disintegrate, rotting with a speed visible to the naked eye. It wasn't Zac that was doing

anything, but it was likely just the natural life cycle of that odd plant. It rapidly grew for a few minutes before its life ended.

Another ten minutes passed where Zac vigilantly walked around the army as a guard, trying to find any clues in the slowly dispersing mist. Every minute that went by made his nerves even more frayed, and his mind even started to play tricks on him. Every small movement in the shadows soon enough felt like a hidden ambush by the golems, and he had to restrain himself from launching fractal edges in all directions.

But no attack appeared, and when the mist finally dispersed, they only saw a desolate landscape devoid of a single golem. Zac was a bit confused, as it felt like the golems had missed the perfect opportunity to strike back. After going over his options, he ordered the army to resume their approach toward the core of the incursion.

But the group only walked for one minute when he got a prompt from the System, telling him that the incursion was closed. That could only mean that the Golem Lord had died or that he had left through the Nexus Hub. The news quickly spread among the people since the Valkyries still had their quest for a few more days, and they noticed that their quest progress had advanced by one.

“The whole invasion has probably left already,” Verana guessed as they kept moving toward the incursion with greater speed. “The moment that golem realized how strong you were, it launched its ultimate attack at us, wanting to create an opportunity to escape.”

“They weren’t even willing to properly fight it out? Things might have become different if the golem brought helpers and some arrays,” Zac said with confusion. “This approach feels a bit different from how the other invaders have reacted. They usually go a bit further.”

“Golems don’t think like us. They generally don’t have emotions, and concepts like honor or revenge are foreign to them. They likely made a calculation that the risks of staying outweighed the potential reward, and immediately left,” Verana guessed.

Zac could only shake his head in disbelief, feeling like he had been robbed of a proper conclusion. These golems really left a sour taste in one's mouth, causing so much trouble for Earth but not having the decency to allow the natives to retaliate.

Verana's suspicions were soon enough confirmed when they saw the harried armies of the council arriving from the other directions as they converged around the Nexus Hub. It turned out that the golem armies had entered a heated struggle against the council's armies, contesting every single meter. The golems even held the advantage, but they suddenly fled with shocking speed, only leaving a token force behind to curtail the advance of the council.

Every single golem that stayed behind fought to its death, even going so far as to detonate themselves in a final attempt to delay the army. Zac realized it was all to let as many as possible flee through the Nexus Hub, and he was speechless at learning the golems were just as ruthless against themselves as they were against others.

He had never encountered a force that would leave behind a tenth of their people like that, and that those people would fight with such rabid ferocity. Perhaps only forces who reared death-sworn warriors could do something like that and trust in the results of the rearguard.

Another unfortunate result of the extreme decisiveness of the golems was that the whole area around the Nexus Hub was completely picked clean. It was just a flat surface, and it looked like the golems had even taken their houses with them as they left through the Hub. There were no stores of resources, no gear or weaponry to loot, nothing.

Even Zac, who had fought two pretty taxing battles, couldn't properly rest and go over the battle, and he started to run around to look for valuables with the rest of the party. He already had a sour taste in his mouth after not being able to kill the Golem King, and that only got worse when he realized he might be losing a bunch of money on the venture.

But Joanna finally came over with some good news after a few minutes.

“They’ve found something,” Joanna said as she walked up to Zac.

“What?” Zac said with bright eyes, hoping to make at least some money from the incursion.

“Tunnels, lots of them,” Joanna said, making Zac blankly look at her.

What was so special about a bunch of tunnels?

Murk came over as well, and when he heard their exchange and Zac’s subsequent confusion, he immediately explained the situation.

“The underworld is surprisingly flat, with its elevation only diverging a few hundred meters at most. The most common exception seems to be mines containing Spiritual-grade resources,” he excitedly explained. “And we’ve already found indicators of what this place holds!”

“So what resources are there?” Zac asked as he got infected by the Moleman’s exuberance.

“It’s a Nexus Crystal Mine!” the Moleman said with a wide grin.

“Oh,” Zac said, his excitement noticeably waning.

He already had his own Crystal Mine on the island. Port Atwood had also gained another six mines in the underworld, though they were far worse than his original mine since they didn’t sit right on top of a Nexus Vein.

“You don’t understand,” Murk said with almost glowing eyes. “I’ve never seen a mine of this size. Our early estimates say it covers the whole area beneath the pillar, perhaps reaching even further. But that’s not the most important thing!”

Zac curiously looked on as the Moleman took out a raw Nexus Crystals shining with scorching radiance.

“Attuned Crystal? E-grade?” Zac whistled with surprise. “You think there are more?”

“We only found the one so far; a scout accidentally cracked a small boulder and found this one inside. But if there is one crystal like this, then there are surely more. This may be the greatest mine in the underworld,” the Moleman said, almost dancing in place.

Zac nodded in agreement, feeling it made sense the golems were placed here considering their attunement. But he also remembered that the golems had only kept to themselves during the start since the integration. Had they mined everything already?

“Don’t worry,” Murk said when he saw Zac’s hesitation. “The council got their hands on a measuring array that detects spiritual resources, and it’s indicating there are still vast resources remaining as long as we go a bit further into the mines. The crystals that were easiest to access might be gone already, but not even the golems could take it all in a couple of months. Besides, the crystals will regrow.”

“I want a detailed survey as soon as possible,” Zac said, his heart finally starting to thump with excitement.

He knew he had gotten his hand on a huge treasure this time, and he wanted to get a feeling of just how huge it was. E-grade fire-attuned Nexus Crystals weren’t that rare in the Multiverse, and even his Top Grade Beast Crystals were worth more.

But the whole Beast Crystal mine would fit in a small side tunnel of the massive network beneath their feet. There were only two hundred top-grade Beast Crystals, but there might be tens of thousands of attuned Nexus Crystals in his newly acquired mine. And with a mine of this magnitude, there might even be the possibility of D-grade crystals appearing in the bottom, or at least in the future as Earth matured.

“We’d be happy to explore the mine together with you in the upcoming weeks,” the Moleman quickly said, his whiskers shuddering with excitement. “Our people can provide both insight and efficiency to any mining operation.”

Zac only smiled in response, making no decisions on the spot. The council had already agreed that the incursion and its surrounding area would fall under his control, but the council would gain a 15% stake in any wealth from this place due to their assistance. The size of the stake had been the largest point of contention in the meeting a few days ago, but Zac ended the discussion with a simple fact. If they had the capability, they would have long closed the incursion themselves.

But the council could still boost their income even further if they were the ones who did all the work since no one would work for free. He would have to check with one of his administrators if Port Atwood could handle such a massive venture themselves.

“Did we find any stores of already mined crystals? Like a storeroom by the entrance of the mine?” Zac asked as an afterthought.

“None, and we’ve gone so far as to frisk the people who entered the mines to make sure they’re not hiding anything,” Joanna said. “I think the golems already found out about the fate of the other incursions, and they already had one foot out the door before we even arrived. The Golem Lord simply tested your power, and when he noticed your strength, he immediately gave the order to return.”

Zac sighed and nodded, feeling that what she said made sense. The golems had had time for an orderly evacuation, so it was no surprise that they would also have taken their things. Still, the mine alone was a huge get, though it was unlikely he would be able to extract anything too valuable before he left for the tower.

The councilors were already closing in on him from a distance, no doubt hoping to renegotiate the deal after finding out about the riches below. Zac could only smile at their approach, feeling that they only had themselves to blame for the situation. The council had so many powerhouses, yet they hadn’t closed a single incursion. They were too tame, and consequently, they were unaware that great riches could always be found close to the incursions.

Zac was a bit wrung dry from the fight, though, and he was in no mood for a haggling session. He simply threw out a couple of arrays on the ground and told Joanna that he needed to rest after the fight. The Valkyrie nodded and moved to intercept the councilors, immediately shutting down any attempts to discuss the mine.

The array disks isolated the small space from the hubbub outside, and Zac sat down on the ground after making sure that none of the councilors were brazen enough to push through his arrays. It was true that he needed to recuperate after the fight, and he took out an E-grade Nexus Crystal.

But the real reason was that he wanted to go over his other gains.

DESECRATION

Zac had sensed a few improvements during the battle, but he didn't feel comfortable checking things out while he was still in the middle of a battle, waiting for a potential ambush. But now it was about time he looked things over.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 75

Class: [F-Rare] Hatchetman

Race: [E] Human

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord

Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt – 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist

Limited Titles: Frontrunner

Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Peak, Seed of Trees – Peak, Seed of Sharpness – Peak, Seed of Hardness – High, Seed of Sanctuary – Peak, Seed of Rot – High

Core: [F] Duplicity

Strength: 773 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]

Dexterity: 400 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Endurance: 1108 [Increase: 70,5%. Efficiency: 140%]

Vitality: 496 [Increase: 55,5%. Efficiency: 140%]

Intelligence: 196 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Wisdom: 299 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Luck: 149 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]

Free Points: 0

Nexus Coins: [F] 185,744,753

His attributes, mainly Endurance and Vitality, had taken a large leap forward. But he noticed that he had gained more attribute points than expected, and he looked at the usual source of unexpected boosts, his title list.

[Promising Specialist: Reach 1,000 points in a single attribute before evolving to E-grade. Reward: All stats +5, Endurance +5%.]

Zac had mixed feelings upon seeing his new title, realizing it might cause some turbulence in his cultivation path. He had gained more Endurance and survivability, but the result of the title itself might prove problematic for his future progression. He had likely gotten the class option for Big Game Hunter due to his Apex Hunter title, and he was worried the same thing would happen now that he was closing in on his next selection.

Would the System try to force him into another tank class now that it considered him a specialist? Yrial had even mentioned that the System only allowed people to pick classes that would suit their talents.

It might not be the first time that someone got 1,000 points in the wrong attribute by accident, but Zac reckoned that it was extremely rare at best. He would much rather have gotten the title for reaching 1,000 points in Strength, but beggars couldn't be choosers at a time when he desperately needed power-ups. Hopefully,

the title only meant that he would get an additional option for a tank class without losing his other options during his evolution.

Zac was actually a bit surprised that the title only appeared now. He had already passed 1,000 Endurance in his human form even before his latest improvements, but he didn't get the title then. Perhaps the System didn't count boosts like **[Forester's Constitution]** to avoid people cheating with the help of skills like **[Hatchetman's Rage]** and Emily's boosts.

His gain in attributes wasn't actually what he wanted to look for when he sat down, even though it was a welcome bonus. It was the fact that he'd sensed something change in his movement skill as he ran atop the lava. He'd still sunk into the molten rock in the end, but he'd managed to move quite a bit faster than he used to, allowing him to catch up to his squad with record speed.

As expected, he saw that **[Loamwalker]** had reached Late mastery, and even **[Nature's Barrier]** had improved a step as well. He wasn't quite sure what made the skills suddenly evolve, but he was happy to take it. Both had been subject to lava before they broke through, perhaps that was a clue to push the two skills one step further?

Zac closed the screens after seeing the changes, but he didn't exit the arrays just yet. He first summoned the emerald leaves out of curiosity, and he noticed that the defensive skill didn't have any great changes. The leaves were larger, and they seemed to contain more energy. Zac deactivated the skill and focused on restoring his Cosmic Energy for two hours as he tried to familiarize himself with his improved Dao Seed next.

The two intense fights had not been too draining, apart from the final strike with **[Nature's Punishment]**. His energy was soon enough at an acceptable level, at which point he exited the array. Zac wryly smiled when a few councilors ran up to him. He had seen them impatiently walking back and forth in the distance while he sat in his array.

The Underworld Council had sent four of the human councilors, perhaps in hopes that Zac would be more amenable to giving some concessions to his own people, but they were sorely mistaken. Their roundabout questions of reopening negotiations regarding the mine were immediately shut down. Zac made no decisions on the spot, as he had people better suited to figuring out a plan for the mine than himself. He would let them deal with it while he focused on the incursions.

But Zac still stayed on to discuss a few other topics, and the meeting took twenty minutes before Zac excused himself. The members of the Underworld Council could only watch in disappointment as Zac bought a teleportation array and disappeared in a flash of light.

The council needed twelve hours before they got their real armies ready, and Zac left a few people to help guide them to the main continent. He wasn't too worried about them trying to double-cross him and take control of the town above, as he had made backup plans.

Mr. Trang and his squads had been busy setting up not one but three backup towns on the unexplored continent, making sure that Zac never lost the means to get back. If the council tried something, he could descend upon them within a day. A transit station on a separate island from Port Atwood had also been set up, meaning that there was no risk of his town being infiltrated.

The air on Port Atwood smelled extraordinarily fresh as he stepped out of the teleportation array. He headed over to the Academy when he couldn't find his sister anywhere, and he found her in the middle of setting up the arrays she'd mentioned the other day. A new and completely circular structure was being erected, and Zac could see that it held three very distinct layers just like they had discussed.

Ogras and the army had left a few days ago as planned, and they'd rejoined the extremely harried Sino-Indian Alliance to finally stop the second Zombie horde in its tracks. The demon had even entered a heated battle against the Zombie general in the air above the sea of undead, though neither was able to gain an advantage, according to the report.

The fight ended with both of them backing away, with Ogras sporting light wounds. Zac guessed that the demon wanted to solidify his Dao through battle, so he had sought out the strongest opponent he could find. Hopefully, it would pay dividends with the Funnel later. The fact that they'd managed to force one of the main armies to a halt was a great sign, but he wasn't sure how long they could keep it up after Ogras left the front lines.

But it would hopefully buy them a couple more days before the enormous array truly activated, which was great, since Kenzie needed some more time to prepare.

Zac couldn't just sit around and wait until the array was finished, and he was torn between a few options. He first considered joining the battle against the undead horde, but eventually discarded the idea. He needed to fight in his Draugr form since he lacked two levels, and he didn't want to alert the Undead Empire about that persona unless necessary.

Eventually, he decided to take down another surface incursion in the meantime, as many of the invaders still focused on enriching themselves rather than helping in the fight against the Undead Empire. He had no problem with using those people like a whetstone for his final levels.

Seeing the Flame Golems' actions was also a bit worrying, filling Zac with some urgency. It would become a problem if the invaders decided to follow suit and escape through the Nexus Hub before Zac could get his hands on them. It would both result in loss of experience for him and that the massive wealth they plundered from stolen land would be permanently lost.

He wanted to take down as many as possible before they cashed out and fled to their homeworlds, and Zac guessed that many were already planning on leaving due to the Undead Empire.

So he ordered a Valkyrie who was on standby in the Academy to head over to the Fire Golem incursion and tell his elite squad to join him. Soon enough, Verana and a squad of elites met up with "Mr. Black" outside a teleporter in a town

hidden in the wilderness. Apart from Verana and Tylia, there was also Harvath and his squad of demons.

Smaug had somehow joined the squad as well, and he looked about ready to cry as he looked up at the sky. He stood still like he was frozen and took one deep breath after another.

“Wait, we have two suns now?” the merchant finally exclaimed after a few seconds.

“And four moons.” Joanna smiled.

“Four of them? Wonder if there are treasures up there just waiting for the first person strong enough to grab them,” Smaug muttered.

“Most moons are pretty desolate places,” Verana said from the side. “Few of them have a World Core that generates Cosmic Energy. But those that do are often turned into private residences, as the density of Cosmic Energy becomes pretty extraordinary. There would no doubt be treasures for the first explorers at such a place.”

Smaug whistled with interest before he finally looked down again and joined the squad as they finished their preparations. All of them looked rested and ready for battle, which wasn't surprising, since Zac had essentially carried out the whole battle against the golems himself.

The group set out without preamble, and things went as expected. After having fought against four above-average incursions in the unfamiliar terrain of the underworld, assaulting a much weaker incursion on the surface provided little challenge for the group.

The moment they reached the incursion, Verana silently summoned Grub, and Zac jumped on its head before they rammed the defensive array. The two had acted as a wall-breaking team a few times already, and the defenses that the invaders set up proved far too weak to handle their assault. It cracked like brittle glass, and a handful of the feathered humanoids of the incursion coughed up blood from the backlash.

Zac jumped down from Grub and stomped on the ground, teleporting himself over to a section of the invader army where a group of birdmen emitting the powers of E-grade warriors stood. He directly activated [**Profane Seal**], for the first time seeing the skill after he'd managed to upgrade it to Middle mastery.

The five sinister towers had gotten an addition of five gates that were placed in the gaps between the towers themselves. It looked a bit funny with gates that had open space on both sides, but they emitted a terrifying enough aura for anyone to take them seriously.

Zac couldn't figure out any purpose of the gates apart from the fact that he sensed he was able to open and close them at will. It was pretty convenient, as it would allow him to get reinforcements while he fought inside the cage.

On top of the gates, the same types of azure fractals as the ones on top of the towers hovered, each of them summoning another spectral chain. Unfortunately, they didn't seem to be much stronger since he'd upgraded the skill, meaning that a strong warrior would be able to rebuff or break them.

But Zac had already found another usage of the chains, as he only commanded five of them to start harassing the incursion leader and the two guards he had by his sides. The other five started to whip around the large number of birdmen who were caught inside the large cage as well.

Streams of energies almost immediately started to flood into his body as he started to fight the leader with the help of [**Hunger**] and [**Unholy Strike**]. It was the chains that managed to impale one of the average warriors after another, killing them before the corpses were dragged along toward the next victim.

A few of the warriors survived having their torsos penetrated by the spectral chains, and wails and screams of fear started to echo in the area as the chains ruthlessly started to drain them of their life force. In just a minute, the chains were studded by rows of desiccated husks as they whirled

around in the air, creating a truly horrifying spectacle completely irreverent of the dead.

He finally understood what the profane part of the skill name was referring to.

DAO OF THE AXE

Seeing the horrifying display of his skill, Zac's resolve started to waver, but he soon steeled his heart. He had already confirmed with the Marshall Clan that this particular incursion hadn't shown any mercy, and quite a large number of people had been enslaved and killed by them. Besides, getting killed by a swing of an axe was only marginally better than getting hollowed out by the spectral chains.

The birdman leader screeched in rage as he saw his underlings getting culled one by one, and he desperately tried to take Zac down. He had some sort of wind-related class, and he moved with tremendous speed to attack Zac from various angles like flashes of lightning. One wound after another started to appear on Zac's body as though they came from nowhere, but Zac didn't mind in the slightest.

Undying Bulwark was truly the nemesis of Dexterity-based warriors. He wasn't able to block out the skills, but why should he even try? In less than thirty seconds, the birdman general was drenched in blood from his own attacks. The ghosts from **[Deathwish]** had dragged him into a dance of death, and there was no way that Zac wouldn't be the last one standing in such a struggle. Zac himself had quite a few flesh wounds, but it was nothing a normal healing pill wouldn't fix in a couple of hours.

Soon enough, the birdman leader gave up on the assault and caused a rain of blood when he shot toward the wall of **[Profane Seal]**. But he couldn't even escape the ghosts over on the other side of the cage, and he finally fell with an

anguished wail when he unleashed a flurry of wind blades against one of the towers.

The battle was pretty much over by that point, as almost all of the trapped warriors had already fallen to the onslaught of the combination of the chains and the corrosive mists from [**Winds of Decay**]. The remaining warriors outside had long given up, and they frantically fled toward the Nexus Hub along with the noncombat invaders. They were all essentially walking Nexus Crystals, but Zac allowed the survivors to leave through the Hub, even though he desperately needed to gain levels.

This was something he had already decided on earlier. He wouldn't start slaughtering people indiscriminately in pursuit of power, and he would stop the moment the fight was over. Besides, he had already killed the leader and his two generals, and those three alone were worth far more Cosmic Energy compared to the remaining army combined.

The whole town was completely desolate in less than ten minutes, and the usual process of integrating the area into a part of Port Atwood began. A group of professionals from Port Atwood immediately streamed out of the teleportation array less than thirty minutes after it was built. His people had become experts at quickly and efficiently integrating conquered incursions, from emancipating slaves to sniffing out all the valuables in the area.

Zac sat down, as usual, to go over the battle and recuperate. He didn't have any major gains from the battle, just as he expected, but it did allow him to become slightly more accustomed to his improved Dao and skills, including the Dao of Sharpness he hadn't really been able to showcase against the golems.

The power of his Seed of Sharpness was amazing by this point, and his very presence was dangerous to people who hadn't yet evolved. Small cuts would appear on their bodies, quickly accumulating to the point that they started to get seriously hurt. Even the weaker of the evolved were slightly affected by the Dao Field, and while he wasn't able to draw

blood, it looked like their concentration was impacted by the constant scratching of invisible blades.

Zac himself only waited out the eight-hour time limit while resting and pondering on the results of the battle. The most interesting thing was the upgraded version of **[Profane Seal]**. The additional structures made him look forward to how the skill would look when he reached the peak. Would it create a whole fortress with an impenetrable wall?

The only unfortunate aspect of the skill was that he wasn't able to infuse it with a Dao, which caused the chains' effect on strong opponents to be pretty limited. The Demon Lord had directly rebuffed them with a fiery aura, and the Cyborg had simply disintegrated them with its aura. Perhaps the chains would have lasted longer if he could have infused them with the Dao of Hardness.

Perhaps the skill was the same as **[Deforestation]**. It was a skill given by an Epic class, and maybe those had higher requirements on the Dao to be used, and perhaps he was even expected to have formed a Fragment from Sanctuary and Hardness by this point if going by the class archetype. But he was dragged out of his musings before reaching a conclusion as Verana walked toward him.

"Your strength is getting pretty shocking," Verana said as she walked over. "I am starting to wonder if our presence is even needed when you take down these incursions. You are becoming an army unto your own."

"I still need people to stabilize the situation outside the cage," Zac said with a shake of his head. "It seems the seal is far weaker from the outside. Besides, it's good training for the future elites of Port Atwood."

"Still, it makes me expectant for the future. It is not often you get to see the ascent of a true powerhouse." Verana sighed.

Zac initially smiled, but suddenly looked over at the Beast Master with suspicion.

"Okay, what do you want?" Zac asked.

“Tylia told me about the Beast Crystals after we closed the golem incursion,” Verana said with a roll of her eyes as she sat down in front of him.

“I’m sorry, there’s only so many in my hands,” Zac said. “And we have quite a few beasts in Port Atwood as well.”

“I am guessing you have gotten your hands on a mine, though,” Verana said. “More crystals will grow.”

Zac didn’t deny that, as it was pretty obvious he wouldn’t just find one high-grade Beast Crystal randomly lying in a corner of the underworld.

“You should know that we never planned on staying on your planet for a hundred years, but here we are. Our reserves will not last that long. We’d like to buy a share in the mine itself to secure a supply,” the Tal-Eladar said, finally putting her cards on the table.

“It’s not impossible,” Zac slowly said. “But do you even have the Nexus Coins for such a transaction?”

“Not yet, but I hope you’ll remember your words in a year or two.” Verana smiled as she stood up.

Zac sighed when he realized that she wasn’t interested in paying up now, but rather only wanted to sound out the possibility. It was the better option for her, of course, since it wouldn’t do her much good to spend all her current wealth on a completely stripped mine.

He didn’t know how quickly Beast Crystals grew, but he couldn’t imagine it was too fast. It would probably take years before new low-grade crystals sprouted. But he needed the money now, so he had no choice but to be a bit shameless.

“A few years is so long, and my memory isn’t what it once was.” Zac coughed as he stood up.

Verana stopped in her tracks and looked back at him with an even stare.

“I guess you have some means to strengthen your memory, no? Perhaps if I paid a bit up front?” she said with a flat tone, and Zac could feel his ears heating up a bit. “How much?”

“Oh, not much. One billion would do,” Zac said with a smile.

“A BILLION?!” Verana roared, making Lulu, who was sleeping in her arms, jump up in fright. “ARE YOU CRAZY?”

The two entered a fierce negotiation from there, but it was clear that Verana really needed the crystals. Unfortunately, she was truly unable to fork out so much money, but Zac walked away with another 500 million Nexus Coins in the end, with the additional promise that the Tal-Eladar would assist in teaching Beast Mastery at the Atwood Academy.

Those Nexus Coins were likely a large part of the combined wealth the Tal-Eladar had scrounged up in the underworld, but they fell into the hands of Zac in the end. It wasn't as much as his other sources of Nexus Coins, but it would give him a bit more breathing room when he visited the Tower of Eternity.

Zac returned to Port Atwood after having completed his mission and changed back to his human form after he arrived at his compound. He didn't reach level 74, but he felt he was over halfway there. He would likely just need to close two or three more incursions to reach level 75.

Kenzie was actually in her courtyard when Zac looked for her, and her eyes were glued to an extremely intricate blueprint.

“What are you doing?” Zac asked with interest as he walked over.

He immediately saw the blueprint was of the house she was building in the Academy, but there were a ton of fractals and lines that Zac couldn't understand at all.

“Jeeves and I are looking over the schematic to make sure we don't miss anything,” Kenzie said, her eyes a bit bloodshot.

“Are you okay?” Zac asked with some worry. “It's okay to take a breather and rest. It will help you avoid mistakes as well.”

“Jeeves doesn’t make mistakes even when I’m tired.” Kenzie smiled. “Besides, everyone is pushing themselves to save our planet. I can’t laze about.”

“So how’s it going?” Zac asked, knowing he wouldn’t be able to get her to rest.

“It’s pretty much done,” Kenzie said. “I will just need a day of testing the arrays and the energy flows to make sure no one made a mistake while setting everything up.”

“One day?” Zac said, his eyes lighting up. “That’s great.”

“Have you decided on who will join us?”

“Not completely,” Zac admitted. “Only the inner layer. How many do you think would be able to sit in the outer layers?”

“I think we could fit thirty people or so? If I make the area any larger, I can’t reliably contain the energies,” Kenzie said after thinking it over.

“Can you ask Alyn, Joanna, and Ilvere to nominate nine people each? I also want to offer spots to Ryan, Lyla, and Ibtep if we can reach them.”

The insectoid had joined Nonet and was currently fighting the Undead Empire along with the Zhix hordes. The communications were sporadic, but he knew that they had still been alive two weeks ago at least, and that Hive Kundevi was part of a roving squad that had split off from the main Zhix army to hunt the smaller hordes.

That, unfortunately, meant that Zac currently had no means to contact Ibtep, and he also couldn’t hold up the activation of the Funnel for them. It would be up to fate if they could join.

“What about Thea and the others?” Kenzie asked. “Shouldn’t we invite them too?”

“No,” Zac finally said. “I want to use this opportunity solely for people of Port Atwood. That means that Verana and the Tal-Eladar won’t join either.”

It took a lot of deliberation, but Zac had eventually arrived at the conscious decision to not invite anyone who wasn’t part

of his force. That included both Billy and Thea, whom he trusted, but who were ultimately allies in charge of their own forces. The same went for Verana. She was a trading partner, not an actual member of Port Atwood. The Tal-Eladar had been helpful lately, but it was essentially a business transaction since they gained something every time they joined him in battle.

Keeping it all for themselves might be selfish, but Zac and Ogras had risked their lives for the opportunity, and they wanted to keep all the benefits for themselves. Truthfully, if they could keep all the Origin Dao for just the two of them, they would probably have done so since that would have the greatest impact in the fight against the invaders and the Dominators.

But since that was impossible, they could only use the spillover to create more powerhouses in Port Atwood. Kenzie didn't look too pleased about his decision, but she didn't contradict him in the end.

"I will enter meditation for a day to solidify my Dao," Zac said as he stood up to leave. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Zac did just what he said he would do and entered his courtyard. His goal for tomorrow was to finally form a Dao Fragment, and he hoped to increase his chances of succeeding if he could find a direction to take the first step. He closed off all outside interference before he took out **[Verun's Bite]**. His eyes wandered over the axe over and over, trying to glean any type of truth or inspiration from its form or by how it felt in his hands.

Just what was the Dao of the Axe?

FREE LUNCH

It was 4 p.m. the next day when the crystal in Zac's lap vibrated, indicating that his sister or Ogras was trying to contact him.

"Everything is ready," Kenzie's voice emerged from the crystal after he picked it up. "We couldn't get a hold of Ibtep, but everyone else is here."

"Ask Alyn if she wants to try. I'm on my way," Zac said as he stood up. "Can you bring the prayer mat from the cave?"

"It's already here."

Zac had spent the better part of a day picturing the Dao of the Axe, or at least the part of the Dao that represented his path. He still did not know if his conclusions were correct, but he was simply out of time and would have to roll the dice.

He walked over to the Academy in quick steps and found that everyone apart from Ogras was waiting outside. There were also fifty demon soldiers and thirty Valkyries who stood ready to guard the structure against any interruptions. Alyn stood there as well, though he was not sure if it was because she was there to oversee the event or to join it.

Alyn was the backup he'd decided to fill Ibtep's spot in case he couldn't be reached. She was not really a core part of his fighting force, but she had contributed a lot to Port Atwood in her own way. He also thought that if Alyn's accomplishments in the Dao increased, then she would also be able to teach the students more efficiently.

“Finally, we’re doing this.” Ogras’ voice drifted over, but the usually lazy tone contained an undeniable hint of excitement this time.

The demon sported a new small scar on his left cheek, but other than that, he seemed fine, even though he had fought an undead general the other day.

“Let’s hope we got this right; otherwise, this will turn into a tragedy.” Zac wryly smiled as he looked across the people who would participate.

All of them belonged to the absolute peak of Port Atwood’s forces. The only exception was a motley mix of youngsters who looked a bit nervous. It was the students whom Alyn had recommended, seedlings with potential to become powerhouses under his banner.

If something happened to all of them, including himself, then both Port Atwood and Earth were finished.

“So maudlin,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “It’s just a bunch of Origin Dao. What can go wrong?”

“Famous last words,” Zac snorted, though he felt the demon had a point. “Let’s head inside, and I will explain things,” Zac said as he looked over the group before entering the circular building.

Zac only took a few steps before he froze for a second, looking with some shock at what his sister had created. The walls were covered in a dense pattern of inscriptions, reaching pretty much from floor to ceiling. Even the stone floor and ceiling contained inscribed lines that went in circles around the outer layer he stood in.

Kenzie truly hadn’t been slacking off.

The group was led into the central chamber, where the first group would meditate on the Dao when the Dao Funnel was cracked open.

The Dao Funnel was placed on an altar in the middle of the room, and the altar itself was covered in fractals as well. According to Kenzie, the platform had the same effect as the spatial disturbance arrays he had used to block out the usage of

teleporters. It was likely that it was these kinds of altars, albeit far more advanced versions, the Undead Empire used to block out the teleporters in the area surrounding his forces.

Whether such a thing would be needed or not wasn't sure, but Kenzie had added it as a precaution. They simply knew too little about Origin Dao, and Brazla hadn't been helpful no matter how much Kenzie had begged or cajoled.

Their best guess was that Origin Dao was a mysterious energy that existed in the air around them, just like Cosmic Energy, but that it was impossible for people at their level to detect. It seeped into their souls from exposure, and absorbing the Origin Dao strengthened people's connection to the Dao.

Kenzie was afraid that the energy would dissipate too quickly, perhaps through leaving into other planes of existence. So she had prepared an array to seal space itself, in addition to the arrays that would hopefully keep the Origin Dao consigned to the room they were in.

The inner chamber wasn't actually sealed off, but it rather had an open layout with eight vaulted arches that provided vision to those who would sit outside. Even the inner chamber was separated into two rows, meaning that the group would be split into three priorities.

The innermost row was just two seats, one on each side of the altar. Just behind the seats was a line of fractals forming a circle around the seats and the altar, along with two small glass cylinders covered in fractals. Each of the glass pillars was roughly half a meter high and placed next to the two seats. Finally, there were four large fractals on the floor tiles, one on each side of the innermost seats.

“Crack any of those pillars and all the restrictive arrays and the altar will be destroyed immediately, which would hopefully let the Origin Dao dissipate quickly,” Kenzie explained when she saw Zac's gaze. “It's like a panic button.”

“What if I only want to release the Origin Dao toward the next layer?” Zac asked.

“See the fractals that are placed next to your seats?” Kenzie asked. “They are shortcuts to the energy pathways that feed Cosmic Energy to the two sealing arrays. If you disrupt the pathway, the array will lose its power in a second or two, allowing the Origin Dao to spread. It doesn’t matter in what order you crush them, so just destroy one to open up the second layer, and two to open up the third.”

“So just punch the tile or something?” Zac asked, receiving a nod in confirmation.

Zac asked a few more questions about the details of the arrays before he turned toward the group still waiting behind them. Even the demons were wide-eyed as they looked around, clearly confused and slightly apprehensive about the dense inscriptions covering almost every surface around them.

“I know that most of you don’t know why you have been summoned here,” Zac said, drawing everyone’s attention. “It’s because Ogras and I are ready to present you with a unique opportunity to become stronger.”

No one would say no to a power-up, and people’s eyes lit up in anticipation. Only a few of the more experienced demons kept their cool demeanor, clearly understanding that nothing came for free or without risks. They immediately understood from the building they stood in that this wasn’t a simple bestowment of some treasures.

“You should all know about Salvation and his deeds by now,” Zac started to explain. “The integration turned him insane, and he killed hundreds of thousands of people, turning them into puppets. Ogras and I killed him after an intense fight.

“What you don’t know is that Salvation had a mysterious treasure on his body, something that he had stolen from the inheritance site of the Great Redeemer,” Zac continued, pointing at the golden fractal on the altar. “The purpose of this item was to steal Origin Dao.”

“I’m sorry, what’s Origin Dao?” Mr. Trang spoke up, and Zac noticed there was a noticeable hint of confusion on the faces of most people.

Only then did Zac realize that the knowledge of Origin Dao hadn't been spread through Port Atwood. It was something that not even Ogras knew the word for before Brazla explained the concept, so it was no wonder that not even the demon soldiers had heard of it either. They only knew that people improved Dao Seeds easier on newly integrated planets for some reason.

"Before the System came, there was no magic in your world," Ogras spoke up to explain. "But now you gain levels and Dao Seeds. This is partly because of Cosmic Energy. But the second half is Origin Dao. It's a unique energy that can be found on newly integrated planets for a short time, an energy that connects your world to the great truths of the Universe."

"Origin Dao is why people on newly integrated planets gain insights into the Dao far quicker than the rest of the universe. You should have heard of how hard it was from the demon soldiers back on their home planet," Zac said, drawing a few nods.

"In any case, this item contains the stolen Origin Dao of all of Salvation's victims. And we intend to crack this thing open and release the Origin Dao into this building," Ogras explained, unable to completely hide his impatience.

"What will happen when you do?" Mr. Trang asked hesitantly.

"No idea," Zac frankly said, drawing confused looks. "Ideally, we would have liked to study this for years before attempting this, but we are running out of time. Threats loom in all directions, and we aren't strong enough as things stand. I will take this risk in order to become stronger, to protect our planet."

"We hope that the massive amounts of stored Origin Dao will forcibly put us into a prolonged state of epiphany, drastically improving our insights into the Dao," Ogras explained. "But we might be way off base. Perhaps nothing will happen. Perhaps we will be turned into idiots."

"There is no such thing as a free lunch," Mr. Trang muttered, drawing confused looks from the demons.

“Exactly,” Zac said. “This is an opportunity, but there are also real risks involved. I will not force anyone to undergo this experiment; everyone here is free to leave.”

Low discussions spread across the hall as people talked about the situation with their close friends. But eventually, the discussions died down, and not a single person chose to leave. Zac nodded in satisfaction, happy that the seedlings that Alyn had picked out had the guts to brave danger. It would be impossible to become a powerhouse otherwise.

“Good, prepare your mental states and ponder on the direction you want to evolve your Dao Seeds. Your results will most likely be more impressive if you have a plan in mind before we start,” Zac said.

After Zac explained the situation, Kenzie took the floor, explaining the intricacies of the array and how it worked. Zac had been a bit worried that people would be offended by being placed in different tiers around the Funnel, but no one even raised a brow after learning about it. Perhaps they knew the value of the thing they were being offered, and that the leaders could make the most use of it.

Everyone quickly got into position and started to stabilize their mental state while Kenzie did a final test run of the arrays. The building had already been sealed from the outside world with an extremely strong defensive array.

Since it only covered a small building rather than a whole town, its shielding was extremely formidable, and even Zac would probably need some time to crack it open. The array also isolated any sounds, so there would be no disturbances from the outside world while the people meditated.

Zac looked around the inner chamber as he waited for everything to begin. Only thirteen people sat in the room, with the third group sitting at fixed positions outside the arches. Ogras and Zac were the two in the innermost layer, as they were the two top-tier powerhouses of Port Atwood and also the ones who had secured the item.

Zac had initially wanted to put his sister there as well, but she had staunchly refused, instead opting to sit in the second

layer. With her were the two demon generals, Emily, Sap Trang, and finally, the three strongest demons and Valkyries respectively. Mr. Trang was obviously the weakest person in the room and not technically one of the elites.

But the old fisherman had been with Zac almost from the start, and he had performed above all expectations in every endeavor so far. This was the chance for him to go from a normal elite to a powerhouse without having to solely rely on his scary pet.

Zac knew that Mr. Trang still hadn't been able to improve his race to E-grade due to his age, but the old man looked at least fifteen years younger compared to when he first arrived thanks to the continuous medicine baths he was taking. He would probably have no problem living for a few more decades as things stood, and Zac hoped he would find a solution for his predicament by that time.

Zac already sat on the second of the two prayer mats he owned. The other mat ultimately went to Ogras, even though Zac felt apologetic for his sister. But things were dire, and they needed to push their two strongest as much as possible for the coming fights.

It was also a distinct possibility that she would receive some assistance of her own through her AI, making the prayer mat superfluous.

“You guys ready?” Kenzie asked after having confirmed that the arrays were activated and that everything worked as it should.

“We're ready.” Zac nodded as he took a deep steadying breath. “Do your thing.”

IMPRESSIONS

“As I’ve said, I have no guarantees this will work,” Kenzie muttered as she turned toward the golden Funnel.

She took out a small inscription tool and started to add new lines to the Funnel. Odd undulations started to appear in the room within seconds, and Zac looked around with wonder. He had never taken any hallucinogenic drugs in his life, but he believed that what he experienced right now might be a bit similar. The world felt as though it was alive, and everything pulsed with life and mystery. He quickly took out his last Dao Treasure so he would be ready to boost his experience.

“Here we go,” Kenzie said, though Zac felt he heard the voice from far away.

A small snap echoed in the room in the next seconds, and all Zac’s senses were completely overloaded by impressions and scenes he couldn’t understand or decipher. If the magical sense of oneness with the universe earlier was a subdued whisper, then what he currently experienced was an unrelenting storm that threatened to rip him to shreds.

It was at that moment Zac realized that they might be in over their heads. Zac’s vision was flooded by colors and shapes that shouldn’t exist, and he heard whispers that threatened to drive him insane.

The energy they unleashed was far beyond what he had expected, and he felt like a small boat in the middle of the ocean during a terrifying storm. He was on the brink of succumbing, and he spotted his sister toppling over as she tried

to get back to her spot. Ogras was already bleeding out of his nose, and he had actually cut himself on the leg with a small knife, and his eyes were completely bloodshot.

“Too... strong,” he croaked, and Zac understood.

The density was just too much; it was not something that people at their level could handle. If they didn't dilute the Origin Dao, they would die or have their minds broken. It took all of Zac's willpower, but he managed to slam down on the restriction in a bid to release the Origin Dao to a wider area.

A second later, Zac could finally take a breather, but he was still teetering on the brink of collapse as he looked around, trying to see what was really going on through the hallucinations. Just the quick look around made him forget what he wanted to do, as it felt that each hallucination contained a mystery that could elevate his understanding of the universe.

“Steady your minds and close your eyes. Focus on your own Dao,” Ogras growled, which allowed Zac to snap out of it long enough to push the Dao Treasure into his mouth and swallow it.

The surroundings kept getting more abstruse, and Zac got the notion that he would be able to grasp myriad Dao just by looking at the plaster on the wall or a spot of melted wax on a candle. The fractals on the wall kept squirming, and Zac believed they tried to spell out divine secrets for him. Everything was calling out to his very soul, but he quickly closed his eyes as well to resist the temptations.

He knew it was the effect of the Origin Dao, that the enigmatic energy was exposing the truths of everything in nature. But just because there were truths to find didn't mean he should delve into them. It would cause chaos to his cultivation system if he got a bunch of new Dao Seeds at this juncture.

He instead used his whole being to focus on the concept of the axe, basing his meditation on the fractal axe in his body. It was still split between the two Daos, and it radiated an immense pressure since Zac had reached Peak Dao with both

his seeds. The groans and shuffling from the people around him soon drifted away as he closed in on himself, and his whole being focused on the Dao of the Axe.

Unfortunately, he wasn't shielded from the chaotic energies around him just because he closed his eyes and focused his mind. The madness crept into his body through each and every one of his cells, making him feel as though he could topple at any moment. Zac did everything in his power to ignore the whispers that kept trying to lead him astray, believing they were hints to various Daos in the Multiverse.

Luckily, a warmth spread from his stomach after a bit, and calming tendrils moved through his body and silenced the chaos to a certain extent. It was the Dao Treasure, and it allowed him to refocus on the Axe with unprecedented clarity.

Space and time no longer held any meaning, as his mind was overwhelmed by the endless profundity of the axe. The fractal axe he envisioned kept growing in his mind, and as he gazed at the fractal, it started displaying one scene after another.

He saw scenes of himself swinging his axe in one desperate struggle after another. He kept pushing forward, and his prey kept getting more dangerous. He saw himself desperately struggling to cause a lethal wound against a barghest, where he was forced to use the environment to his advantage to survive. He could almost taste the blood as his hatchet made its way into the spine of the beast.

Beasts, cultivators, invaders, and even armies entered his vision, only to be bisected and conquered. Everything in the world was fleeting, and the only truth was the weapon he held in his hand. Whoever stood in his path would be crushed by the towering force of his swing; whatever tried to resist would be cut by the gleaming edge.

The scenes kept flashing through his mind, and something started to crystalize. It was the path of the Axe that he had arrived at yesterday. It was a path of indomitability and furious offense, one that gave up on the flexibility of the sword or the

speed of the rapier in favor of monstrous power and momentum.

Nothing could hamper the progress of his axe. All defenses would get crushed, all obstacles cut in two. The axe was the truth that would allow him to walk to the end of the path, and also the tool of slaughter that would keep those around him safe. But before his epiphany could mature into something real, the visions started to change, and he felt himself getting dragged inside.

Zac was no longer looking in on his deed from outside; now it was suddenly him getting killed, and he felt himself dying one indignant death after another. He could see himself as the aggressor, and he looked up only to peer into his own wooden face and two pitch-black eyes that held no emotion or succor as the Zac in the vision swung his axe down.

He was the merchant only following orders, his head getting cut off in one swift motion. He was the mink defending its mountain, only to get slain. He was a tiger, a cultivator, a Zombie, one being after another with their own dreams and aspirations.

But those dreams turned to dust with the arrival of that sharp edge. His resistance was futile against the towering weight of the weapon soaring toward him. Zac died a thousand deaths, and he felt his soul was getting wounded each time.

Soon enough, it wasn't even himself who killed, but he rather saw visions of men and women being forced to their knees, and their whole vision was filled with a finger that moved toward their forehead. Pain that Zac never had experienced before rippled through his body as his soul was dragged out of his body in the visions.

The visions became increasingly chaotic as time passed, showing a jumbled mess of scenes that were unfamiliar to him. But as the scenes kept appearing, he felt an increasing amount of anger and hatred filling his body. It was different from the splinter, it was more open and direct. But even though Zac could see it coming, he couldn't avoid his mind getting corrupted, and the destructive thoughts were eroding his soul.

But his resilience wouldn't let him falter or give up, so he forcibly lived through the discordant visions of death and destruction as he searched for that feeling that he'd lost just before. He needed to get back to the axe, the truth that he'd almost grasped before his mind was led astray.

He felt he was on the cusp of success before things turned dark, and he only needed to regain it. But the constant flurry of visions took their toll, and Zac was starting to lose track of what was going on. Everything felt muddled as the thousands of impressions threatened to destroy his sense of self.

But some hidden spark inside his mind suddenly ignited his cognizance for one final burst, and he managed to grasp hold of the feeling once more, finally putting an end to the endless visions. The visions finally stilled, and he found himself in outer space, facing a huge fractal that was formed as an axe.

In the far distance in the deepest space were two lights radiating boundless power. It was the very same stars as the ones he'd seen during the Dao Impartment, though this time, they felt far more distant. It was no surprise, as he'd had the help of a C-grade powerhouse to connect to those stars last time.

But he had another type of help this time. It felt like he was full of a boundless power that allowed him to create a tendril of his own, one that reached for the distant stars just as they reached for him. It was the Origin Dao that empowered him to reach further than he would have been able to on his own, effectively creating a bridge to the Grand Dao.

The tendrils finally connected, and Zac felt a surge of endless knowledge enter his mind. His whole soul, which was already wrung dry from the onslaught of visions, shuddered from the impact, but he held on.

At first, he didn't know what he was waiting for, but he soon had his answer. As knowledge crammed itself into his brain, the fractal started to grow in front of him. He instinctively reached toward it as he absorbed additional truths from the stars. The axe released a keening echo the moment

Zac's intangible hand touched it, and the lines that made up its body started to twist and writhe with blinding speed, rearranging themselves after some unknown blueprint.

The outer shape of the enormous fractal was the same, but the lines had reformed to no longer possess two separate sides. The axe looked far more complete now, with one completely integrated pathway. The weapon radiated immense power, and Zac sensed both his earlier Dao Seeds in the mix.

Everything from the emotional heaviness to the most recent indomitable will to cut through everything was accounted for, but there were many additions that he hadn't recognized before. The snippets of truth were all meshed together into a perfect whole, and they together made up the Dao of the Axe.

He knew he had done it; he had upgraded his two Dao Seeds into a Fragment. If he was physically there, he would have breathed out in relief.

The two stars in the distance receded after Zac had managed to upgrade the fractal in front of him, and the large axe started to dissipate as well. He realized that this epiphany was over and willed himself to exit his mysterious state. The deed was done, and this step guaranteed that his classes would at least be able to upgrade his class immediately. He was pretty sure that he had passed the "achievement" part with flying colors anyway.

But Zac didn't even have time to celebrate the success of his advancement before a shocking sight entered his vision when he opened his eyes. His experience hadn't been smooth, but Zac had initially chalked it up to the difficulty of forming a Dao Fragment.

The insight needed for that was on a higher level than upgrading a seed, and Zac guessed that would take a greater toll on his body. This was something he had already discussed with Ogras earlier, and the demon had agreed. But reality proved different.

He didn't know how long his meditative state had actually lasted, but the house was still under the full effect of the

Origin Dao. Zac felt he had a bit greater resistance against the hallucinations now, and the brief moment of clarity allowed him to witness the state of everyone else in the building.

Something was terribly wrong with the energy they had released.

RISK AND REWARD

It was clearly not only Zac who had struggled tremendously to withstand the onslaught of impressions unleashed by the Dao Funnel. Everyone had various degrees of struggle written on their faces, with most in the building even shaking as they had their eyes shut tight as they strained to endure.

Zac's mind churned as he resisted the constant lure of the truths of the universe, and he tried to make his sluggish mind find a way to lessen everyone's burden. He finally remembered the plan from earlier, and he slammed down on a second stone disk next to him, immediately cracking it.

But his addled mind soon realized that someone had already opened up the Origin Dao to the third layer, and when his eyes reached the people sitting outside the arches, he realized they were even worse off than those sitting inside.

The Origin Dao might be like the Cosmic Water: great in small quantities, but it could quickly become a dangerous poison if you indulged in too much of it. Perhaps someone like the Great Redeemer would be able to absorb it all, but he was at Peak D-grade, and he was perhaps planning on absorbing it over decades.

What they were doing right now might be equivalent to jumping into the Nexus Water pond to take a bath. The only difference being that it was their souls that would take the hit rather than their bodies getting blasted to pieces from absorbing too much energy. That wasn't the only problem, though, even if it might be part of the reason almost everyone seemed to have one foot in the grave.

Something was assaulting the people stuck in meditative poses. They were pitch-black specters, reminiscent of those poor souls who had been corrupted by the splinter in the Eastern Trigram Sect. Perhaps they were just another set of hallucinations brought by the massive surge of Origin Dao, but Zac felt a huge amount of resentment coming from the ghosts, which was completely different from the enigmatic and almost addictive feeling that came from the other hallucinations.

The ghosts weren't attacking anyone; it instead looked like they were praying to or even begging for mercy. Others held their translucent head in their hands, radiating hopelessness. Zac's thoughts immediately went to the visions he had been forced to endure while he formed his Dao Fragment. Were these the souls of those Salvation killed?

They flocked around most people, though Zac noted with relief that his sister was completely spared. The same went for Ogras and Janos, while a few more were less crowded as well. His sister had somehow managed to make her way back to her spot in the second layer, and he realized that it was she who had cracked open the array, releasing the Origin Dao to the outer layer.

He couldn't confirm that the ghosts were actually harming anyone since they never touched anyone, but he did note that those who were more crowded seemed to be struggling more. A lot of them were bleeding out of their noses and ears, looking like they had suffered some type of hemorrhage.

But what was even worse was that he saw indistinct silver fractals appearing on the foreheads of those who struggled the most, and even in his currently muddled state he had no problem remembering where he had seen that particular design before. It was the same fractal that shone on Salvation's forehead, though his tattoo was far more intricate than the nascent inscriptions on the people around him.

Was the Funnel trying to convert everyone around it, turning them into raving lunatics like Salvation himself?

Worry gripped Zac's heart, and he arduously got up to his feet in his eagerness to help everyone. But what should he do?

Everyone was in an extremely fragile state, likely fighting a desperate battle with their souls on the line. Dragging everyone outside might have the opposite reaction of what he hoped, as it might cause a disturbance that made them lose focus and destroy their minds.

His eyes darted to the crystal pillar next to him, but he eventually looked away from that as well. The soldiers stationed outside had standing orders to quickly evacuate everyone in case the arrays were deactivated, and that would be the same as him dragging people outside himself.

He needed to do something by himself, but he was in no condition to start swinging his axe around in the building. Not that he thought he could actually destroy any of the ghosts with **[Verun's Bite]**. But he did possess one weapon that seemed effective against the dead, so he released his Dao Field for Dao of Trees, hoping it would bring some vitality to everyone while it drove the ghosts away.

His soul was already battered and bruised, feeling like when he had overtaxed his mental energy during a fight, but he persisted in using it when he saw many people regain some color on their faces. Even the silvery fractal that had appeared on a few foreheads had started to dissipate slightly.

Best yet was that the ghosts started to fall apart, releasing soundless wails as they turned into motes of dust.

The Seed of Trees worked wonders, so he kept his Dao Field going for as long as he could. But his vision started swimming after only thirty seconds, and he was forced to stop. At least everyone looked noticeably better by that point, and Zac could only pray that the extra energy would allow everyone to beat the side effects of the Dao Funnel on their own.

He believed that as long as they managed to improve their Dao Seeds, the corruption would be pushed away by the pure energies of the Daos, just like when he'd condensed his Fragment. The moment the two stars appeared, all the discordant visions had been pushed aside, allowing him to finish his meditation in peace.

This was all he could do, as his mind was starting to tear and distort once more from the beckoning visions and intrusive whispers. He sat down on the mat again, which helped a little bit with the chaos in his mind. He closed his eyes and desperately focused on the small space that he'd created when he managed to form a Dao Seed from his own effort.

He needed to turn calamity into an opportunity once more since the Funnel obviously wasn't out of Origin Dao just yet. It was either that or flee from this place, taking the winnings before losing everything. But Zac wouldn't stop now that he had come this far. This was a unique opportunity, and he couldn't leave his people behind in any case.

His first instinct was to go for his second Fragment since both Trees and Sanctuary were at the Peak by now. But he reluctantly had to give up on that idea. Forming the first Fragment had been extremely exhausting, and his condition was exacerbated by providing a respite to those around him. He wasn't confident in forming another Fragment as things stood.

Besides, there was the issue of balance. He was afraid that if he formed a life-attuned Fragment while his Dao Seeds of Rot and Hardness were still only at High mastery, then his evolution of Undying Bulwark might become messed up. It was a safer option to work on his two final Dao Seeds instead, even if the benefits might be worse.

He desperately closed his eyes again to shut out the hallucinations, and this time, he focused on the Seed of Rot, going over all the aspects of rot and putrefaction he could. Rot was the seed that he felt was furthest from upgrading, whereas Hardness still had the residual boost of his Dao Vision and recent battles with extremely sturdy foes like the Battleroach King and the Cyborg. Even the imperviousness of the environment in the underworld had given him some inspiration.

Zac quickly slipped into a deep meditative state again, his mind diving toward that empty universe where only the Dao

existed. But just like last time, his ascent was intercepted by an onslaught of visions.

Various scenes where he killed his foes with the help of the Seed of Rot started to flash by his eyes. This time, the fights almost exclusively took place in the underworld against the roaches and the invaders. But just as he expected, the visions turned on him soon enough, and he soon found himself the subject of an endless cycle of rotting away before everything just turned into a chaotic blur.

But the vision felt far less real now, like a weak mimicry of the terrifying experience he'd endured the last time. His hypothesis had been correct. Part of the trouble had come from forming a Fragment under these weird conditions. Upgrading a normal seed might prove a deadly challenge for others, but Zac had long gotten used to this sort of struggle due to the splinter stuck in his head.

Both his body and soul were stronger than usual as well, something that he had realized long ago. This had only been further improved by the unknown energy that continuously seeped out from the Splinter of Oblivion. Even though upgrading his seed was easier, it was still a draining task. It was like the Origin Dao from the Funnel was a reservoir of tainted water, and he had to manually siphon out all the poison before he could drink it.

Time passed as Zac worked with everything he had to complete his goal. He didn't know how long it took until the Funnel was completely drained of energy. After improving Rot, he didn't even dare open his eyes again since his mind felt extremely fragile after enduring another round of visions. He didn't trust himself not to go astray if he looked upon the various hallucinations that the Origin Dao brought on, and could only keep focusing on his Daos.

But with risks also came rewards. Not only had he gained the Dao Fragment that he'd hoped for, but he even managed to push his final two seeds to Peak mastery. In fact, after being forced into those cycles of death and despair, he felt he had gained more than just the final mastery of the respective seed,

and that forming a Fragment related to death on his own wasn't impossible.

He only needed some sort of spark of inspiration to bring enough momentum. Zac was elated by the amazing results of the Funnel. He would have been happy if he just got the Fragment and nothing else, but he got so much more than that.

The effect of the Dao Funnel seemed to have subsided by the time Zac managed to upgrade his Seed of Hardness as well, which was lucky since he wasn't sure what he would do if he had no Dao Seed to focus on. Pained groans could be heard from all directions as people arduously got to their feet.

Zac slowly opened his bleary eyes, taking in the surroundings for the first time since he'd unleashed his Dao Field. All the ghosts were gone, as were the tempting hallucinations in the building. However, his eyes were drawn to the dense fractals inscribed into the walls, and he even forgot to check on those around him.

"Don't look at the walls," Kenzie tiredly said, dragging Zac out of his reverie. "The Origin Dao changed the fractals somehow. They contain the Dao now."

Zac quickly looked away, since he was in no condition to keep pondering on the Dao. But horror flooded his heart when the first things he saw were the unmoving bodies on the floor.

A prickling sensation entered Void's head, prompting him to look far into the distance. He even forgot about the half-dead anointed he held by its throat, or the hundreds of unmoving Zhix warriors strewn across the royal chamber.

"So they actually managed to open it," Void muttered, some delight filling his heart.

The change in fate made him lose interest in interrogating the miscreation in his hand, and he cracked its huge neck before throwing the oversized Zhix to the side like a piece of garbage. He had wondered if those humans would ever figure

out what they held in their possession, but he had underestimated them.

Less than a month had passed since they got their hands on the Funnel, but they had already managed to release the seeds stored inside. Void had feared that it would take them years, but perhaps having enslaved a couple of alien forces worked in that man's favor. He had even considered throwing out a hint about the Funnel when he met Super Brother-Man, but in the end he'd opted against it, afraid that it would increase their vigilance.

"Do you think it will work?" the curious voice of Inevitability asked from the side.

Void looked over at his child, sighing at the sight of her face full of revelry. What would their Lord think of such a bloodthirsty subordinate? Slaughter was just a means to an end, not something to base one's cultivation around. That path was a dead end, where you were no better than a beast. He knew he would have to educate her better going forward.

But such a small detail couldn't dampen the sense of victory in his heart.

"It is too early to tell," Void said with a small smile as he once again looked in the direction of Mr. Atwood's small island kingdom.

"Our Lord is not so easily denied. It's always good to have a backup plan."

FALLOUT

There were unmoving bodies in not only the outer layer, but even in the inner one where his core people were seated. Just a glance around indicated that over a third of those who had entered the building were lying on the ground right now.

His sister looked tired but otherwise fine, and she was currently walking around trying to help others with the help of Janos. The illusionist seemed to be mostly fine, though it was always a bit hard to tell with that man. Perhaps he'd had an easier time resisting the mental corruption due to having Wisdom as his main attribute.

Zac grimaced when he saw Emily shakily helping Joanna to her feet; both of them looked ready to keel over from the simple action. Next to Joanna, one of the Valkyries lay unmoving in a pool of blood, and her bloodstained eyes were blankly staring into the beyond.

“Don't blame yourself. This is what it is to be a cultivator; braving death for a chance at greatness,” a hoarse voice echoed from behind, and Zac slowly turned around to see Ogras. “Besides, not all of them are dead. Some are just in a coma.”

The demon was as pale as a sheet, and his hand was visibly trembling. There was even blood running down his nose and from one of his ears.

“Are you okay?” Zac asked with a frown.

“I'll need to rest for a day or two,” Ogras said without hesitation as he ate a healing pill. “Did you... did you see a lot

of visions as well?”

Zac nodded. “Scenes of me killing people and dying. Even scenes of complete strangers. It was a chaotic mess that happened over and over.”

“What’s going on?” Ogras muttered as his bloodshot eyes turned to the Funnel. “It shouldn’t be like this... unless?”

“Unless what?” Zac asked.

“Resentment,” the demon concluded. “The Origin Dao was dragged out of that lunatic’s victims at their time of death, and perhaps their resentment and other negative feelings came with and tainted the Origin Dao. Perhaps that was even the plan. The gathered resentment of a whole planet would contain shocking power.”

Zac nodded in agreement, though this wasn’t the time to discuss the topic. He instead started walking around the people to check on their condition. He also opened up the array to let the doctors enter, giving strict instructions for everyone to not look at the walls and avoid loud noises. A few, like Ryan, were still in a meditative pose and couldn’t be disturbed, but Zac felt that those were out of harm’s way.

“They should have passed the trial and are currently reaping the rewards,” Ogras agreed as he followed Zac’s eyes. “They should be out of it soon enough.”

Those who still were in the middle of their epiphanies woke up one after another, and after thirty minutes everyone was awake. It was at that time they finally could make a proper tally, and Zac once again felt his insides churning with regret, even though he remembered Ogras’ words.

Only the lone Valkyrie had passed away in the second layer, but another one was in a coma. The same went for one of the demons and Mr. Trang. Six people in the outer layer had passed away from the experience, all dying from a brain hemorrhage. Another eight people were in comas caused by their minds being overtaxed.

The doctors planned on moving the unconscious, but Zac stopped them for a second as he arduously walked around to

check each one of them. There was an extremely strong correlation between the number of ghosts people were surrounded by and the severity of their condition.

Those who had teetered on the brink of collapse when Zac tried to intervene were those who now lay dead on the ground. Also, most of those who were now in a coma were the same people who had sported the silver fractals on their foreheads. Sap Trang was the only exception, and Zac guessed that the reason for his unconsciousness was rather his advanced age.

The fractals were thankfully all gone now, but that fact didn't allow Zac to breathe easy. The Great Redeemer was an expert in Karma, and seeing his people sporting his marks felt like trouble waiting to happen. He made a mental note of the appearance of everyone who had been marked before he allowed the people to be carried away.

He did also give the order to one of the Valkyries stationed outside to place a secret guard on those people and to keep a watch out for any suspicious behavior. The woman looked confused, as a few of those who were carried away were her own fellow Valkyries, but she quickly accepted the order and brought a few people along.

Zac shook his head as he walked back into the Dao House, and only then did he start to feel some happiness about the results. The atmosphere was subdued due to those who had fallen, but many of the remaining people were discussing their enormous gains with low voices.

At least it seemed that those who made it through did reap amazing rewards, taking multiple steps forward with their Dao at once. He really wanted to check with his sister how she had done, since she seemed to have been the best at handling the side effects of the Funnel. But he first gave Ogras a look, and the demon shuffled over to talk in private.

Zac recounted what he'd encountered the brief instant he woke up, how the ghosts had appeared, and the silver fractals that shone on some people's foreheads.

"Did I have a fractal?" Ogras asked. "Or anyone who's still here?"

“No, you just looked to be in extreme pain,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “And I don’t think anyone conscious right now had any fractals, but I was only awake for less than a minute. Oh, Mr. Trang is in a coma now, but he didn’t have a fractal.”

“It might just be a phenomenon that indicated that they were failing against the onslaught of resentment. The puppets were created when Salvation touched their foreheads, placing a fractal there. But Salvation is not here, so the fractals might just be a shadow reflecting the ghost’s last moment alive,” the demon mused.

“Of course, there is also the risk that those people now possess some latent problem,” Ogras muttered with a ruthless gleam in his eyes. “It’s lucky you managed to wake up and notice the anomaly. What if we have created ten new beacons that will lead that old bastard to Earth? Perhaps... it would be best if they never woke up from their current condition.”

“Out of the question,” Zac said without hesitation. “We can’t just kill them. I caused this, so I will figure something out.”

“Then what’s your plan?” the demon asked skeptically.

“We monitor them, for now, to see if they act out of the ordinary. The Abbot once shared his Karmic vision with me, and it allowed me to see the Karmic Links of the Dominators and the beacon. Perhaps there is a treasure or pill that will allow me to do the same thing for a short while,” Zac said. “That way, I’d be able to tell if they have formed a connection to the Redeemer.

“Besides, even if they are beacons, their link should be far weaker compared to the Dominators’, so we only need to make sure they’re not transmitting anything after dealing with Void’s Disciple and the other two,” Zac added.

“Fair enough; I guess it’s worth pursuing other venues first. So what do you think?” Ogras acceded, changing the topic. “Are you ready for the tower? If we leave now, we’ll have a bit over two weeks before your deadline.”

“There is no stress,” Zac finally said after some consideration. “I want to gain the two last levels for my other class.”

“You can still gain experience inside the tower,” Ogras said. “Or you’ll probably be able to buy a pill that gives a level for an F-grade warrior when we get there. They’re not very rare.”

“I know, but I want to gain the levels beforehand in case the skill quests can’t be completed inside the tower,” Zac explained. “I want both my classes to be at their best before entering the tower. You know I won’t get a second chance like you.”

Ogras sighed and nodded.

“How is your human class? Need help with your second quest before we go?” the demon said.

Zac froze for a second before his eyes widened. He had completely forgotten because of the hectic events just now, but he had actually completed his second Class Quest! Zac quickly scoured through his body and found a new fractal firmly placed on his back.

“The quest was Dao-related. I just finished it,” Zac admitted.

“Oh? What type of skill is it?” Ogras asked with curiosity.

“No idea.” Zac shrugged. “I will try it out before we leave.”

“Keep me posted. No secrets in the tower.” Ogras smiled. “It will affect our teamwork.”

Zac just threw the demon a contemptuous look. Ogras had tried to pry out all of Zac’s secrets since day one, and it was shocking how many of them he had actually figured out if you looked back on it. But Zac wouldn’t give him a complete understanding of his strengths and weaknesses.

“I think I will be good to go in an hour or two. Will you join me, or will you stay behind for a bit?” Zac asked as he looked over at the pale-faced demon.

“Monster siblings,” Ogras muttered. “The rest of us had our minds turned to putty, but the two of you are fine.”

Zac could only wryly smile as he looked over at his sister, who had been helping everyone in the building since he woke up. She was healthy enough that she was able to emit a soothing field made from her Dao, which helped people around her recuperate faster.

He initially thought that the reason he was mostly fine after that event was the fact that the splinter in his mind had made his soul sturdier, but perhaps that wasn't the only thing he had going for him. Unless Jeeves could somehow help Kenzie block out the visions, it might be due to their ancestry.

Having a big-shot mom came with all kinds of perks, it seemed.

“I need to solidify my gains,” Zac said as he stood up with a grunt. “Can you look after things here?”

“It's fine.” The demon nodded. “I'll stick around here for a few days before heading out to play with the Zombies. When do we leave?”

“In five days,” Zac eventually decided.

But there was something he needed to do before leaving the Academy. He walked over to Alyn, who had bloodshot eyes as she sat on a chair with a Divine Crystal in her hand.

“I'm sorry.” Zac sighed as he sat down next to her. “This thing exceeded my expectations.”

“Such is cultivation,” Alyn said, but her eyes darted over to the corpses that were lined up not far away.

The bodies that Alyn looked at were the seedlings that she had recommended. Out of the ten youths, four were in a coma, and another three were dead. Only three were still conscious, but they were barely better than the unconscious ones. Only one, a young man looking just a bit older than Emily, managed to stand on his own, whereas the other two seemed to have wounded souls.

It would be a devastating blow to the group of talents that had been slated for grooming if they were forced to take extreme measures because of the silver fractals. Would only three out of the ten youths walk away from this encounter alive in the end?

The results for the group of seedlings were the worst, whereas the demons were best off. They'd only lost one person, with another three in a coma. Zac could only assume that their accumulated experiences had hardened their minds, allowing them to more effectively resist the resentment.

"Do they have families? If so, make sure they're taken care of," Zac said with a heavy heart.

"They were all orphans, which is one reason I chose them," Alyn said with a small shake of her head. "They had no attachments left to their countries or families, which would allow them to work wholeheartedly for Port Atwood."

"Then provide them with a proper funeral at least," Zac said as he closed his eyes, a wave of tiredness washing over him. "Do what you can for the others. I'm afraid I can't stay here. There's too much to do."

"Don't worry. Everyone understood the risk and also the burden you carry. Just look forward and keep walking." Alyn sighed.

FRAGMENT OF THE AXE

Zac felt bad about leaving while people were still barely able to get to their feet, but he followed Alyn's advice. He lastly went over to check in on his sister, and he was relieved to see that she was fine as well. In fact, she might be even better off than himself, as she was still able to spread her Dao in the area around the Dao House.

Only then did he return to his courtyard with brisk steps. He felt a bit muddled the whole way back, as though he were dreaming. Zac knew he had warned everyone of the dangers involved, but he truly hadn't expected anyone to get hurt, much less get killed. He could only endeavor to etch this lesson in his heart so that something like this would not repeat itself.

The arrays around his place flitted to life as he sat down on a padded mat with a sigh. He wanted to immediately go over his gains, but a wave of exhaustion hit him the moment he sat down, and he immediately fell into a dreamless slumber.

Zac opened his eyes again, only to see that four hours had passed in the blink of an eye. The nap had made him feel noticeably better, with only a small headache remaining. He hadn't felt comfortable going over his gains while his people lay dead right in front of him, but he couldn't wait any longer and opened up his Dao screen.

**Fragment of the Axe (Early): All attributes +10,
Strength +110, Dexterity + 80, Endurance +15.
Effectiveness of Strength +5%.**

Seed of Trees (Peak): Endurance +20, Vitality +90, Intelligence +5, Wisdom +5.

Seed of Hardness (Peak): Endurance +100, Wisdom +20.

Seed of Sanctuary (Peak): Endurance +50, Intelligence +20, Wisdom +50.

Seed of Rot (Peak): Endurance +5, Vitality +45 Intelligence +25, Wisdom +45.

Zac slowly read through the changes, but he was truthfully a bit disappointed with the result. Fusing two Dao Seeds into a Fragment had only increased the total attributes gained from 240 to 275. He knew that he had attained almost no “new” insight compared to upgrading a single Dao Seed, but he had still thought that he would get more when evolving from a seed to a Fragment.

Of course, he had to remember that if things progressed the way it did with a seed, where the number of attributes given doubled every time it progressed, it would still rack up to a lot. A Fragment would end up giving 2,200 attribute points at Peak mastery, which was a huge number, even in the E-grade.

He hadn't gained a title by forming a Fragment either, something he had pretty much thought was a done deal. Then again, if there was a “first in world” title like all his other progenitor titles, it had likely already gone to Abbot Everlasting Peace. And the general reward for gaining a Dao Fragment might simply be the fact that he now had access to Epic classes.

The good part was that he actually gained all attributes from the Fragment, which meant that his Luck got boosted as well. And if the pattern kept going as it did with the seeds, then he might end up with a huge boost to Luck by the time the seeds reached Peak. However, if he was being honest with himself, he hoped that he wouldn't gain any more Luck from his Dao Seeds.

One of his unique advantages was his huge pool of Luck, where he had almost ten times the amount compared to most

people. It had allowed him to survive countless dangers and often turn the tables on his enemies. That advantage would quickly get eroded if one had an easy-to-access source of the special attribute.

He also got a boost of effectiveness for his main Strength, and that in and of itself might turn into a tremendous boost if the number kept increasing as the Fragment evolved. What if he got a 25% boost or something at Peak? The value from that was far higher than static increases, especially with his already large number of high-tiered titles.

Then again, he knew that the true benefit of a Dao Fragment wasn't the attributes it awarded. It was just a bonus that the System tacked on. The true benefit came from the huge boost in fighting power. That was doubly true for someone like Zac, who was a bit lacking in his control department and who could only use one Dao at the time.

The Seed of Hardness hadn't provided any surprises, even though he had tried to skew the results in his favor. When he pondered on the final upgrade, he focused on the rebounding effect of hardness. He imagined creating a body so sturdy that people hurt themselves when they attacked him, and thought that he might get some strength that way.

But it still simply doubled down on the Endurance, pushing his highest attribute to even more ridiculous heights. Luckily, he had still a lot of room for improvement before he hit his limit. He had already asked Ogras about it recently, and it turned out that the next limit usually lay around 2,500 attribute points for humanoids.

But it also meant that he would have to evolve his race as quickly as possible since he was already halfway there. It was only a matter of time before he reached 2,500 Endurance with the increased gains in E-grade.

The Seed of Rot had a surprising change in the attributes it provided, but not overly so. Alea had been on his mind a lot lately, and the way she fought had influenced his insights. He already knew that Alea's highest attribute was Intelligence,

closely followed by Vitality, and that was reflected by the gains in his Seed of Rot.

He was especially happy with the extra 45 points in Vitality since the tower was a hundred-day climb. Having a great regenerative ability would be a huge boon. If he could cut down his rest time to a third, then he would have a lot more time to spend on the harder floors at the top of the tower. He soon closed the Dao menu and opened his skill menu next to take a look at his new skill.

Hatchetman's Spirit – Proficiency: Early. Oneness with nature. Upgradeable.

He wasn't sure what oneness with nature meant, but he guessed it was some sort of boosting skill. He knew that Ogras had received the skill that turned him into a winged shadow demon at level 75, and he hoped he got something similar.

Even though he was a bit tempted to activate it right now, he chose to wait until he visited Mystic Island. Even if he had a hint of what the skill entailed, he couldn't be sure, and he didn't want to accidentally blow up his courtyard.

There was one final thing that he wanted to do before heading out, and he eagerly walked over toward the Nexus Node. He had kept himself in check all this time, but now that he possessed a Dao Fragment, he couldn't stop himself from checking out his options to evolve.

He had already confirmed from multiple people that he could simply skip evolving even if he activated the Node. Zac walked over to the huge hovering crystal with eagerness in his eyes, but his face fell after touching the crystal to begin the process.

There was no response.

He kept trying to activate the Node to display his choices, but no matter how many times he tried, there was simply nothing available for him. He swapped through the other systems, such as the skill shop, to see if the crystal was on the fritz, but it worked just fine. It was hard to believe, but it

looked like Zac truly wasn't able to evolve at this point even if he wanted to.

Zac couldn't believe that there was not a single option for him to evolve even after having gained the Fragment of the Axe. Hatchetman was only Rare, and he had already gained the prerequisite Dao for an Epic class. He had a slew of titles and accomplishments under his belt as well, and it felt ludicrous that the System wouldn't deem him worthy after all he had done.

Swallowing his burgeoning anger, he rapidly tried to think of any reason why he could be stuck like this, and he could only imagine there being two reasons. The first was his skills. Only two of his skills had reached Peak, while the rest were between Early and High mastery. Not even Axe Mastery was at Peak proficiency, which might mean that the System didn't consider him ready to evolve.

The other possibility was that some issues had arisen due to his special situation. His Duplicity Core was still F-grade, which meant it wasn't good enough to accommodate E-grade classes. This was something that had worried him for some time, but no matter where he looked into the matter, he couldn't find any clues.

Or perhaps he needed to evolve both classes at the same time, which was impossible since his other side was only at level 73?

Zac's eyes lit up with hope at the idea as he left the building housing the Nexus Node. He couldn't do anything about the issues of his skills or his Duplicity Core in the short run, but he could easily grind levels with his Undying Bulwark class.

He quickly headed over to Tul'Sarath, the town the Tir'Emarel Clan had founded before their incursion ended. The town felt a bit desolate since a large contingent of people had left along with the former slaves being freed. But by now, there were quite a few humans and a couple of Ishiate who walked the streets as Zac arrived.

Some had chosen to stay behind after being liberated, and even more had returned over the past weeks. Life outside was extremely chaotic and dangerous, and many chose to work for the aliens rather than getting eaten by some beasts. Zac shook his head at the irony as he entered Verana's mansion.

"I hear something big took place in Port Atwood," Verana said with a light voice from her seat in a garden when she saw Zac being led over by a maid.

"Nothing too major," Zac said. "I found a trinket containing stored Origin Dao, and we released it."

"It's good to see you are fine," she said with a staid demeanor. "What brings you over today?"

"I am planning to hit a couple more incursions over the next days. I could use your support," Zac said.

"Unfortunately, we're not able to help this time around," Verana said without hesitation. "My people are exhausted, and I fear another round of battle will cause too many casualties for us to bear. If we keep fighting with this intensity, there will be no Tal-Eladar left on this planet in a hundred years. We need to rest and recoup before we can discuss joint battles again."

Zac silently looked at Verana in an effort to figure out her thoughts, and she returned the stare in kind. It was pretty obvious she was angry with him and refused to help out as payback, even if that meant losing out on staking a claim on another incursion's resources.

"Remember, you asked us to stay behind as a trading partner, not as part of your army," Verana added, ending the prolonged silence.

Zac slowly nodded in agreement.

"It's fine. But don't forget why you, in particular, chose to stay behind. Are you already tired of moving forward?" Zac said as he turned to leave.

Verana didn't answer and only silently watched him leave.

Not having the help of the Tal-Eladar was a bit of a setback, especially now that all the elites of his force were down for the count for the time being. The only reason he hadn't needed to order his army to completely retreat was the fact that their lines were bolstered by the huge army of the Underworld Council.

Only nine councilors were currently on the surface, with four staying behind to keep the situation in the underworld stable. But those nine were enough to stabilize the battlefield, perhaps even more than his three demon generals.

Besides, perhaps it was a blessing in disguise that the Tal-Eladar refused to help him this time around. He had used **[Hunger]** while fighting alongside the Beast Masters, as only two of them knew of the true identity of Mr. Black.

Now that they weren't around, he could freely use **[Verun's Bite]** to fight, allowing him to take full advantage of his new Fragment. He was pretty sure that the Fragment would still work when using a sword, but the effect would be greatly diminished.

He did consider bringing a couple of the demon soldiers or Valkyries along, but he eventually decided against that as well. There would be a lot of casualties if he brought soldiers without powerful generals to hold down the fort, and all of them needed to rest for a couple of days.

Eventually, he arrived at the most logical conclusion. He would go back to his roots and close a couple of incursions on his own. He got everything ready before he headed over to Westfort as Mr. Black. He needed someone to guide him to the hidden outposts next to the incursions, so he commandeered one of the Marshalls who worked for the intelligence department.

Just thirty minutes later, the scenery was flashing past him as he utilized **[Loamwalker]** to run through the wilderness.

COASTAL INCURSION

Not being encumbered with a group of soldiers had its own advantages. Zac could move with over twice the speed he usually did when his elite squad joined him for battle, and it only took him a bit over eight hours before he reached his destination.

It was an incursion manned with extremely ugly aliens. There was an image attached to the intelligence report, and Zac felt like they looked like humanoid toads who had injected themselves with supercharged steroids to grow oversized muscles.

Their heads were large enough for them to fit a human head in their mouths, and they sat straight at their torsos without a neck. They had two sets of large murky-green eyes, but no ears or noses. They also had four arms, with the second set being slightly smaller and extending from slightly above their thick hips.

Judging by their stocky builds, Zac would have thought them leaning toward Strength-based classes like himself, but he learned that they also had quite a few water-based mages. The incursion was placed by the shore, and they had caused massive tsunamis to drown the people of the close-by settlements.

There was also an unconfirmed report that the frogmen were adept at illusionary skills since there was one thing that set this incursion apart from most others. There was no incursion pillar to showcase their position, and the general

guess was that these frogmen had hidden it somehow in a bid to stay under the radar.

These invaders were quite brutal, but Zac had held off on targeting this place until now because they had already killed everyone close by, and it didn't look like they were expanding their territory. The Marshalls were guessing that they were busy with something underwater, as their class choices and appearance indicated an amphibian nature.

It quickly became obvious to Zac as he crept closer to the incursion that they mainly lived on land, even if they might be comfortable in the water as well. A sprawling town right on the shoreline spread out, and Zac saw some frogmen walking back and forth along the streets.

Interestingly enough, the town didn't have any physical wall, but a wide moat had been dug to encompass the town, turning it into an artificial island. There was only one bridge, and it looked like they could lift it like a drawbridge if needed.

Walls were technically not needed in a world with arrays, but a proper wall kept out weaker beasts without wasting any Nexus Crystals. Walls were so easy to construct now that people had both Cosmos Sacks to transport material and superhuman strength, so almost all settlements that Zac had visited sported defenses that would make any medieval lord proud.

The fact that there was no wall only made Zac more confident that there was an array protecting the town, but he couldn't sense it even after spying on the town for over twenty minutes. Of course, that didn't mean it wasn't there. The invaders had killed pretty much all the humans in the vicinity, so perhaps they didn't bother keeping it active to reduce their running costs. However, any force strong enough to receive a chance to helm an incursion would at least have the smarts to protect their encampment.

His hunch that the place wasn't as unguarded as it seemed was soon confirmed as the large head of a frogman suddenly appeared in the middle of the artificial river before it once

again submerged under the depths. They actually had guards staying underwater.

Zac wasn't sure how to best attack the town. Taking out a ship and entering from the ocean would be playing straight into their strength, but just walking up to the bridge felt like walking into a trap.

Unfortunately he had no skills for infiltration in either of his classes, so he decided to get as close as possible while using the natural cover at hand. He crept along in the high grass, but soon enough, he couldn't get any closer without stepping on open land. Since Zac had no way to hide any longer, he immediately accelerated to a full-out sprint as he ran straight toward the closest section of the moat.

He had eventually decided to go straight in, and the ground cracked beneath him as he barreled forward like an enraged bull. It only took a second for screams and warning sounds to start blasting across the town, but Zac wasn't deterred, and a storm of Miasma was released from him as he activated **[Fields of Despair]** before jumping across the river.

A blast of water suddenly surrounded him as the water in the moat rose with shocking speed, and Zac's brows rose when he noticed that the water had somehow stolen all his momentum mid-jump. The water surged around him as he started to feel a huge pressure bearing down on every part of his body. Luckily, he didn't need to breathe in his current form, saving him from drowning due to the trap.

He had been wrong about his assumption that these people didn't have a wall. It was only that it was made out of water rather than stone or wood. The whole moat had risen over ten meters, and the water stayed in the air, defying all gravity.

Sharp stabs of pain erupted across Zac's body as the nearby guards launched ranged attacks on him while he was stuck in place. Something was off with the water as well, as no matter how much he flailed his arms and legs to swim out, he was still stuck in place. The liquid was somehow enchanted, and it truly was a bane for most land-based cultivators.

Of course, it was not that Zac was completely helpless inside the block of water. Since he couldn't swim out, he would simply have to cut his way out. His arm swelled with power as he kept infusing it with Miasma, and he noticed that he was able to cram a lot more energy into his muscles since his latest boost to his Endurance.

The water started to shudder and twist from the huge concentration of power, and Zac finally unleashed a mighty vertical swing that contained a force that shouldn't belong to someone who still hadn't even evolved to E-grade. The wall of water in the area was completely ripped to shreds from the immense force, and Zac fell down to the exposed riverbed.

The water wall was temporarily dispersed, though another huge gout of water headed straight toward him. It was only barely that Zac managed to jump inside the town in time, avoiding getting trapped once again.

However, he made for quite the sorry figure as he crawled up on dry land. He was completely caked in mud, and there was even a crab that angrily ran along his shoulder. That was fine with Zac, as his embarrassing display had emboldened the frogmen to launch a direct assault on him.

Over a hundred warriors rushed toward him, and Zac sensed a surprising amount of power from the warrior in the lead. The frogman held a large golden trident that Zac immediately could tell was a Spirit Tool, and he also wielded two aquamarine crystals in his second set of hands. The two crystals suddenly lit up with a lustrous shine as he approached.

Zac immediately sensed danger approaching from behind, and he instinctively threw himself forward, barely avoiding a block of ice the size of a truck slamming into the ground where he just stood. The attack caused a huge shockwave, throwing Zac another few steps forward. The moment he landed, his foot stomped onto the ground, and Zac disappeared from sight.

It was [**Profane Seal**] that Zac activated now that he finally had his target in sight. He had held back on both unleashing his Dao Fragment and his more impressive skills

since he was afraid that the incident with the Flame Golems would repeat itself. He wanted to close the incursion as quickly as possible, but he also needed to gain the last two levels.

And now that his prey was caught, it was finally time to put his Dao of the Axe to the test.

The towers of **[Profane Seal]** immediately trapped the whole army, and a terrifying aura spread out as Zac unleashed his Dao Field to cover the entire cage. His attributes might not have undergone a huge change by forming a Fragment, but his Dao Field had received a shocking transformation.

The frogmen caught within his aura were no longer harassed by a constant stream of small cuts; they were now receiving huge gaping wounds from nowhere. Energy started streaming into his body almost immediately, as there were unlucky frogmen who received fatal cuts from his Dao Field, their throats getting slit open without any warning.

The number of kills quickly slowed down as shields of water quickly covered the warriors, which blocked out most of the power of his Dao Fragment. Unfortunately for the frogmen, the nightmare had only started, and the spectral chains started to dance through their life, punching straight through the walls of water with only minimal resistance.

The macabre scene of corpses getting strung along like Zac was making a necklace repeated itself, but Zac's attention was on the leader.

Storms of ice rampaged outside the cage as a hailstorm had formed in no time. It was no doubt the frogman leader who utilized those two crystals to attack **[Profane Seal]** from outside. The power contained in the barrage was impressive, likely because he had such a huge amount of water readily available from the ocean.

However, the Seal had already been upgraded to Middle mastery, and it would take some time for the storm to break down the sturdy towers. And Zac reckoned a minute should be all he needed as he pushed toward the froglord, his right arm already swelling from **[Unholy Strike]**.

The frogman seemed to sense the danger from Zac's approach, and a huge swirl of energy quickly gathered around him as he swelled up to three times his original size. Living streams of water surged around him as a liquid armor formed on his body. The transformation made him look like a god of the ocean, and it became especially poignant when the frogman's trident started to crackle with extremely potent lightning.

The invader pointed his trident straight at Zac, and one of the crystals suddenly started to spew out a rampant stream of water that possessed such speed that Zac didn't even have time to summon [**Immutable Bulwark**]. Worse yet, the froglord had crammed the stream with enough electricity to run a small town, and the barrage made Zac's whole body spasm painfully. A spectral ghost appeared to stab the frogman in his chest, but the water armor effortlessly absorbed the strike.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as Zac forcibly resisted getting washed away, but the stream of water seemed endless. He considered activating his Bulwark skill to redirect the blast, but he instead decided to simply use his axe instead. Rampant energies made the water churn as Zac swung his axe down with all his might.

He had no skill to add range to the attack itself, so he could only use his Dao and his Strength in hopes of creating an extended shockwave. The moment he imbued his axe with his newly acquired Fragment, it felt like he had the ability to cut all creation in half, and his axe ripped down through the torrent of water with undeniable momentum.

For a moment, it felt like time had stopped, but the illusion only lasted for a fraction of a second. There was an unmistakable feeling that Zac had cut something more than just the water, even though his eyes couldn't make sense of the intuition. It did feel like he had unquestionably cut apart space in front of him, and that the space in front of him was actually two separate pieces even now.

But at the same time everything looked the same, making Zac wonder if his mind was just making things up in its belief that the Fragment should create a larger spectacle. Zac had

learned to trust his guts by now, and he truly believed that something had changed, even if he couldn't see any conclusive proof.

Thankfully, there was a reaction to his swing soon enough, as the torrent of water stopped slamming into him, allowing Zac to once again see his opponent. Zac's eyes turned to the hulking form pointing his trident at him, ready to meet its second attack. However, the frogman stood completely frozen, and a huge surge of energy entered his body the next moment.

Zac's eyes widened in surprise as the body of the frogman fell apart into two pieces, and the enormous cut looked so smooth that one could think that he had used a laser from the Technocrats' armory. Zac still couldn't figure out exactly what happened, but one thing was abundantly clear: the froglord was as dead as dead can be.

Was that it?

Zac had expected the frog to have a water clone, or do something to avoid the fatal blow, but it simply died where it stood from a single swing empowered by his Dao Fragment. It had emitted such a mighty aura; was it all bluster? Or was the difference of power brought by the Dao Fragment simply that huge?

The fight from there on out went without suspense. The moment the leader fell, the barrage of ice from outside stopped, ending any hope of escape for the remaining soldiers. The area was blanketed in dark corrosive clouds and deathly mists, and wails could constantly be heard from within. Just a minute later, the clamor gave way to a deathly silence, with only Zac walking out from one of the gates before [**Profane Seal**] dissipated.

It was at this point the remaining invaders usually fled toward the Nexus Hub in a bid to escape Earth, but Zac looked on with confusion as he saw the remaining frogmen streaming into the ocean. Most had already fled, and the town was pretty much desolate by the point that he exited.

Had the invaders chosen to stay on, hiding in the oceans until they could enact revenge?

OPTIONS

Zac's confusion only grew when he couldn't find the Nexus Hub even after entering the town, and he realized he needed some answers. Zac quickly ran after the fleeing frogman and jumped into the ocean himself, but even with his superior attributes, he had a hard time catching up with them. They were simply better suited to moving quickly underwater with the help of their four arms and huge webbed feet.

The hunt went on for almost twenty minutes, and the frogmen fled in a straight line while harassing Zac with various attacks to keep him at bay. He tried to respond in kind, but he wasn't really used to fighting underwater. It added a whole new dimension to the battle, as the targets were not only noticeably faster, but they could freely move in essentially any direction.

His undead class was also extremely bad at this type of fighting, as it both lacked movement skills and ranged attacks. His acquired skill [**Winds of Decay**] could reluctantly be classified as ranged, but he was unable to use it underwater. The only thing he had going for him was that he didn't need to breathe, so he could keep paddling forward so as to not let his prey out of his sight.

Zac considered swapping to his other class to start launching fractal blades at the frogmen, but he soon stopped in his tracks when he realized what was going on. Not far ahead, a sprawling underwater town stretched out, and the frogmen fled toward a square in the middle. There were still some

frogmen in the square, cramming toward the center to touch the enormous crystal placed there.

A cursory glance proved that the place was already mostly evacuated, though, probably since the frogmen had had plenty of time to leave. Zac had to admit it was a pretty ingenious way to protect their people. The town on the shore was just a decoy or an outpost, while their real base was far out to sea.

The Nexus Hub was actually underwater, which probably explained why there was no pillar to be seen at the surface. The pillar had already been deactivated by now since he had defeated the leader of the incursion, but he noticed that there was an uncharacteristic haze above the water. Perhaps the mist had been created by an array in a bid by the frogmen to hide the true seat of their power.

The frogmen he had followed were actually streaming toward the Nexus Hub rather than some hideout in the ocean, and Zac allowed them to exit now that he knew that they didn't plan on staying on Earth. He was more interested in checking out the underwater town, since it was his first time seeing something like this.

Some of the structures were completely submerged in water, but other sections of the town were enveloped by enormous water bubbles, making them habitable by humans as well. Zac felt a place like this would make a decent hidden base, as long as they could figure out how to actually make sure that the pockets of water didn't disappear.

He was also extremely eager to get a hold of this kind of technology, as it might allow him to expand his kingdom to the waters as well. He was sure there were all kinds of valuables hiding in the depths around his islands, but he didn't have a way to properly extract them until now. If he could create mobile air bubbles, he'd be able to send people to scout the ocean floor for everything from mines to rare Spirit Herbs.

Things progressed in the usual manner from there on out, and a troop of people emerged from the teleportation array Zac had set up within one of the larger air bubbles. Exploring an underwater town would bring its own set of difficulties, but

Zac would let others figure that out, and he left through the teleportation array to pick up Jonas, the guide from the Marshall Clan.

The following days were just a storm of blood and steel as Zac moved through the continent of Pangea like a walking calamity. Between his unbreakable defense and the terrifying might of his Dao Fragment, nothing could hinder his path. One incursion after another was shut down as Zac wasted no time. He would have plenty of time to rest in the tower, so now was the time for action.

Jonas Marshall, who was forced to guide “Mr. Black,” looked more and more horrified as the days passed, and he didn’t even dare to speak up or look in Zac’s direction after he had closed three incursions in less than two days.

Zac didn’t care, though, as the only thing on his mind was to crush all the lingering threats to Earth before he left, or at least those he could handle now. He only returned to Port Atwood after four days of relentless battle, but his hard work had paid off. He had closed every single incursion on his list.

As far as Zac and the Marshall Clan could tell, there were currently only five incursions left on Earth after Zac’s rampage, or seven if you included the demons and Tal-Eladar. One was the Church of Everlasting Dao, and another was the Undead Empire.

The final three incursions were invaders who had been unlucky enough to be placed next to the Undead Empire itself, and they were all currently embroiled in battle with the undead hordes. They probably didn’t fight to help Earth, but rather to prolong their stay so that they could extract more resources from Earth.

No matter their reasons, they could still be counted as reluctant allies against the Lich King, so Zac left them alone, even though he had the ability to close them down as well. Shutting down all those incursions had given him a tremendous boost to his confidence, something that he had slightly lacked since encountering the Cyborg. A Dao

Fragment provided a far larger boost to his fighting power than upgrading his skills ever could.

But most importantly, he had reached his goal; he had finally reached level 75 with his Undying Bulwark class. He had been forced to head over to Mystic Island and grind the final stretch for a few hours after closing the last incursion on his list, but he actually made it. He sat down to catch his breath the moment he entered his courtyard, and he opened up his menu before changing back to his human form.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 75

Class: [F-Epic] Undying Bulwark

Race: [E] Draugr

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord

Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt – 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist

Limited Titles: Frontrunner

Dao: Fragment of the Axe – Early, Seed of Trees – Peak, Seed of Hardness – Peak, Seed of Sanctuary – Peak, Seed of Rot – Peak

Core: [F] Duplicity

Strength: 798 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 147%]

Dexterity: 400 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Endurance: 1,175 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]

Vitality: 567 [Increase: 50%. Efficiency: 140%]

Intelligence: 218 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Wisdom: 313 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Luck: 165 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]

Free Points: 19

Nexus Coins: [F] 871,111,618

He had once again been given 20 attribute points rather than 2 from reaching Peak F-grade, one of which was taken by his class. Zac only briefly hesitated before he threw everything into Strength, pushing him one step closer to his goal of getting 1,000 in that attribute before he evolved.

He had also gained a hefty number of Nexus Coins, even excluding the 500 million he'd gotten from Verana earlier. But that wasn't what truly interested him at this moment, and he quickly opened up his quest menu to have a look at his new quests.

Vanguard of Undeath (Class): Obtain a defensive Dao Fragment. Reward: Vanguard of Undeath skill. (0/1)

Undying Legion (Class): Gather the resentment by vanquishing 500,000 foes Reward: Undying Legion skill. (500,000/500,000) COMPLETE.

There were two new Class Quests as expected, but he felt a surge of elation when he saw that one of them was actually already completed. The moment he focused on the quest, it immediately disappeared from the list, forming a fractal around his right wrist.

After the moment of happiness passed, Zac started to frown in consternation. The quest had been to kill 500,000 things, something he had long accomplished between the beast hordes, all the Zombies, and his grinding during the Hunt. But what did "gather the resentment" mean? Was he carrying around a bunch of resentment unknowingly?

He remembered the horrible scenes elicited by the Dao Funnel, and he started to worry that he might be setting himself up for disaster if he didn't cleanse the resentment

somehow. Perhaps it was something like Karma. He was bound to kill a lot more beings than most due to not being able to cultivate, and this was potentially a hidden danger that he needed to watch out for.

Dealing with resentment was outside of his expertise, and he made a mental note to have Kenzie ask Brazla about it. The two of them had a far better relationship, and the chance of the annoying Tool Spirit divulging information was a lot higher if she was the one asking.

He held off on activating [**Undying Legion**] in Port Atwood and instead focused on [**Vanguard of Undeath**]. The second Class Quest wasn't surprising at all, as it essentially mirrored the one for [**Hatchetman's Spirit**]. Luckily, it didn't demand him to reach Middle mastery of a Dao Fragment due to being a quest for an Epic class, but the quest did present another problem.

He had already decided to walk his own path, forgoing fusing Sanctuary with Hardness to instead enter the path of Life and Death. Would his Fragments still be considered defensive? Yrial had mentioned Fragment of the Corpse when they spoke, and that didn't sound much like a defensive Dao. It rather seemed to be on the path of death, or perhaps puppetry or control. But his Seed of Trees was at least considered defensive for his last quest, and hopefully that trend would continue.

In either case, the skill would have to wait, since he hadn't gained any inspiration that would allow him to fuse either of his two remaining Fragments. He could only put his hopes on some opportunity presenting itself in the tower or the Base Town.

Since he was done with everything he needed to do, he swapped back to his human form, but he didn't immediately leave to find Ogras or his sister. He rather headed over to the Nexus Node once more, hoping to get a better result this time. His heart was pounding in his chest as he touched the large crystal once more.

[E-Rare] Fallen Groveskeeper (The grove fell, but you took on its torment.) // [E-Epic] Undying Warlord (Unstoppable. Undeniable. Unmatched.)

[E-Rare] Mountain's Ward (Defender of the mountain, stout and unyielding.) // [E-Epic] Curse of Nature (All can be corrupted, even life itself.)

It was like a huge weight was lifted from his shoulders when he saw that there were actual options available for him to pick this time around. It meant that it was the level of his Undying Bulwark class that had been holding him back rather than the Duplicity Core or something else.

Of course, he still felt he would need to put some priority in upgrading the Specialty Core, since having an F-grade core when he proceeded to E-grade might result in unanticipated issues. For example, his Duplicity Core was unique, giving him a full set of attributes for his second class. What if he needed to upgrade his core for that to continue? He could stand to lose a huge amount of attribute points if it worked like that.

Zac carefully read through the classes and their descriptions before he quickly removed his hand from the Nexus Node to avoid any mishaps or bouts of impulsivity. But he didn't walk away, but he rather stood frozen in place as he looked into the distance with some loss and confusion.

He had to admit that he was extremely disappointed with his options. He had expected there to be at least one Arcane class to pick, considering his insane amount of attribute points, titles, and achievements. But he didn't even have two Epic classes to fall back on, with his human form still being relegated to a Rare class.

Was this some sort of punishment from the System for his heritage? He had already speculated the System had it out for him before, but was it actually true? Or was he still lacking in other departments to the point that he couldn't even get two Epic classes? Only after a few minutes did he manage to steady his mind and go over the facts.

The situation was disappointing, but Zac believed he had gained a few clues as to how the System would handle his dual classes. The most obvious thing was that it didn't let him independently pick his two classes, but they rather came in pairs. It meant that his idea of only evolving one class and returning to the tower that way was out.

The combined class evolution provided a few more clues as well. The most striking thing was the fact that his Fragment of the Axe could not be used as a prerequisite to evolve both his classes.

His struggles were clearly far from over.

ENFORCED BALANCE

There was no doubt in Zac's mind that the System had decided that his two class upgrades could not both use the same Daos as a base for its upgrade path. This was by far the most likely reason why he was provided two different options for Epic classes for his Undying Bulwark class, but none for his Hatchetman class.

He already knew that the evolution of Undying Bulwark would have to be at least Epic Rarity, which in turn required at least one Dao Fragment to upgrade. That was why the Fragment of the Axe was "used up" to provide an option to upgrade his Draugr class first.

This forced his Hatchetman to rely on his remaining Dao Seeds for options in what direction to evolve in. The fact that neither Fallen Groveskeeper nor Mountain's Ward seemed to have any obvious connection to axes was another strong indicator that his theory was correct.

He could also make a decent guess about which Daos were used for which class choices.

Zac guessed that Undying Warlord used his Fragment of the Axe together with the Dao Seeds he'd gotten from Undying Bulwark. It would still likely be a class geared toward leading undead armies, but with a more offensive component added.

That left the seeds of Rot and Trees for Hatchetman, creating the "Fallen Groveskeeper" class. It also felt like he had the accomplishments for such a class. He had literally

created a “fallen grove” on his property, the hidden valley where the corrupted Tree of Ascension stood.

The Curse of Nature seemed to have incorporated Rot and Trees with the Fragment of the Axe instead, leaving hardness to create the Mountain’s Ward in conjunction with his nature-aspected skills. There were a few more possible combinations of Dao Seeds, but Zac guessed he lacked other qualifications to get other class choices.

It did leave him a bit confused about what sort of connection Curse of Nature had with the Fragment of the Axe. Would it be some sort of class that caused corruption and curses with the swing of his axe? He did have a mental component baked into his Axe Fragment come to think of it, the mental heaviness.

What Zac didn’t know was if the System split up everything between his two paths, not only Daos. For example, did the System take half of his accomplishments to evolve Hatchetman, and the other half to evolve Undying Bulwark? It was much harder to figure out what the rules were on something intangible like accomplishments.

Luckily, he had some extra merit in the bank from closing the Technocrat incursion, which would hopefully help him out a bit if he found himself lacking in the future. There were also more accomplishments to be had in the Tower of Eternity before he had to pick a class.

Perhaps his current situation was a way for the System to enforce some balance. Having two classes was an almost disgusting advantage, and it was fair enough that he would have to work twice as hard to Evolve both of them to high-quality classes. But it also begged the question of whether he should maintain his goal of getting as high rarities as possible.

He was so far beyond everyone else on Earth, and he had advantages that would make most people in the Multiverse green with envy. Yet he hadn’t even managed to get any options to upgrade his classes’ rarity after all he had accomplished. That proved the difficulties surrounding the

highest rarities, and he was once again reminded of Alyn's exhortations of not biting off more than one could chew.

But at the same time, he couldn't stop himself from being drawn toward the concept of an Arcane class. What was the point of cultivation if not becoming as powerful as possible in order to protect those around you? His classes and the opportunities they provided were a large reason he could defeat even those who possessed equal or even higher attributes than him.

Besides, if he got stuck when evolving to D-grade in the future, he could always head out to adventure and find new opportunities to make up for what he lacked. This time, he was pretty much forced to quickly evolve to meet the threats on Earth, but Zac wouldn't be as rushed for time after dealing with the incursions and the Dominators.

He would have a hundred years to slowly and steadily progress, allowing him to push both his skills and his Daos to Peak before attempting to form his Cultivator's Core.

His options for classes weren't exactly what he had wished for, but they gave him a good hint in what direction to work in. He felt that his optimal choice was to focus on a Fragment of Death next, or at least some subordinate Dao to the Dao of Death. That way, he could use his Fragment of the Axe to upgrade Hatchetman, and the death-attuned Dao Fragment to upgrade Undying bulwark.

Best of all would certainly be if he could get both Fragments, which might even give him the chance at one Arcane class and one Epic, but he couldn't be too greedy.

As for the specific classes he was presented, he didn't analyze them too deeply, apart from figuring out why he could choose them. His options would probably change completely the moment he gained another Fragment, making it premature to plan his cultivation around the classes he saw now.

He quickly left his private domain to head over to the Thayer Consortium. It was time to finish his preparations.

“The brave general returns!” the Sky Gnome said as he handed over a Cosmos Sack. “I bet your name will be used to scare unruly children after the invaders return home. I’ve never heard of anyone single-handedly closing multiple incursions in one week.”

The Sky Gnome had already prepared a long list of items that Zac would need, containing everything from a wide array of attuned crystals to provisions to last for almost a year. Ogras had said that anything could happen inside the tower, so he had prepared for every contingency he could think of.

“Half of them fled the moment it became apparent that I would be able to single-handedly breach their defensive arrays,” Zac said with a wry smile as he accepted the sack. “The leaders usually fled first, leaving mostly the slaves and noncombat classes to cover their escape. I simply stood and watched for the most part.”

“It’s good to have some benevolence, but don’t be complacent when you arrive at the Tower of Eternity,” Calrin said with a serious face. “You will be mixing with all kinds of people, some from terrifying forces, and not everyone will share your kind-hearted mindset. Keep your head down and focus on your task.”

“I will be careful.” Zac smiled. “About that money?”

The Sky Gnome looked a bit queasy, but he transferred over almost 4 billion Nexus Coins without complaint. It was the combined worth of the sales of his Beast Crystals, along with his accumulated dividends from all the profits the Thayer Consortium had accumulated since the Beast Waves.

“Here, take this as well,” Calrin said as he took off a ring from one of his fingers. “It’s something the Thayer progenitor found during his travels. He discovered this at an ancient gravesite, and it has extremely impressive defensive properties. It can only be used once every year though, so only activate it if you’re all out of options.”

Zac wasn’t too surprised that the Thayer ancestor was a hobbyist grave robber in addition to a merchant after having met his descendants. He gratefully accepted the ring, since one

could never have too many aces in a place like the Tower of Eternity.

“Thank you, I appreciate it,” Zac said as he put the ring on his right hand.

“When are you leaving?” Calrin asked curiously.

“In a few hours. I just need to deal with a few matters first,” Zac answered after some thought. “Can you find Ogras to make sure he’s ready as well?”

“I’ll find him. He has requested some items as well.” Calrin nodded. “Good luck. And remember, a great leader always has time to earn some money on the side. Keep your eyes peeled for good trades!”

There were a few more things to take care of, and the first was to head over to the battlefield. There were a couple of people he needed to speak with, and he began with the Marshall Clan rather than visiting his own army. He was leaving for a while, so he felt he should touch base with Thea first.

It had been over a month since they last spoke in person, though he got regular updates on her activities and her army’s situation. He headed over to the battlefield with the help of a Marshall Liaison residing in Port Atwood and was quickly led toward the command tent of the Marshalls’ allied army.

The army was far larger than Zac had thought, with tents almost reaching the horizon. There had to be at least half a million people in the camp, and Zac didn’t understand where she had gotten so many people. But it was good that she had found help against the threat, and he put aside the question as he entered the tent.

There was a middle-aged man who gave off a military vibe standing by a large map, and Thea stood next to him, looking slightly troubled. Something had changed about her since he’d seen her last. She felt harder and a bit colder compared to before. But Zac wasn’t surprised, as war had that effect. He could imagine it was especially demoralizing to be forced to face Zombies that were once your people.

The fact that she stayed in a constant cloud of Miasma didn't help either. He had seen the effect the death-attuned energy had on people personally. Zac himself was fine since he could simply cram any errant Miasma into his Duplicity Core, but others weren't so lucky. They would first become broody and grim until they were finally transformed into true Zombies.

He could still remember the scene where the poor adventurer finally lost control over the accumulated Miasma in his body. And the following scene where his former companions ripped him to pieces to get a hold of his Zombie Core. But Zac could tell that the people he'd passed in the camp were far from reaching that state, which was a small relief at least.

"Long time no see," Zac said with a small smile as he walked up toward the table.

"Indeed. I hear your people have closed the final incursions?" Thea said as she looked up from the table. "Are you preparing to assault the Dead Zone? How can we help?"

"Not quite." Zac sighed. "I need more preparation."

"Every day of delay costs us ten thousand lives," Thea said with a frown. "And there's also the issue of the array."

Port Atwood had immediately sent an update regarding everything they'd learned about the array the moment Zac turned back, so the Marshall Clan and the Sino-Indian Alliance long knew about it.

"We still have a few weeks before the array can activate, especially now that we've gotten reinforcements from the underworld," Zac said, feeling a bit startled about Thea's strong reaction.

He knew he had gotten a bit sidetracked with the underworld and rescuing his army, but the fact remained that he was pretty much on schedule. They had discussed a timeline of up to two months to close all the incursions on the surface, and Zac had completed the task well within those parameters.

At the same time, he could understand her sentiment. It was her people, many even from her own family, who kept dying in their continuous effort to keep the Zombie horde at bay. He had heard that Thea almost lived out on the battlefield, taking on as much as she could so that as few of her people as possible would die.

It might have felt extremely frustrating to suddenly see Zac's progress stop after only closing a handful of the incursions on the surface. It was only last week he'd resumed his work, closing the remaining ones in quick succession. That made the three weeks in between look particularly suspicious.

But even then, things couldn't be rushed.

"We have to be careful about the Undead Empire. They are far beyond any other incursion in power. We need to do everything in our power to improve our odds while we still can, only attacking when we have confidence in success," Zac said, trying to underscore the importance of taking their time to power up.

"I understand." Thea sighed.

The two kept discussing the war for twenty minutes or so until Zac needed to leave.

"Ten days to two weeks. I will launch an all-out assault within that time. I hope I can count on your assistance," Zac said as he left, leaving the two Marshall Clan members silently looking at his back.

"What do you think?" Thea asked as she watched Zac disappear out of sight.

"I think he speaks the truth; he doesn't feel like the scheming type. He needs to do something before evolving," Mark said after some thought. "All our research does point to evolving to E-grade being a quick process, even if you have a high-rarity class. I would guess he has been holding off in order to get a better class. Our liaison mentioned some large event took place at their Academy the other day."

"A better class..." Thea mumbled, some light dimming in her eyes. "But he's been level 75 for over a month by now

while Earth is dying. So it's for himself in the end... Was I wrong about him?"

FINAL HOURS

The meeting with Thea was surprisingly tense, but Zac guessed it wasn't anything too surprising, considering how her last month had been. It was obvious that she was both physically and spiritually exhausted after fighting the Zombies for so long. He could only shrug off the uncomfortable feelings as he proceeded with the things on his list.

He visited his settlements one after another to see whether there was anything that required his attention. Luckily, things were running quite smoothly so far. The former incursions had vast swathes of unclaimed land around them, and there hadn't been a single dispute over territory so far. Not that anyone would dare encroach on his domain.

Next, he headed over to the Atwood army, which once again was embroiled in a protracted war against the second undead horde. The soldiers looked at him with awe as he stepped toward the front line, and he saw Ilvere hurry over from the distance.

"Is there something wrong?" the demon asked with confusion, since he hadn't been forewarned about Zac's arrival.

"I'm leaving in a bit," Zac said after making sure no one else was within earshot. "I thought I could thin the herd a bit for you guys before that. Do you know a good sector to strike?"

The general's eyes lit up, and he immediately started to think of a plan.

“I’d stay away from the innermost core, even if I were you. The young master mentioned that there is an extremely strong array in there; he barely got out before it closed in around him. There are a few places we call command clumps in the inner area, though. They’re far into the horde, but not so far that you enter the array of Unholy Beacons,” the demon eventually said.

Zac nodded, as he had heard Ogras mention it earlier as well. It was the same reason that Thea hadn’t dared another assassination attempt. It was pretty much impossible to head into the core unless you were ready to risk it all in taking the general down, and Zac wasn’t ready to reveal all his cards before fighting the Lich King.

“Command clumps?” Zac asked curiously, focusing on what he could help with at the moment.

“Clumps with highly intelligent Zombies that command the rest of them. They’re what’s stopping the stupid ones from simply walking off into the woods. We generally try to find and kill solitary leaders like that to fracture the horde one piece at a time,” the demon said.

“Won’t I cause a stampede if I kill a command clump, then?” Zac asked skeptically.

“The clump is surrounded by the strongest Zombies. If you kill them as well, only the rabble will remain,” Ilvere said. “We will be able to handle the weaker ones now that we have the underworld army to help.”

“How have things been working out with the council so far?” Zac asked.

The Underworld Council was the last thing he needed to check on before returning to Port Atwood. The Atwood army relied on the strength of the councilors to keep the undead general in check. Now that Alea was out of commission, only Janos and Ilvere remained. Both had gotten a decent power-up from the Dao Funnel, but they’d also had a much lower starting point compared to the Undead Empire.

They alone weren't a strong enough deterrent, but with ten councilors to help out, even the undead general would have to think twice before moving out.

"They are competent fighters," Ilvere said with approval. "Much better than the rabble of the Sino-Indian Alliance. But they are also holding back, and they appear to have sent out quite a few scouting parties toward the wilderness."

"They're no doubt looking for places to set up proper towns," Zac said before changing topic. "By the way, how's your progress on **[Cyclic Strike]** coming along?"

"I've mastered it, thanks to the opportunity you and the young master presented," Ilvere said with some pride. "I managed to push both my Daos to Peak mastery. Everything went extremely smoothly after that. As soon as my soul healed, I tried it out, and it almost came naturally, as though the two Daos wanted to form a cycle of their own accord."

The mouth of Zac started to twitch with some annoyance since he couldn't say that he had enjoyed the same success the past days. He had renewed his efforts of mastering **[Cyclic Strike]** now that both his Seed of Trees and Rot were at Peak mastery. But his control hadn't really improved at all, and he wasn't even halfway to being able to activate the skill properly, let alone use it in a fight.

Was this the result of having zero affinity with the Daos? Was he forced to stay a dumb brute who had to smash his head against every trial that came his way? Was the path of the refined cultivator forever out of his grasp?

He had the demon display the strike a few times, and Zac had to admit that its might was a bit shocking. It almost felt like the large metal ball was infused with a Dao Fragment rather than two Dao Seeds as it shot out in the direction that Ilvere targeted, and the power was enormous for someone at Ilvere's level.

Yrial had said that the attack was nothing much, but was he simply saying that from the perspective of a C-grade Monarch? **[Cyclic Strike]** was not too important for Zac, who already possessed a real Dao Fragment by now, but what if he

managed to form the Life/Death Fragments? How powerful would the skill be if it was powered by Fragments rather than seeds?

Zac kept having Ilvere repeat the strike over and over, and he asked all kinds of questions to make sense of why the demon had mastered the skill so effortlessly. He asked about everything from how he controlled his mental energy to even minor details like how he breathed during the infusion.

Zac was determined to learn the skill during his stay in the tower. If he couldn't manage that much in one hundred days, he might as well jump into a well and stay there out of shame.

He didn't immediately find out any solution to his inability to combine his two Daos, but he did get a few clues on how to act going forward. It was all he could do for now, and he returned to the subject of thinning out the Zombie horde.

It quickly became apparent that they would need the assistance of the Underworld Council if Zac started rampaging inside the horde, so Zac set off to the nearby, and much larger, camp belonging to the council. He was immediately showed inside a command tent with great courtesy, and he spotted a few familiar faces there.

"I barely see any of the Molemen around?" Zac asked with confusion after going through the customary greetings. "I thought they'd jump at the opportunity to see the sky again after all this time."

"Old habits die hard," Lararia, one of the Molemen councilors, said. "We have lived beneath the surface for thousands of years. The darkness and stone have become part of us. Not all are ready to leave their sanctuary just yet, or perhaps ever."

"I see." Zac slowly nodded, understanding their feeling.

The concept of "home" was something built into one's wiring, and Zac had felt slightly oppressed the whole time he'd spent down in the tunnels. Coming back to the surface was like he could suddenly breathe again, so he could understand how the opposite held true for the Molemen.

Perhaps his dreams of creating large underwater towns would end up as a pipe dream unless he could find some amphibious races to join his force.

“So what brings you here today?” another councilor asked.

“I will be busy taking care of a few unavoidable matters for a bit over a week,” Zac explained. “So I was planning on thinning the horde a bit before I leave. I was hoping I could count on your cooperation.”

“No problem. These undead have proven a great whetstone for our armies,” Lararia said without hesitation. “We don’t mind getting our blades wet some more.”

Zac nodded in thanks and immediately set out after ironing out the details of his assault. Ilvere had already prepared his people, so Zac didn’t go back to the Atwood camp. He put on the amulet he’d gotten from Ogras back then and flashed straight into the huge sea of Zombies, and he found himself mostly unencumbered.

The both good and somewhat frustrating thing about the Zombie horde was that it wasn’t tightly clumped. It allowed Zac to simply walk between the millions of undead who were just milling around, but it drastically decreased the lethality of any area attacks aimed to take out a lot of them in one go. It was nothing like the tightly cramped Zombie hordes you could see in the movies, where they were crammed together like sardines.

He couldn’t be sure whether it was the efficacy of the amulet, or if the general had already decided not to meet Zac head-on, but Zac managed to find the clump without much hassle and unleashed the first two stages of **[Deforestation]**, causing a huge swathe of scorched corpses.

Just as Ilvere had warned, chaos immediately ensued, but Zac stayed on for another hour to rip apart the larger clumps of Zombies with his fractal blades. However, even if he wanted to take this opportunity to get more accustomed to his Fragment of the Axe, he chose not to display it here, and he also refrained from using **[Hatchetman’s Spirit]** and his Undying Bulwark class.

He wanted to keep his aces hidden for the final clash in the Dead Zone in a few weeks.

Between the coordinated efforts of Zac, his army, and the Underworld Council, a week's worth of Zombies were felled in the span of a few hours. Zac wanted to do more, but he needed to get going. He could only pray that his small help on the front line would give his people a breather and delay the terraforming a day or two.

He returned to Port Atwood and gave some instructions to Adran and Abby, and he also took the opportunity to plunder the town coffers of another 800 million Nexus Coins. The money came from a mix of taxes and the sales of Nexus Crystals, along with some plundered wealth from the underworld.

His final destination was the secluded valley between the mountains, and Zac was happy to see that Calrin had already accomplished his task. Alea's crystal coffin was shrouded in a green mist that seeped out from a grate next to her, and even the poisoned Tree of Ascension seemed to benefit from the Amanita's mist.

Zac didn't say anything as he looked down at Alea, who seemed to simply sleep in her crystal encasing. She neither looked better nor worse compared to when he saw her last, which Zac guessed was the best he could hope for. A tired sigh escaped from his lips as he lightly touched the coffin before he left.

He had finally crossed off everything on his list, allowing him to head to the Tower of Eternity with a clear mind. For the people of Port Atwood, he would only be gone for ten days at the most, but for him, it would be over a hundred days. He didn't want to carry a nagging feeling that he had missed something for such a long time.

He finally returned to his compound and found both Emily and Kenzie in his sister's courtyard. The three had a dinner where the two seemed to compete in bragging about who had the greatest gains from the Dao House. Zac was relieved to

hear that both of them were doing good, and it seemed that everyone had already woken up from their comas by now.

There was still the issue of latent dangers, but at least it seemed like a possibility that people's souls had simply been overtaxed after being forced to ponder on the Dao too intensely. Luckily, even those who had fallen unconscious had made great gains, and there were now over fifteen people from Port Atwood on the Dao Ladder.

His sister had even managed to crash into the sixth position, while Joanna just missed the top ten at eleventh. Emily, who had chosen to use her real name for the ladder, was currently in the eighty-seventh position. She would likely have been a lot further ahead if it weren't for her late start.

It felt good to have a relaxed meal, but Zac knew he couldn't put things off any longer. He finally headed toward his courtyard to meet up with Ogras, with the two girls following behind.

The demon already stood ready, but no one else was there to see them off. Only a very select number of people knew that Zac was about to leave Earth for a bit, as Zac was afraid someone would use his absence to cause damage to Port Atwood or his people. He wanted to use his identity as a deterrent even when he wasn't around.

He took one last look in his Cosmos Sacks to make sure that he hadn't missed anything, before nodding at the demon.

"Stay safe, both of you," Kenzie said. "And you know... See if you can find any news of her?"

"I will," Zac said with a smile as he crushed the token while placing his hand on Ogras' shoulder. "Take care of things while I am gone, okay?"

He looked at his sister for ten seconds as the space around them started to shudder and twist until the System swallowed the two to send them on their way.

APPARITIONS

Zac had expected to be stuck in darkness for a prolonged duration, but the two appeared almost immediately some distance away from the base of an enormous set of stairs. Transportation that the System provided itself sure was different, Zac reckoned as he looked around to get his bearings.

People kept appearing around him as well, most of them looking quite young. Some looked around in confusion and wonder just like himself, while others immediately started to ascend the steps after orienting themselves. Zac's eyes followed the stairs until his eyes finally reached the crest.

"Holy crap," Zac muttered as his eyes tried to compute what was in front of him.

"Pretty impressive, yeah?" Ogras echoed as he looked up at the Tower of Eternity in wonder.

They were currently standing in what seemed to be an endless square, as there was nothing in all directions apart from the people who kept appearing out of thin air. This whole space seemed to be made solely for one thing, the Tower of Eternity. Its name was truly apt, as it really towered into space itself, breaking all logic and convention.

The tower itself was a pristine white and completely without adornments as far as Zac could tell from this distance. There were no windows and no decor, and it didn't get any thinner at the top. It essentially looked like a massive tube made from marble, but Zac had trouble getting any sense of its

actual size. He could only confirm that it spanned at least a couple of kilometers in width.

As for its height, it was impossible to tell.

The tower itself didn't look very impressive apart from its mind-boggling size, but that wasn't the only magical thing about it. Mysterious lights trailed along its massive surface, causing a beautiful spectacle that stirred something in Zac's soul. It was like a subdued but never-ending fireworks show that brightened up the sky.

It reminded Zac a bit of the gaudy display of his own Towers of Myriad Dao, but there was a vast difference in their essence. The lights that Brazla conjured around the Dao Repository felt empty and pretentious, but it was completely different with the radiance around the Tower of Eternity.

It was as though the lights were communicating the Grand Dao itself, and Zac's mind shuddered slightly when he watched them. Zac finally understood that the original Brazla had tried to imitate the Tower of Eternity when he'd created his Dao Repository, but had only managed to project a cheap copy.

Zac had a feeling that if he observed the lights for a few months, it wouldn't be impossible to gain a completely new Dao Seed. The sight made Zac better understand why almost everyone stayed for the full year inside the Base Town if they could. Just living next to the tower itself was a precious opportunity.

But the divine lights suddenly disappeared and were instead replaced by an impossibly large snake that coiled around the tower. It was majestic beyond comprehension, and Zac couldn't stop gaping like a fool as he watched it stretch its scaled head toward the sky.

The snake actually had a horn on its head, and Zac could barely distinguish some sort of fractals covering it, but it was too far to discern any details. It was a shame, as he felt that the inscriptions on the horn contained shocking insights into the Dao.

Everyone around them had stopped what they were doing as well and looked at the snake with rapt attention. A few people even seemed to have been struck by an epiphany as they quickly closed their eyes, delight clear on their faces. The mythological beast only appeared for a minute or so before it dissipated and was once again replaced by the mysterious light.

“A flood dragon,” Ogras muttered. “I think that is the 38th level? Pretty auspicious to see a sign the moment we arrive.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked curiously, finally taking his eyes off the tower in the distance. “I thought there were only nine floors?”

“Well, each floor is divided into nine trials, each a world in and of itself, so most people simply count it as there being 81 levels,” Ogras explained. “The 38th level means that someone has completed the first four floors and another two levels before exiting.”

“Apparitions appear when people pass specific floors, and there are a few rules to it,” the demon added. “It essentially showcases that a powerhouse just completed his climb in the tower.”

“Aren’t there always powerhouses undertaking the trial?” Zac asked with confusion. “Wouldn’t people get blinded by constant apparitions, especially if the time inside the tower is accelerated?”

Zac heard a few snorts from around him and noticed that a few cultivators looked at him like he had a hole in his head. He even heard someone mutter “country bumpkin” under his breath, no doubt talking about him. Even Ogras looked over at Zac with exasperation.

“Don’t underestimate the difficulty of the Tower of Eternity, especially the 36th levels and beyond. I only barely made it past the 27th because my grandpa spent a good chunk of his life savings on me gaining a good score,” Ogras whispered.

“But still,” Zac said.

“If you stay here for a year, you might see one of the apparitions between the 36th and 40th levels a few times a week, so it’s nothing too exciting,” a voice drifted over, and Zac looked over to see a young man with a bow strapped to his back, smiling in their direction. “But the others are pretty rare.”

“Oh?” Zac said with interest.

“This is my second time here. Last time, I saw the apparitions for the 45th level ten times during the year I stayed here, which meant someone passed the fifth floor. The last level of each floor represents a huge spike in difficulty, so it’s a tremendous achievement,” the man explained.

Zac looked at the man with some confusion before he understood what he meant. The Tower of Eternity possessed nine true floors, each of which had nine subfloors. That meant that the 45th level was the final subfloor of the fifth floor, and the next true floor ended at the 54th level.

“I also was lucky enough to see an apparition for the 52nd level,” the man said, seemingly enjoying Zac’s attention.

“And for higher levels like 54th and beyond?” Zac asked with interest.

“No, that’s something that you might only see by chance. It doesn’t even happen once every ten years,” the bowman said with a shake of his head. “But you never know. One of my family’s ancestors had the fortune of witnessing the apparition for the 63rd level, that’s a grand occasion taking place only once every few millennia.”

Zac’s brows rose in surprise when he learned of the details. Apparitions above the 54th level happened every decade or so, but the 63rd was once every couple of thousand years? That was over a hundred times more difficult from the time it took. Then what about the 72nd level? The young ranger seemed to understand Zac’s thoughts, and he was obviously happy to showcase his expertise.

“You’re wondering about the higher tiers, right? The last time an apparition for the 63rd level appeared was around

4,600 years ago now. It was actually a loose cultivator called Parvan Beradan, though most know him as the Sunfire Monarch now that he's become a C-grade Monarch. As for the 72nd level?" the young man said, pausing for dramatic effect.

"That was the Eveningtide Asura."

Both Zac and Ogras blankly looked at the young man after his grand proclamation, neither of them ever having heard that name before. The ranger seemed a bit embarrassed about the lack of reaction, and he coughed while scratching his chin. But just as he was about to explain the origin of the so-called Asura, an attendant stepped up to his side.

"Young Master, your reception is waiting," the young girl next to him discreetly said.

The man gave a start before he sighed with annoyance.

"Anyway!" he said as he started to move away from Zac and Ogras. "Witnessing those top apparitions is an opportunity that one can hope for, but never control. If you need to stock up on goods or intelligence before you try your luck in the tower, remember to visit the Trentach Society!"

After that, the ranger started ascending the stairs with rapid steps, and a retinue of ten people quickly followed behind. Only then did Zac realize that the people around him were all elites who had completed a quest for the tokens. But even elites who qualified to get a token were only assistants to that guy, so they might just have met a big shot.

Zac's eyes followed their figures as they pushed forward, and he realized that the endless stairs simply led up to a vast plateau that the tower itself stood on. The plateau itself was crafted from some black stone, and Zac guessed it was a few kilometers in height. The only reason it didn't feel so massive was that its size was dwarfed by the tower itself.

"Well, let's go," Ogras said with a shrug. "And remember to keep a low profile. There's no law and no restrictions here, and anyone can be a true monster."

"That guy told us to visit his store. Do people live here permanently?" Zac asked as the two started to walk up the

stairs.

The steps were hundreds of meters wide, so it wasn't cramped in the slightest even though quite a few people were appearing on the platform.

"Rydel and I were the only two who had gone to the tower in my family among those who entered the incursion, and no one had gone for well over a decade before us," Ogras said. "But some forces are so big that they always have people here. Maintaining a compound or a business here is a show of strength, since it proves that the force is flourishing with young talents."

"So any place up there is controlled by some real powerful families?" Zac asked with a whistle.

"Not all," Ogras corrected him. "The top forces control the structures closest to the entrance of the towers. But most buildings don't have a permanent owner, especially in the outer parts of the town. Anyone could live or set up a temporary business there if they want, and close it down when they leave this place."

The two kept walking, and soon enough, they reached the summit of the plateau. A sprawling town full of palaces and luxuriant compounds entered his eyes, and it felt extremely bustling. The architecture was extremely varied as well, making Zac believe that the System had simply stolen a bunch of large mansions from different parts of the Multiverse.

There was no way that there was a single society that had created all these buildings. But even though the mansions and storefronts varied in both style and size, it all seemed to blend perfectly into some sort of cultural melting pot. It also wasn't cramped at all, with the streets being over a hundred meters wide.

Even though there were dozens of people ascending the stairs at any moment, the enormous town didn't seem to have any trouble swallowing them all. Some walked in certain directions with purpose, while others simply chose to meander around. The new arrivals were walking along both in groups or alone, and Zac was shocked to see some of the creatures.

The cultivators they passed came in all shapes and forms, including quite a few humans. Zac already knew that humans were one of the most populous races in the Multiverse, yet it was a bit mind-blowing to see all these humans, who were probably from all corners of the universe.

It was a far cry from how many believed that Earth might be the only planet housing life back in the day.

Still, humans were only a somewhat large minority in the mix of people around. Zac couldn't help looking over at a dour contingent of undead warriors silently walking toward the center of the town, all of them releasing dense clouds of Miasma to avoid the Cosmic Energy in the environment.

Most cultivators took a wide berth around them, some out of fear and others not wanting to get sullied by the death-attuned energy. There were also enormous golems, flying pixies only as large as a hand, and all kinds of other odd beings.

There was one thing that essentially looked like a flying disco ball, and it slowly flew forward with a low hum. There were a couple of Stargazers as well, and when Zac accidentally looked into their cosmic eye, he couldn't help but twitch a bit as his mind got a small shock.

He remembered that these guys almost always used mental classes, and just looking into one's eye was to ask for trouble even if they weren't hostile. Abby was different, since she was an administrator without any combat capabilities.

Zac also noted with some interest that the groups of cultivators were more diverse than he had expected. He had thought he might stick out by traveling together with a demon, but he realized that was an unnecessary worry. At least a third of all the groups were comprised of a mix of races, so they weren't exactly unique.

But even though all these diverse groups of people were put on the same street, it was all surprisingly harmonious. There should be quite a few grudges between races, especially with the System's instigation, but people seemed to get along just fine.

Of course, Zac believed that this serenity was only the surface of the Base Town.

PROTECT YOUR WALLET

“It’s pretty quiet. I thought things would get rowdier if there were no laws,” Zac said with a low volume to Ogras as they walked down the seemingly endless road leading toward the tower.

“Everyone here is an elite of their force, bringing hidden aces to climb as far as possible in the tower. Only a real mouth-breather would risk their lives against enemies of unknown power for no reason. This might be the only chance they have to come here; most people are only concerned with gaining strength before evolving,” the demon responded. “Of course, there are always some who were just born without a brain.”

Zac followed Ogras’ gaze and saw a scene where three burly beastkin cultivators seemingly had bumped into a group of hooded beings that were shorter than a meter in height. Even Calrin was slightly taller than the diminutive cultivators, who covered their appearance. The beastmen towered above them like giants, and they seemed to be raring for a fight.

“Look where you walk, you little shits,” one of the beastmen growled as it threw a forceful kick. “You puny things should scurry in the sewers like the other rats.”

Zac could sense that the power of the beastman wasn’t too bad, and his kick was even imbued with some Dao Seed that was at least middle stage. But the kick was forcibly stopped by the small hand of the leading hooded cultivator.

A shockwave erupted from the clash, but Zac noted with interest that its power was quickly swallowed by the atmosphere, and not even those standing within five meters were affected apart from a small flutter of their clothes. If such a collision took place on Earth, it would have been able to topple trees over twenty meters away.

The beastman seemed shocked by how effortlessly the little cultivator had stopped his kick, and he hurriedly took out a large axe with some fear in his eyes. However, before he even had time to swing, the group of hooded cultivators disappeared, only to reappear again in the same spot a second later. As for the three beastmen, they stood frozen for a second before their bodies started to fall apart into neatly separated chunks.

Zac looked at the beastmen, knowing they were deader than dead. He had barely been able to see what the hooded creatures did, but he realized they were actually some sort of small beastkin who all focused on Dexterity. They hadn't used weapons when dissecting their bulkier brethren, but rather a set of sharp claws on their furry hands.

The people in the surroundings didn't care in the slightest that a murder had taken place just in front of them. Not even the other beastman in the area lifted a brow when seeing their kin get slain. They rather looked down at the killed beastmen like they were idiots, and Zac had to agree. You would have to be extremely powerful or extremely stupid to harass people in a place like this.

Interestingly enough, the blood and the bodies of the killed cultivators turned into motes of light that soon enough dissipated, and only the Cosmos Sacks were left behind. One of the hooded cultivators snatched them up before the group walked away without a care, walking toward the inner parts of the city.

“Some people come here without a real understanding of the world, thinking they're unbeatable,” Ogras snorted with a shake of his head. “Let's go.”

“Weren’t those small guys supposed to be suppressed or something?” Zac asked curiously as he took a last look at the beastmen.

“The larger ones attacked first, so whatever happened next was counted as self-defense by the Ruthless Heavens.” Ogras smiled. “So remember, if you want to kill someone, try to make them hit you first, even if it’s just a shove. Then you can kill them without any repercussions. This is another reason why there’s so little fighting.”

“Even if you win, as long as you hit first, you will still get hunted down, right?” Zac confirmed.

“Right.” Ogras nodded as he kept walking. “There is an exception, though, but it doesn’t relate to us. You can simply follow the rule to not hit first, and we’ll be fine.”

“Where are we heading?” Zac asked as he walked along.

“You said we only have ten days here at most, so we’d better make the most of it,” Ogras said. “First off, let’s get something to eat. I haven’t had a decent meal since I arrived at your godforsaken planet.”

Zac stopped in his tracks and gave the demon an even stare, making Ogras roll his eyes in exasperation.

“We need to get a feel of the current situation here. Listening in on the discussion at a tavern is a good way to get some of the latest gossip of the area,” the demon snorted. “It might allow us to save a lot of money to learn what we need to know. Information brokers are pretty damn expensive.”

Zac reluctantly agreed with Ogras even if he felt the urge to start running back and forth to complete all his various goals of coming here. There was so much to do, with helping Alea and learning more about his Specialty Core being the top priorities before entering the tower itself. So it was with some reluctance he let the demon drag him to a decently sized open-air restaurant roughly halfway between the stairs and the tower.

“This is roughly the halfway point,” Ogras said as they walked inside the huge courtyard of the restaurant. “The

buildings from here on out generally have permanent owners. Of course, if you feel the need, you can always take a building by force. But there is no point in us doing that even if we had the strength to do so.”

It was completely packed, but the two luckily managed to get a table in the back. Almost the moment the two sat down, a golem arrived and gave them each a crystal containing the menu. Zac curiously looked at the waiter, but it stood unmoving until the demon placed a round of orders for the two. Only then did it slightly bow before wordlessly walking away.

“It’s a puppet?” Zac finally asked as he looked at the dozens of golems walking around between the tables.

“Yes. Only elites can come here, so most businesses use puppets or arrays rather than living personnel. I hear that the top restaurants right by the tower entrance have living waiters, but that’s not the kind of place we can freely enter,” Ogras muttered.

“Why not?” Zac asked, not understanding why they couldn’t shop where they wanted.

“This version of the tower is low-tiered, but the strongest forces here are still Peak C-grade. Getting involved with those kinds of people before we have some sort of backing won’t end well,” Ogras explained. “Besides, most of the top-tier establishments require referrals or things like that.”

“Isn’t the point of coming here making a connection with those kinds of forces?” Zac asked skeptically.

“No,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “It’s better to look for a weaker force in my opinion. A strong Early C-grade or weak Middle C-grade force might be best. They will be strong enough to rebuff that old goat, but not so strong that we’ll be forced into a situation we can’t dig ourselves out of.”

Zac slowly nodded, feeling it made sense. Yrial had full confidence in killing a Peak D-grade powerhouse even if he was just a soul fragment. It went to show what a huge difference it was between D-grade and C-grade. A live C-

grade Monarch would probably have no problem dealing with the Great Redeemer even if he was stuck in the early stages.

“Besides, those peak forces are millions of years old. What elites haven’t they seen before? There’s no guarantee they’d bother recruiting you even if you passed the sixth floor,” Ogras added after a thought. “Even if you’re a monster in human skin, you’re still a mortal.”

Zac ignored the demon’s insult as he suddenly realized something odd about what the demon had said earlier.

“This version?” Zac asked with confusion.

“The tower services the whole Multiverse. How could all the young elites fit in this small town?” Ogras snorted. “There are innumerable Base Towns where elites of the same sector gather.”

“Sort of like the incursion forces?” Zac mumbled, remembering that only forces in the same star sector got the opportunity to invade Earth.

“Yes, though the area for who gets teleported here is a lot larger.” Ogras shrugged. “At least I saw more forces I didn’t recognize than ones I knew last time. Its scope is quite large.”

“So the forces we’re looking to ally with are locals?” Zac asked. “Are they staying here or further inside the town?”

“Yes, they are, but we’ll deal with all that after you’ve proven your worth by summoning a top-tier apparition in the sky.” Ogras shrugged. “For now, we’ll be treated like garbage if we go there, and might even get ourselves killed. Remember, those places likely have a bunch of treasures that aren’t suppressed like in the tower.”

Zac nodded in agreement. He also felt there was no point to sounding out strong backers before he had proven himself in the tower. That way, he wouldn’t need to divulge any of his titles or attributes. He could simply point to the apparition he created with his tower run, and it would vouch for his power.

There were a lot more things Zac wanted to ask about now that he had a better understanding of what sort of place they had arrived at, but just as he was about to ask another

question, he noticed a squirrely human look in their direction. He was a pure human just like Zac and looked to be somewhere in his thirties.

It wasn't anything too surprising, but most people looked quite young. Looking a bit older could be a sign that they weren't very powerful and had been stuck at F-grade for a few decades. But it could also mean that he was someone like Zac himself, someone who only evolved his race a bit later than normal.

Some might spend a decade or two perfecting their Daos or gathering achievements, as not all could have direct access to Origin Dao like Zac and Ogras did. So looking even older than Zac was a bit out of the norm, but not unseen. There were even a few people looking middle-aged in the area, though those were likely people who had been stuck on a bottleneck for most of their lives.

When the man noticed Zac's stare, he immediately started to walk over to their table. Zac frowned slightly, afraid that trouble had already found them for some reason. Was that man someone from one of the incursions that he had closed? But Zac didn't sense any danger from the man, and he gave a weak smile when he arrived.

"I am sorry. It seems quite crowded here today. Would you mind if I imposed on the two young masters? I am Galau of Clan Beroria, by the way, from the Allbright Empire," he said.

Zac's brows rose when he heard of the all-too-familiar empire, and he immediately indicated for the man to sit down. What were the chances of meeting a countryman of Average and Greatest? He had been thinking of the Allbright Empire often since meeting those two, mainly because he had a standing invitation from Greatest.

It might just have been an offering made out of politeness, but if Zac actually showed up at their doorstep, Greatest would hopefully at least be able to arrange something that would help him in his cultivation. Such a powerhouse no doubt had a large network of connections, and he might even be able to

introduce Zac to a force that could keep the Great Redeemer at bay.

Greatest was also someone who already knew of his Specialty Core but hadn't made any attempts to snatch it, which was Zac's biggest fear in dealing with the powerhouses of the Multiverse. He had even gone so far as to give him his bracer, which was something that he still wore every day to maintain his secrecy.

"I'm Zac," Zac simply said, not explaining his origins any further. "This is Ogras."

"Nice to meet you. I'll order a round as thanks for your hospitality. Have you been here long?" Galau asked.

"We haven't entered the tower yet, if that's what you're asking," Ogras snorted.

"No, no, I am just making conversation," Galau said with some embarrassment. "I have been frequenting this restaurant for a few months, but it is the first time I see the two young sirs. But I can already tell you're two people destined for greatness."

Zac and Ogras gave each other a weird look before the demon leaned over.

"Protect your wallet and your butt," the demon muttered with a guarded expression.

GALAU

“I am sorry, I am flattered, but I am interested in the fairer sex,” Ogras said without waiting for Galau to speak up again. “As for this guy, I’m not sure? I think he’s converted to ascetic cultivation for some reason.”

Galau blankly looked at Ogras for a few seconds, obviously unable to compute what the demon was talking about.

“What? No! I like... I like the ladies as well,” Galau stammered. “I was just making conversation. I have been here for so long, and it simply gets a bit tedious after a while, so I like making new friends.”

“Oh, how long have you been here?” Zac asked with interest.

He knew that Ogras had hinted at the fact that Galau might be a scammer, but Zac didn’t care. He was interested in learning more about the Allbright Empire, and they were in need of information. If this guy had been here for a while, he surely had a general sense of the situation.

“I only have a month before I need to leave this place.” The man sighed. “It’s a shame. There are not many places where so many forces can gather and display their wares. Interesting treasures and techniques keep appearing in the auction houses.”

Zac could only shake his head with a wry smile. There was nothing to gain by comparing oneself to others. This man seemed to have taken his visit to the tower as an opportunity to

relax and do some shopping, while Zac was here to fight for the future of his planet. But someone like this could be quite useful as well.

“So you’re knowledgeable about the shops in the Base Town?” Zac asked curiously.

Galau nodded. “I have gained some understanding of what’s available except what’s in stock in the top-tier firms.”

“How are the auction schedules? Are there any interesting ones coming up?” Ogras immediately asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Interesting auctions?” Galau thoughtfully repeated. “I hear that a main-branch member of Talovor Trappings arrived a week ago; they are holding an auction of their wares in three days.”

“What kind of wares?” Ogras asked.

“Mainly wearable treasures. Rings, amulets, bracelets. That family consists of both craftsmen and traders, and they almost only sell their own wares. Their specialty is defensive treasures, so I expect the auction will turn quite heated,” Galau dutifully explained.

Zac nodded in understanding. Ogras had already explained that defensive treasures and arrays were suppressed in the tower, but not completely. Having a great defensive treasure could still save your life or allow you to reach a higher floor. It was no wonder that such things would be in high demand in a place like this.

Normally, Zac wouldn’t mind spending some of his money on defensive treasures to supplement those he had, but he was hesitant to spend too much money until he managed to get his hands on his top-priority items: medicine for Alea and a shield.

“Do these Talovor sell shields as well?” he probed.

“Like physical ones?” Galau asked with surprise. “No. They focus on consumable and rechargeable defensive treasures. For a shield, you would either have to find a blacksmith outside this place or hope that one appears at the

general auctions. The System gives them out sometimes as quest rewards to people who don't want them, and they sell them here to make some money."

Zac only sighed in understanding, not too surprised about what Galau said. It was essentially the same as what Calrin had mentioned before. Most good shields were custom-made since they were so expensive.

"Anything else?" Ogras probed.

"Let's see..." Galau muttered as his brows furrowed. "The Naspheyi Clan holds a weekly auction; the next one is tomorrow evening. The quality of the auction can vary a lot, but it's never too bad. Sometimes amazing items appear as well. Visiting cultivators usually go to them to sell off items they don't need in order to gather money for other treasures before attempting the climb. There are a few more places like this, but Naspheyi is generally the most reputable among those open to the public."

Zac shot a look at Ogras, only to see the demon's eyes glazing over. Zac finally remembered that attending auctions had been one of Ogras' favorite pastimes back in the day, and he sighed with exasperation. The demon was supposed to be helping with information gathering, but he was daydreaming about going on a shopping spree.

"Have you heard of Trentach Society?" Zac asked, remembering the man they'd met by the stairs.

"Trentach? It's a high-grade general store," the youth said. "They carry almost everything, but they do not really stand out in any department. Trentach is actually a cooperative venture between eight allied clans who run the store together. None of the clans can be considered a supreme force, but their combined might is nothing to scoff at."

"How do you define the grade of the stores?" Zac asked curiously.

"By how close you are to the tower. It's graded the same as most things, from Low to Peak. Of course, the grade of a business doesn't necessarily reflect the quality of the wares.

But it is usually indicative of quality,” Galau explained. “This restaurant could barely be considered medium grade, for example, but their food is above average.”

“I am looking for top-tier healing treasures. Do you know where I could find that?” Zac asked as he kicked the demon under the table to wake him up from his dreams of auctions.

“Healing treasures?” Galau repeated with some confusion. “You can get them at any pill shop. They are everywhere. Or do you mean something specific?”

“I am looking for something that can heal a fractured soul,” Zac explained, not opting to lie.

There were likely various pills with soul-mending capabilities in the pill shops, but an extraordinary treasure was needed to heal a fractured soul. It wasn’t as simple as a soul wound.

“I’m sorry, such treasures are not readily available in even the higher-tiered pill stores. But I’ve seen things that might work crop up every now and then in the auctions,” Galau said before hesitating. “Of course, there’s always the Zethaya Pill House by the tower entrance, but...”

“But what?” Zac asked with a frown.

“They are an alchemist family and likely one of the three wealthiest clans among those who control shops by the entrance. They are extremely powerful, but more importantly, they have a vast network of connections,” Ogras spoke up for the first time in a while.

“So they have pills for healing souls?” Zac asked. “Then what’s the problem?”

“If any shop has it, then it’s that place. But their shop is invitation only, just like all Peak-grade stores,” Galau explained. “You can’t just enter at will. There are always people desperate for their pills, but the Zethaya turn them all away.”

Zac frowned, but Ogras nudged him to not keep pressing the issue. He knew he shouldn’t make too big a row at a place like this. Besides, these Zethaya people might invite him if he

performed impressively enough in the tower. It should be in their interest to form some ties with promising cultivators while they were still young and weak.

“We might as well head to the auction tomorrow.” Ogras shrugged. “Even if they don’t have what we need, we might still be able to find some clues.”

“Let’s look around today, and we’ll head to the auction tomorrow,” Zac agreed with a nod.

“Oh, if the two gentlemen are amenable, let me host you tomorrow! I have been awarded a bronze membership due to my regular visits, so you can join me at my table rather than sitting crammed in the back,” Galau enthusiastically said.

Zac looked over with some hesitation at Ogras, who seemed to be a bit confused as well. Why was this guy so helpful to two complete strangers? The universe was seldom so benign. Galau seemed to understand their skepticism and hurriedly spoke up again.

“I promise, I just wish to be a good host. How about this? I will simply meet you outside the venue before it starts tomorrow. There’s no way that I could do anything suspicious right in front of the Naspheyi Clan’s doors, no?” he hurriedly said. “Besides, going to the auction as a bronze member has various perks, such as additional information on the items for sale and complimentary liquor.”

“Deal,” Ogras said without hesitation.

“Excellent!” Galau exclaimed as he raised a glass of some unknown alcohol. “To new friendships.”

The dinner lasted for another hour, and Ogras and Zac interrogated Galau for as much information as they could before they split up for the day. Galau initially wanted to accompany them as they walked around the Base Town, but the two excused themselves, citing that they needed to get their bearings.

“What do you think?” Zac asked as his eyes followed Galau, who scurried away after paying the tab in full.

“A bored young master who wants to pretend to be a commoner for a day?” Ogras ventured. “In either case, we’ll figure it out sooner or later. Between my looks, smarts, and charms, and your sturdy body, I’m sure we can handle any scheme that guy has planned. So let’s just let him pay for our food and drinks.”

Zac snorted in response, but he didn’t contradict the demon. He didn’t sense any malice from the guy, so he would let things play themselves out. The two spent the next couple of hours looking around in the shops, gathering snippets of intelligence everywhere. It quickly became apparent that Galau had been pretty much accurate in all the information he’d shared during the dinner.

They found nothing that would help Alea’s condition in the normal stores, even when they went to the upscale establishments in the inner city. Those places had pills that would help with a wounded soul, but not a fractured one, and the two quickly confirmed that their best bet was hoping that someone would put up an item for auction at one of the major houses.

Only when it started to get dark did they decide to find some place to stay. Zac wanted to simply find some empty building in the outer rim, but the demon staunchly refused, citing hours lost every day just walking back and forth to the slums. He wanted to rent a place as far inside as possible, preferably in the inner sector.

Eventually, the two settled on a hotel that covered a huge area at the edge between the middle and the inner zones. It was essentially a gated community where every guest rented their own smaller mansion with its own gardens and arrays. It was extremely tranquil and a perfect spot to meditate during the nights.

What impressed Zac the most was that it actually had a spatial array covering the whole compound, just like the Ayn Hive. The size of the place was at least three times larger when

they entered, and the two rented a small mansion for the price of 250,000 Nexus Coins a day.

It was a steep price, but it was nothing uncommon in this place. Luckily, they only planned to stay for ten days. Otherwise just the lodging would have turned into a real sunk cost. According to Galau, the buildings starting in the middle of the Base Town came with those arrays from the beginning. They were not something that the owners controlled. That was one of the reasons the inner buildings were so contested.

They contained the best spatial arrays, providing extremely luxurious accommodations to whoever controlled the place. But that wasn't the most important reason that forces wanted to claim structures as close to the tower as possible. The Cosmic Energy was denser closer to the tower, and Galau said there was even some Origin Dao in the core sector.

Origin Dao was nothing special for Zac, or even Ogras by this point, as they came from a newly integrated planet. But for people coming from an established force, it might be what would allow them to push their Dao Seeds or Dao Fragments to the next step before entering the tower.

Some buildings even possessed temporal arrays, though those were only used for business purposes, as it was impossible to cultivate inside those structures. The auction houses were a prime example of that. There were a lot of treasures to auction off, but people did not want to spend half a day of their limited time in the Base Town to visit it.

With the help of the arrays, they would spend less than an hour in real time, while still not missing out on the action. Zac couldn't understand why the System would bother to set things up like this, but he soon understood the motivation. It wanted to create conflict.

As long as there were good lodgings and bad lodgings, there would always be covert and overt competition for the best spots.

THE NASPHEYI CLAN

It wasn't without reason that Zac believed that the difference in the quality of the lodgings would cause friction. He had already witnessed an attempted takeover of a shop with a decent location at a crossroads with a lot of foot traffic. It was a group of purple humanoids who tried to snatch it from a group of golems who reminded Zac of the proprietor of the Merit Exchange.

An intense battle ensued, but the humanoids were eventually forced to give up on their takeover after the shop owner started throwing out one powerful offensive talisman after another. However, that wasn't the end of it. Multiple forces assaulted the humanoids the moment that they started to flee. Apparently, they would have been safe if their attempt had succeeded, but now that they gave up, they became fair game.

It was a world where the powerful lived and ate well, while the weak could just look on from the distance. There was no such thing as equality.

The two mainly meditated during the night, as they knew that they had almost no chance to evolve their Daos within the tower itself. The atmosphere in their borrowed garden was quite nice, though, and it allowed Zac to freely gaze upon the ever-changing lights surrounding the tower. Unfortunately, he didn't gain anything that would allow him to form his second Fragment, but he still had a few days to go.

Zac and Ogras had already decided to enter the tower toward the end of their visit. They could accomplish most of

their goals anonymously right now, as they didn't know what would happen after climbing the tower. Ogras wasn't completely sure, but he guessed that the current Zac should be able to reach at least the fifth floor, something that was pretty rare, all things considered.

It might not sound like much, climbing only five out of nine floors, but that was something that only happened a few times a year among the elites of thousands of planets, and everyone succeeding would cause a certain amount of spectacle. That would ideally result in making connections with stronger forces, but it might also put a target on his back.

So they would only allocate one day after the tower itself to find a backer, and endeavor to finish most of their purchases before.

The auction they were going to attend didn't take place until the evening, so Zac and Ogras took the time to continue their exploration. Ogras wanted to spend another day "gathering information" at restaurants, but they instead headed to a reputable information broker in the inner zone at Zac's insistence.

There were a lot of things that he needed to know, such as the requirements for Specialty Cores and Arcane classes. Zac had already asked the demon next to him, but he had no idea. Ogras had only gotten annoyed by the questions since they were simply a form of humble-bragging in his opinion.

The information merchant was run by a sect rather than a clan, and they were called Seed of Jnana. Zac was pretty surprised to hear that the sect was actually populated by monks, and it made him think of Abbot Everlasting Peace. Was Lord 84th perhaps someone from this sect? It was a strong C-grade force, according to rumors, and splitting off into 100,000 incarnations might be the Clan ancestor's bid at breaking through to B-grade.

None of the monks were present in the store, though, so Zac couldn't make any comparisons to the chubby powerhouse's appearance. They were instead met by a puppet

who led them to a private room, and Zac was happy to hear that they did indeed carry the information he was looking for.

A short introduction of Arcane classes only cost 10 million, probably since it was general knowledge among the more powerful factions. Zac immediately paid for it, and the puppet engraved the knowledge onto a blank crystal. The puppet didn't immediately give a quote for information about Specialty Cores, though.

"Specific or general knowledge?" the puppet asked with a lifeless voice.

"General," Zac answered after some hesitation.

He currently needed general information about Specialty Cores, as his information was a few snippets of rumors from various sources. Besides, even if this place had information on Duplicity Cores, there was no guarantee that it would be relevant for his mutated version.

"Two hundred forty-five million Nexus Coins," the puppet said.

"What's included in the report?" Zac said, whinging a bit at the price.

The puppet opened a screen, and a short presentation was included. A decent list of common cores was included, as was a general guide in matching various types of classes with cores. It mentioned there was a long list of successful combinations to prove the theories. But most importantly, there was a general guide in nurturing and evolving cores.

Zac could only bite the bullet and cough up the money since he didn't even know what to look for in his goal of upgrading his core as things stood right now. There was quite a lot of information in the second crystal he bought, but he breathed out in relief when he skimmed to the part about evolving.

He breathed out in relief when he read that Specialty Cores could only be upgraded to a higher rank after one had upgraded one's class. But at the same time, it said that the strength of cores was limited, so they would quickly become

too weak to provide any assistance unless you kept them at the same rank as your class.

Zac also had the puppet list all the specific cores it had intelligence on, and he was both relieved and disappointed that there was nothing on the Duplicity Core. He wasn't sure if he could handle the cost of a specific knowledge packet if a general one cost that much.

Hopefully, that would mean that the core would still be usable at the start of E-grade, allowing him to put the matter aside until he dealt with the Undead Empire.

The Naspheyi Auction House was a grand structure three-quarters in from the edge of the plateau, placing itself somewhere between the middle and the inner cone. It reminded Zac a bit of the Hagia Sophia, with four grand ornamental towers in the corners and an enormous dome atop the main structure.

When the two approached, they saw people streaming toward the auction house, even though it didn't start until an hour later. Some were perhaps there to enter an item into the auction at the last minute, but most likely just wanted good seats.

Zac and Ogras weren't really interested in entering this early, especially since time moved quicker inside. If they entered now, they'd be forced to wait half a day before the auction started. So they instead planned to walk around the area to see if they could find anything interesting.

A lot of people were taking advantage of the large draw of the auction house and held impromptu auctions of their own treasures, shouting at the top of their lungs to advertise their wares. Some did it because the auction house didn't find the treasures precious enough; others were probably unwilling to pay the 10% commission.

Of course, there were a lot of scammers as well, wanting to take advantage of inexperienced people.

Zac and Ogras barely had time to make the rounds before they saw a familiar figure wave at them from the distance,

some excitement apparent on his face. Unsurprisingly, it was Galau, and it even looked like he had been on the lookout for their arrival.

“Just what is this guy’s deal?” Zac mumbled with some bemusement. “Is he lonely?”

“I think he is looking for an expert, but he’s running out of time,” Ogras said with a half-smile.

“An expert for what?”

“Someone to help him reach a higher floor than he would be able to reach himself,” Ogras said. “Strong people often do that for payment.”

“So like what you’re expecting me to do for you, but without pay?” Zac snorted.

“Our situation is different. What’re a few floors between friends?” Ogras said as he shot Zac a toothy grin.

“If it’s something common, there should be a market for it, no? Most people wouldn’t turn down free money if they were strong enough,” Zac said, even wondering if it was possible for himself to make some money on the side.

“My guess? He seems to enjoy the auctions, and he has already spent the money that was meant for a carry.” Ogras shrugged. “So now he’s looking for some strong-looking hillbillies to do it on the cheap.”

“It’s also possible that he’s offended someone, and no one wants to stick their neck out just for some extra income. So he’s forced to skulk around new arrivals in a circumspect manner, looking for someone who could take him up. We are probably not the first people he has approached if that’s the case.”

“So we should distance ourselves from him?” Zac asked. “We already have enough on our plates as it is; no need to take on additional problems.”

“No need. If my guess is true, he’s desperate, and he’ll be far more helpful than even an information merchant. If we get confronted later, we can simply proclaim ignorance and point

to the fact that we just arrived.” Ogras smiled. “For now, let’s enjoy his bronze ticket and free liquor.”

Zac sighed, but he eventually complied with Ogras’ idea. It was not even certain what the demon speculated was correct, and if he started to act on every little suspicion, it would become impossible to get anything done. It was just as possible that the guy was simply lonely after staying here for months and wanted to make new friends.

“Wait,” Zac suddenly said. “You said that your grandpa spent a huge amount of money for you to climb to the third floor? Did you simply pay someone to carry you?”

“Of course,” Ogras snorted. “I was only level 54 at the time. What do you think, that I would rush inside there on my own? I had only just formed my first Dao Seed at that point.”

“So it wasn’t actually with your own power you got to the third floor,” Zac snorted. “That wasn’t how you made it sound before.”

“I would be able to conquer the third floor with my own prowess by now, so what does it matter,” Ogras muttered, looking a bit glum. Clearly, this was a bit of a sore topic for the proud demon.

After I’ve provided you with all kinds of opportunities, Zac lampooned in his mind, but he didn’t bring it up. No one had worked harder for Port Atwood than Ogras, after all.

In the end, the two decided to head over to Galau, who excitedly led them around the area full of hawkers displaying their wares. The two didn’t really find any great deals, but Zac bought a decent number of Divine Crystals from a golem who sold them for 10% cheaper than what Calrin charged.

Ogras also bought a slab of metal, which was apparently complementary to what his black spear was made from. Perhaps he wanted to have some of the material on hand in case he found someone who could upgrade it or even turn it into a proper Spirit Tool.

But neither was ready to buy any valuable treasures outside since they didn’t possess as discerning an eye as

Calrin. Galau seemed somewhat proficient at inspecting treasures, but the two wouldn't put their trust and wallets in the hands of someone they'd just met.

Soon enough, the trio entered the massive auction center, and Galau kept trying to make a good impression as he immediately forked out the 200,000-Nexus-Coin entrance fee for both of them. Zac was surprised when he heard the price, and he couldn't help but look around at the sea of people entering the building.

The Naspheyi Clan held an auction like this every week, and according to Galau, they also held a few major auctions a year that were even grander. On top of that, they took a 10% commission on every sale that took place, though that fee could probably be negotiated down. He couldn't imagine just how rich these guys were.

Of course, most of the entrance fee probably went into keeping the Temporal Array active during the auction. The System set them up, but they still required crystals to run. But he wouldn't be surprised if the Clan still made tens of billions of Nexus Coins every auction. Apart from that, they also had their stores that were constantly open.

"The Naspheyi is an ancient martial clan whose ancestor is reported to be Mid or High C-grade. Their family members generally use spears," Galau explained when Zac probed about their heritage.

"It's not a mercantile clan?" Zac asked with interest.

"Most huge clans would have some businesses to provide the resources for cultivation. To be a cultivator is to be forced into poverty, always scrambling for resources," Galau said. "But they are mainly a martial clan. This auction house is just a minor source of income, but they are pretty ruthless with anyone trying to take it away from them. It's a matter of pride."

Zac nodded and looked around the venue, once more feeling the distance between Earth and the entrenched forces. This place made more money in a week than Port Atwood had in a year. Even then, this was just an insignificant revenue

stream for the Naspheyi. Then again, Zac knew there was no point in making comparisons like that. Earth had just been integrated, while clans like this had millions of years to build up sturdy foundations.

Zac shook his head and instead started looking around. It was simply enormous inside, and he realized this place was more than just an auction venue. There were multiple restaurants and bars, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw that there was even a brothel.

And just as Zac feared, the shadows around the demon started to twist as the demon unhesitantly teleported away a second later.

TOXICITY

Zac desperately tried to grab on to the demon before it was too late, but Ogras had clearly learnt from his failure during the auction held by the New World Government. Zac didn't exactly know what happened, but he somehow missed the demon, instead grabbing right behind where he stood. He couldn't be sure, but it felt like Ogras had somehow influenced him to slightly misjudge his position.

Was it the Dao Seed that the demon had gained recently?

Ogras had let it slip in conversation a few times, where he mentioned Dao Seeds as plural rather than singular. Zac had learned of it after they did their respective inheritances. Perhaps the Umbra Inheritance had provided Ogras with a similar Dao Impartment that Zac himself enjoyed.

Galau looked a bit confused at the exchange, but he didn't comment on it. He instead continued to explain how the auction was handled.

"The Naspheyi will only divulge what items will be put to auction within the current segment for bronze members," Galau explained. "If you don't see anything that tempts you, you can visit one of the other establishments inside to relax until the next segment starts. But the items in the final segment will not be divulged at all, as they want to maintain maximum participation for the top treasures."

Zac nodded in understanding, feeling that these guys really knew how to do business. Such a setup would stop people from leaving early, and most people would still spend money

even if they didn't find anything to buy. And people would perhaps become more willing to fork out some real money if they had been plied with alcohol for a few hours before the final section.

The two walked around the enormous lobby for a while, as there still was some time. Suddenly, the shadows shuddered, and Ogras reappeared, looking like he had just experienced a crushing defeat.

"Bunch of puppets, don't know what I expected," Ogras muttered with a constipated look.

Zac snorted in derision as the three entered the auction hall, loath to make a comment. A quick glance indicated that there were actually fewer seats than he had expected. He guessed that there were roughly three to four thousand seats in total, with roughly two-thirds being cramped cinema seats in the back.

The group didn't have to use those, though, thanks to Galau, and were instead shown to a table some distance from the scene. The table was luckily equipped with a decent-sized screen that would show the items, allowing them to take a good look at everything.

Zac immediately started to go through the catalog of items that would appear to see if there was anything of use to them. He was surprised to note that quite a few items were listed as unknown items, only describing what they looked like. It seemed quite possible to make a few good deals if your eyes were discerning enough.

Ogras wasn't nearly as curious, and he only took a quick glance at the catalogue.

"It's just the opening segment," Ogras said with disinterest as he indicated for a puppet to bring a bottle of liquor. "Those weapons in the start are pretty good. They are there to create some excitement, but the rest is just slightly better than the things you can buy in the shops."

"Don't get too drunk," Zac warned. "We're not here to mess around."

“Not much else to do here when the brothel is full of automatons,” Ogras scoffed as he started to look around.

“Well, not many who have the ability to get their hands on a tower token would be willing to work as a... courtesan. Likewise, those types of classes are generally considered noncombat, which precludes entry to the Tower of Eternity.” Galau coughed with some embarrassment. “But I am sure that a handsome man like you would be able to find a paramour in one of the bars.”

Ogras only snorted in response as he kept observing the other guests. Zac himself only shook his head with a smile, already having heard the demon complain about the lack of brothels in Port Atwood on multiple occasions.

When it was around ten minutes before the auction started, the area above their heads was starting to fill up with floating platforms of varying size. On top of them sat groups of people who mostly looked quite impressive, or at least wealthy.

“That’s the VIP platforms; the higher it floats generally means the higher the status of its occupant,” Galau said with a hushed tone, probably afraid to draw the attention of the big shots upstairs.

Zac shot a glance above, not really caring about the special treatment. It was not like it mattered where he sat as long as he could buy the items he needed.

The auction started soon enough, and Zac was impressed with the quality of the items presented. All kinds of items were sold off in rapid succession, ranging from pills to arrays to weapons. There were some raw materials as well, but Zac noticed that most items were ready to use and things that might help when climbing the tower.

However, there was nothing that Zac couldn’t do without, so he never placed a single bid. Most items went for between 5 and 15 million Nexus Coins, which meant they were decent items, but nothing rare. It was a bit disappointing, but Zac knew the items would get increasingly impressive as the auction went on.

“How are the prices?” Zac asked the more experienced Ogras.

“The starting bids are slightly below what you would usually pay for the items outside this dimension, but they usually end up a tad more expensive,” the demon said after some consideration. “It looks like items that will prove helpful in the tower have a slightly higher premium at around 50% to 80%.”

Zac nodded, realizing that Calrin had been spot on with his estimation. This place truly was a money-making machine for the established forces, where they were allowed to earn far more money on their products compared to the outside.

Ogras placed a few bids for fun, but he got quickly bored when he realized that the process was completely anonymous, where you placed your bid through an array on the table.

“What’s with the secrecy?” Ogras muttered with annoyance. “Takes the fun out of the bidding process.”

“Open bidding caused a bit too much chaos in the end,” Galau said with a wry smile. “A few strong people suppressed the prices of any items they wanted. So the Naspheyi Clan finally installed arrays in the table to allow anonymous bidding for everyone’s safety. Of course, anyone is still able to bid openly if they so wish.”

Zac nodded in agreement, feeling it was for the best. It would help normal people avoid becoming targets of the powerful factions, and lessen the risk of getting robbed afterward, since the items would be exchanged anonymously after each section.

It did make his own backup idea of robbing the treasures he needed almost impossible, though, so he could only hope the items he was looking for wouldn’t end up being too expensive.

Hours passed as the event proceeded, and Zac started to become a bit bored. He hadn’t placed a single bid so far, not daring to waste his limited money before he found what he needed. He did learn quite a bit from the auctioneer’s

explanations about the various treasures, and the day gave him a lot better understanding of what drove the value of treasures.

When it came to Spirit Tools, there were generally two factors that decided their value. The first factor was the material the item was created from. Different materials and combinations had different potential, it seemed. Some weapons couldn't be upgraded very far due to the poor quality of the core material, whereas others had greater potential.

It was the same as with most people. Very few had the capability to reach the peak of cultivation. Their constitution simply wouldn't allow it unless they managed to remold their bodies through some extreme fortuitous encounter.

Zac had already somewhat instinctively picked up on this difference when he'd gathered a couple of Spirit Tools earlier, but he couldn't explain it better than the fact that a few of them were better than others.

There were a lot of Spirit Tools for sale in the auction, and it was standard for the auctioneer to explain what the item's core materials were, and its guaranteed evolution. The weapons that could evolve further were tens of times more expensive than those with a limited progression path.

The other thing that could have a large impact on an item was whether it was attuned. It seemed to work just like with crystals, where there were normal Nexus Crystals, but also items like Flame Crystals and Divine Crystals. A weapon with a popular attunement was usually many times more expensive than one without.

After figuring these things out, he had a bit disheartening realization about his own weapon, **[Verun's Bite]**. It was a weapon that he'd gotten from the Merit shop during his beast wave quest, and he knew by now that it wasn't some top-tier item. The weapon had no attunement, and Zac realized its materials were nothing too special either after seeing all the Spirit Tools on display.

However, it was a weapon he had grown extremely accustomed to, and he was loath to give it up for something else unless absolutely necessary. He also had a feeling that

Verun had its own points of uniqueness due to the fact that the Tool Spirit could actually appear and fight. The auctioneer had never mentioned such a thing when presenting all these weapons, and she was clearly working hard on the upsell.

It made Zac believe that the mysterious stone he'd fed to Verun back when it was still F-grade was an extremely precious item. It was his luck that no one on Earth could figure out what it was, which allowed Zac to get it for a fraction of its true value. That thing alone might be what would allow him to evolve Verun to even greater heights in the future.

Besides, it was not like the more common weapons couldn't be upgraded. They just needed their own fortuitous encounters, just like cultivators did. So even if Verun was common, so what? It just put his axe on the same level as himself, a mortal.

It was only in the second-to-last section of the auction that Zac started to see things he was interested in on the list. The final five items were still obscured, but the seventh weapon was actually listed as a "one-of-a-kind" shield. There were also multiple pills that would give large boosts to both improving race and opening nodes.

Zac eagerly waited as the auctioneer sold off one item after another until she finally arrived at one item that Zac was interested in.

"Next item might not be helpful during your stay inside the Tower of Eternity, but it is a must-have for when you return home triumphantly. It is the [**Treasure Blood Pill**] that will complete up to 15% of the Race upgrade for a general humanoid cultivator. It will even purify your blood, reducing the pill toxicity in your veins by a noticeable degree," the young auctioneer said with a smile as she presented a crystalline vial.

"Pill toxicity? What is that?" Zac asked with a frown.

Galau gave Zac a befuddled look, as though Zac had asked what air was, but he still quickly answered.

“Most pills contain small amounts of impurities that the body is unable to break down. The more pills you eat, the more it accumulates. The problem is that it is very hard to notice that there is a problem before it’s too late. You won’t lose any attribute points, but it might cause your Cosmic Energy to become a bit sluggish. But most importantly, it might affect your attempts at forming a Cultivation Core negatively,” the man said with a hushed voice.

“Eating too many pills will essentially end your path of cultivation unless you deal with the crap,” Ogras added.

“Are all pills like this?” Zac asked with a frown. “Even healing pills?”

“No, it’s just pills that improve your Dao, Race, or levels that have this effect, as far as I know,” Galau said with a shake of his head.

“What about natural treasures?” Zac asked.

“They’re born by nature, so there’s no residual toxicity,” Galau said. “Instead, they are often poisonous and still require getting turned into a pill before they can be used.”

“So this pill is pretty good, even reducing the toxicity rather than increasing it?” Zac asked.

Galau looked back and forth before he leaned over and whispered.

“It’s a sales trick,” he said as quietly as possible. “Remember what she said? It removes toxicity from your blood, but she never said anything about removing it from the body.”

Zac’s eyes widened in understanding, feeling it was a bit lucky to have the experienced youngster to explain the pitfalls. If it weren’t for his warning, he would have unhesitatingly bought this thing after learning about pill toxicity, perhaps ready to buy it at a huge premium.

Just from hearing Galau’s explanation, he realized that pill toxicity would become another barrier for his future cultivation. He would be far more reliant on pills compared to

normal cultivators, since the only other way for him to crack open nodes was to risk his body by forcing them open.

But now, he learned that even the safer path was fraught with hidden danger. What if he managed to get all the way to Peak E-grade only to discover that his body had accumulated too much toxicity?

DREAMS

“Is there any way to cleanse the toxicity for real?” Zac asked.

“There are various means, like certain natural treasures. There are even arrays that will slowly purify the body. Most alchemy clans are researching ways to reduce pill toxicity in their bodies almost as ardently as they are researching new recipes,” Galau said.

The biography of Galvarion that Zac had read in the Marshall Library immediately popped into his mind after hearing Galau’s explanation. That mortal had stayed at the peak of E-grade for over a century before finally forming his core. Was this related to pill toxicity perhaps?

Zac eventually spent 130 million Nexus Coins on a pill that would push forward his Race by a decent amount, pill toxicity or not. Most of the herbs gathered in Port Atwood were geared toward gaining E-grade Race and wouldn’t really assist him in reaching D-grade. And that was something that he had to get done sooner or later, as he would quickly approach the attribute limit otherwise.

He also spent 100 million on a pill that was guaranteed to break open a node beneath level 80, and another 120 million for a pill with a similar effect. Hearing about the pill toxicity made him a bit worried, but he would simply have to find a way to deal with this later. Surviving the undead incursion and the Dominators was simply more important in the short run.

Ogras finally bought an item as well, which apparently was a treasure that was known to strengthen the psychic bond

between a cultivator and his contracted spirit. It was no doubt bought with the purpose of getting a better handle on the mysterious creature that lived in his shadows, and Zac could glean that the situation was less than ideal since the demon spent over 300 million on it.

Zac was happy that the demon found an opportunity to get a handle on his parasite, but his mind couldn't help returning to the advertised shield that was listed. For some reason, there was no detailed description like those Zac read for the Spirit Tools, and he didn't know if that was a good or a bad thing.

Luckily, the wait wasn't long, and two assistants produced a massive shield that thumped down on the ground with enough force to cause the whole scene to shake slightly. The shield itself was more of a large heater shield compared to the huge spiked scutum he'd used until it broke.

It was made from some material that Zac didn't recognize, but it obviously was extremely heavy. It looked a bit like carbon fiber ingrained with streaks of copper. Only the core was a bit different, as it was covered in dense white fractals that formed a circle. It didn't have the same ferocity as his old shield, but Zac could tell it was of much higher quality.

"Next up is this spectacular item wrought from almost pure Neprosium that has been treated with expert care to provide the highest standards in durability and regeneration," the auctioneer said with a smile as she held her hand on the anthracite and copper shield.

"What do you think this item would go for?" Zac asked with a low voice.

"It doesn't have an attunement, and it's not a Spirit Tool, but the material it's made of is extraordinary. A piece of raw Neprosium that large would alone cost hundreds of millions of Nexus Coins. I don't understand why someone would use such a large piece to create a normal shield. The creator will risk taking a loss," Galau said in bafflement. "Neprosium is rare, and it's a popular material in defensive treasures."

"Perhaps the craftsman had a quest or an inspiration." Ogras shrugged. "They made it for the experience rather than

money. I would say you will have to fork out at least 700 million if you want this. People would be willing to pay over 500 to 600 million just to melt it down for the materials.”

“The creator named this shield **[Everlasting]**, and I can inform you that it is the only shield appearing in today’s auction. I am sure many of you are a bit confused as to why a blacksmith chose to make this item,” the auctioneer said with a smile, playing on the suspense in the room.

The name made Zac strongly resonate with it. It not only reminded him of the ancient protector in his Dao Vision, but it also indicated that it would be able to take blow after blow. Wasn’t that just what he needed?

“Truthfully, it is a failed item. The creator wished to create a mighty Spirit Tool, but it wasn’t to be, and it ended up a normal shield without a soul. However, the creator felt it was still an item of beauty and chose to sell it rather than reforging it,” the auctioneer continued.

“So that’s why the materials used are so damn expensive,” Ogras muttered. “But that blacksmith seems a bit loony to not repurpose the materials.”

“The extravagant choice of material puts the shield at the very peak of what’s allowed into the Tower of Eternity, something that you will not encounter more than once. This, combined with Neprosium’s inherent ability to take in and even strengthen almost any attunement, makes the shield the ultimate companion for any warrior used to being the vanguard,” the auctioneer finished her introduction. “Perhaps you can even upgrade it to a true Spirit Tool in the future!”

“Turning a mundane tool into a Spirit Tool is extremely difficult,” Galau whispered when he saw Zac’s interested expression. “But what she said about Neprosium is true. It is a really high-quality material. But you should know that Neprosium doesn’t mix well with a lot of materials, which might make it a picky eater when you try to upgrade it, even if you manage to bring it to life.”

Zac slowly digested the information as he took a look at his savings before making a decision. As long as the shield

didn't become too expensive, he would buy it. The inherent quality of the material might come in handy in the future, as he walked the path of both life and death. This shield might be usable in both his forms, something that was hard to find.

“The starting bid is 400 million Nexus Coins,” the auctioneer said. “Minimum increase is 25 million.”

That price was already well over what many of the earlier Spirit Tools sold for, but the bidding immediately pushed the price to 500 million. Zac guessed that those bids were mainly from people who wanted the shield for the material, as the bidding drastically slowed down after having passed the value of the Neprosium itself.

However, it did steadily keep climbing in price, something that seemed to surprise the demon.

“I was wrong,” Ogras whistled. “It might even pass a billion.”

“Shields are rare,” Galau explained. “Not many use them, and they are hard to make. So few are produced, creating a bidding war when a good one finally appears. Besides, Tool Spirits aren't as important for shields as for weapons. The weapon's Tool Spirit can increase your lethality to a large degree, but a Spirit Tool shield is mostly better at regenerating itself after taking damage. That's something Neprosium is already extremely good at by itself.”

Zac waited for a bit longer, but when the price rose to 800 million, he immediately increased the bid with 100 million Nexus Coins, hoping to dissuade the competition. But only a few seconds passed before another person raised it with 25 million, at which point Zac raised it to a billion. This repeated twice until he finally bid 1.2 billion while his stomach was churning due to the price it had reached.

It was a huge sum for Zac, who had felt the pinch when spending a few million on the Creator Vessels just a few months back. A billion Nexus Coins would be able to pay for all the expenses of his Academy for years, perhaps decades, but it wasn't even enough for a single item here. It was truly a rich man's game.

“Twelve hundred E-grade Nexus Coins! Anyone?” The auctioneer smiled as she looked around. “Remember, the shield might not have an attunement right now, but who knows what will happen when you manage to upgrade it.”

It was the most expensive treasure sold so far by over 600 million Nexus Coins, but it still wasn't any record-breaking amount. She was obviously trying to push the price a bit further with all kinds of exclamations.

“Gaining an attunement during evolution?” Ogras snorted in derision. “How often are people that lucky? And you need to make it a Spirit Tool first.”

Galau didn't say anything, but he nodded in agreement, proving that it was truly just a sales trick. Zac felt pretty annoyed as he inwardly cursed the woman to close the auction. Luckily, no one else fell for the auctioneer's exhortations, and Zac successfully won the bid.

Time passed, and the items got more and more impressive, but neither Zac nor Ogras bid anymore. The last section only had ten items, each one of them going for well over 1,000 E-grade Nexus Coins, which translated to 1 billion Nexus Coins. The final treasure was actually an urn from the Limitless Empire, an item predating even the System itself.

It did emit a trace of spirituality, but Zac couldn't tell if there was anything special about it. It had just been excavated from an unknown Mystic Realm, according to the auctioneer, and the method to unseal it was unknown. Perhaps a great treasure waited inside, or perhaps it was just wine that went bad billions of years ago.

The urn eventually went to a beautiful young lady sitting on one of the top platforms for the staggering price of 147 billion Nexus Coins. The only reason Zac even knew that was because she had entered an open bidding war against a young man sitting on another platform.

“That's some gamble,” Ogras muttered. “Or perhaps she just collects those things.”

“Our sector has been known to hold a few fragmented pockets of space from the Limitless Empire,” Galau explained. “But not much of value has been found from what I’ve gathered. It was clearly not some flourishing part of the empire that had ended up in our neighborhood as Mystic Realms. So, I am guessing the young lady, or rather one of her ancestors, is a collector.”

Zac could only shake his head in bemusement. Life truly wasn’t fair.

Unfortunately, there were no soul-mending pills or treasures in today’s auction unless one of the unknown treasures had such capabilities, but the haul wasn’t bad overall. Zac had already received his items in the intermissions, so the group didn’t need to stay behind to complete any transactions.

“I’m sorry that you didn’t find the thing you were looking for. But don’t worry, it’s only been a day. There will be many more opportunities,” Galau said after they had exited the venue. “How about I treat you two to dinner to cheer everyone up?”

Zac wasn’t really in the mood, but Ogras preceded him to graciously accept, loosely mentioning a certain restaurant that he had heard quite a few good things about. Judging from Galau’s face, that place was obviously expensive, but he quickly recovered and led the two there. He even went so far as to book a private booth for the three of them and ordered a large set of dishes and drinks for the three.

“So, I guess it’s about time you explain why you’ve been following us,” Ogras said after they sat down at their table. “If you plan to rob us, you should understand by now we aren’t that wealthy.”

“I don’t harbor any malicious thoughts!” Galau said hurriedly, his eyes darting back and forth between the two. “But truthfully, there is a matter where I require your help. I need assistance in climbing the tower.”

“It’s a carry after all? But why us? We are completely unknown, and you don’t know our strength,” Ogras asked skeptically.

“That’s part of the point.” Galau sighed. “I need to reach at least the 30th level without it being obvious I was carried. Preferably even higher.”

“Thirtieth level?” Ogras muttered. “It’s a pretty hard carry, but nothing impossible for the stronger people who offer services like that. Why not just go to them? Are you trying to get a cheaper deal?”

“I am afraid my family will find out from one of my cousins who is also here.” Galau sighed again. “The point of me climbing is to gain more freedom, but it will become invalid if this gets found out. But if I simply enter with a few unknown friends I made while dining out, it will be harder to prove that I was carried through.

“I have a decent chance of taking on the third-floor challenge with the help of my saved-up treasures, but I doubt I would be able to climb any further after that,” Galau admitted. “But I need to reach at least the 30th level to achieve my dream.”

“What? Why?” Zac asked with confusion. “It’s just a title, and isn’t it based on the floor rather than level? As long as you pass the third floor, aren’t you fine?”

“Because I wish to become an appraiser and run a store,” Galau said, an unfamiliar sense of determination appearing on his usually timid face.

Zac was completely stumped, and he looked over at Ogras to see if he could follow what was going on. But the demon looked just as confused as himself, and he had even frozen mid-bite.

What the hell did reaching the 30th level have to do with opening up a store?

BALANCE

It turned out that Galau's family was a stuffy old martial clan that almost exclusively raised warriors for the Allbright armies or adventurers who explored wild Mystical Realms on behalf of their owners. Galau's ancestor was one of the seven grand elders in the family, and the pressure was on him to carry on the legacy.

However, Galau had become enamored with buying and selling artifacts after having handled the inventory that his clansmen had gathered while traveling or fighting wars. He had asked for permission to set up a store, but the elders had denied his request.

“Why say no?” Zac asked with confusion. “Sounds like opening up a side business would only be good for the family. Cutting out the middleman.”

“For one, it's about legacy, but it's also an undeniable fact that families with a stricter focus are more likely to progress, no matter if it's on the martial path or business ventures.” Galau sighed. “The ancestors are all dreaming of rearing a C-grade powerhouse who can elevate the clan, so they do everything in their power to raise promising warriors. Especially us in the main branch.”

“What does this have to do with reaching the 30th level?” Ogras asked.

“I wanted to change profession, giving up the martial path. That would generally be seen as a sign of weakness, or that I was giving up. It might affect my whole branch negatively.

But my ancestor eventually gave me an ultimatum after I kept pestering my elders. He told me to reach the 30th level in my upcoming visit to this place, to prove that I did have the power to proceed on the martial path if I wanted to.”

“But you don’t.” Ogras laughed.

“So you want to trick your grandpa and your clan into letting you do whatever you want?” Zac added with a raised brow.

“Well... essentially, yes.” Galau coughed. “And that’s why I need to use this circuitous method to not get caught.”

Zac looked over at Ogras to get his opinion. The demon only shrugged in response, meaning he didn’t see any issues with the proposal, and Zac felt the same way. It was a bit shady, but that wasn’t really their problem. Carrying one person to the 30th level shouldn’t be too difficult, especially since it was just the early stage of the fourth floor.

“But why us?” Ogras repeated. “You haven’t explained that part.”

“Because there is no fear in your eyes,” Galau finally said after a short pause. “The biggest asset to becoming a successful business owner is to have an understanding of people, and I believe this is an area where I shine. It’s something that has allowed me to triple the wealth I brought with me, as I was able to sniff out those who lied about their products or were desperate to gain a quick buck.

“I have observed the warriors who have come and gone during the past months, and most carry a well-hidden fear in their hearts as they carry themselves here. It’s natural; this town is full of hidden dragons, and people don’t have their elders to protect them. Even the tower itself brings a real risk of death even with its protective measures.

“But you two are completely unafraid, and I know it’s not due to stupidity as with some,” Galau continued, his speech increasing in fervor as he turned to Ogras. “The two of you seem to take this as a stroll in the park, not even flinching when you saw those scary people sitting on the floating

platforms. This makes me sure you are dark horses, the people I've been waiting for over the past months. You surely have the capabilities to reach the fourth floor."

Neither denied the claims since what he said was essentially accurate. Zac didn't worry about some people causing problems, as he felt confident in rebuffing most people when he had the System on his side. There was the risk of running into someone with a huge stack of E-grade arrays, but it was doubtful that anyone would throw those items around on some random person who kept to himself.

And even if they did, he still had **[Loamwalker]** to get away in an instant in case someone took out an unknown crystal. He felt confident in surviving at the edge of even a dozen Middle E-grade arrays thanks to his defensive skill and a massive pool of Endurance.

When neither Ogras nor Zac spoke up, Galau's eyes lit up in delight, but Zac felt a bit sorry for the guy. He had a feeling that Galau's plan was bound to go awry. Who would believe that Galau's accomplishment was his own after Zac elicited a projection from something above the fifth floor?

But Zac needed the money, so he could only hope the effect of making the acquaintance of someone like himself would make up for Galau's plans. Besides, he never mentioned any stipulations about him or Ogras not being allowed to ascend too far.

"So what are you ready to pay for bringing you to the 30th level?" Ogras asked, making Zac lock onto Galau with interest as well.

"How about 3 billion Nexus Coins to take me to the 30th level? Each, of course," Galau said. "And we can negotiate an additional price for taking me even further when we get there."

Ogras' eyes glistened with greed, and Zac saw that he was about to agree without hesitation. But there was something else that Zac needed even more than money at the moment, and an aspiring merchant like Galau might be just the right person to ask for it.

“Throw in a Dao Treasure for each of us as well, and you have a deal,” Zac said, receiving an enthusiastic nod from the demon.

“Two Dao Treasures,” Galau muttered, looking a bit pained. “Fine, but you’ll need to take me to the 32nd level, then.”

The two mulled it over for a fraction of a second before they immediately stretched out their hands to seal the deal.

Agreeing to carry Galau to the 32nd level would essentially double Zac’s and Ogras’ wealth, and the two ate until they barely could move in order to celebrate. The restaurant that Ogras recommended had a noncombat-class Chef who brought out amazing dishes that all contained a high amount of Cosmic Energy.

These dishes didn’t give any temporary boosts to increase their attributes or anything like that, but they were far tastier than anything Zac had ever eaten before. Zac finally understood why Ogras kept calling earthlings country bumpkins, and he wasn’t sure how he would go back to eating some crude meals he had thrown together himself.

Nurturing a proper Chef became one of his side missions after that evening.

Zac spent the next few days walking around the Base Town to search for items that could help his force. With the extra cash infusion from the surprisingly wealthy Galau, he had some wiggle room to buy more than the bare essentials.

He first purchased a large number of low-grade talismans from a reputable store. Each one cost less than 100,000 Nexus Coins, but they would perhaps be able to save the lives of his elites in case of a crisis back on Earth. He also cleaned up a sizeable number of herbs on Calrin’s list of things they needed to create medicinal baths on a large scale.

He even found a small stack of [**Sky Reed**] that were almost as aged as the other three herbs he’d gathered during the hunt, which meant that he now had all the needed ingredients to concoct more [**Four Gates Pills**]. Unfortunately,

he still couldn't find any medicine that might help with Alea's situation. Many of the better stores had items that could mend a wounded soul, but a fractured one was something else entirely.

There also weren't any Dao Treasures available, which wasn't too surprising. If anyone had one, they would eat it themselves to improve their strength before the tower. Some did appear during auctions, according to Galau, but they were amongst the most fiercely contested items, turning insanely overpriced.

Everyone wanted to have a couple of Dao Treasures on hand in case someone elicited a grand projection. A single projection alone usually wasn't enough to form or upgrade a seed, but there was a decent chance if you also had a treasure to help out.

So Zac could understand the scarcity, but it did put a damper on his goal of forming another Fragment before leaving the Tower of Eternity. He could only put his hopes on Galau's ability to sniff two of them out.

Ogras bought a few items as well, including things that would help out with his progress after evolving. But Zac guessed that the demon already had quite a few such resources in his possession, given by his grandfather. He should have planned on evolving soon after arriving at Earth, but had been delayed by various reasons.

Galau was actually the one who bought most of them all, but what he bought during their visits to stores and the open bazaars was completely random. He explained that the items weren't for himself, but things he felt he could make money on either here or when he returned to the Allbright Empire.

Zac spent the nights sitting on his prayer mat, working his hardest to meditate on the Dao. The atmosphere wasn't quite as good as Earth, but it was far better than the Eastern Trigram Sect. That place was completely devoid of spirituality, but he felt he still could progress his Dao here. He also had the tower to help, and he had already seen three projections, though they were of the lowest kind that didn't provide too much.

On the sixth night, he took a break, as Ogras had brought over some expensive Spiritual Wine. The two sat and enjoyed the evening breeze in the courtyard, gazing up at the sky. The stars were unfamiliar, and massive nebulas painted the sky into a mesmerizing haze. It was a poignant reminder of how far away from Earth and its struggles he was at the moment.

“This is the life.” Ogras sighed in contentment, the tranquility of the night affecting him.

“Is this what life is like for those who stand at the top? Those who are part of established forces?” Zac asked somewhat rhetorically.

“Not in Clan Azh’Rezak at least.” Ogras sighed as he took a sip, some wistfulness apparent in his eyes. “There was always struggle, though a different kind compared to the one we face now. But the moment that we as a family relaxed, we would be eaten by one of many forces in the surroundings who lusted for our land or our inheritance. I think it’s like that everywhere.”

“Struggle?” Zac asked with some despondency creeping into his heart.

“Balance,” Ogras answered. “The universe is a lawless place, where might makes right. Our kingdoms, empires, whole Sectors are in a state of delicate balance that keeps a semblance of peace. But a small ripple will topple that balance, and bloodshed will invariably follow.”

Zac understood what he meant. The moment a clan or sect declined, like through the passing of an ancestor, it would be under constant threat of annihilation. This worked the other way as well. If a true powerhouse emerged in a family, it would likely set out on a path of conquest to sustain that person’s continued cultivation and to raise the standard of their progeny.

Any change would result in lines being redrawn and blood spilled until a balance was restored.

“Balance...” Zac echoed as his eyes slightly glazed over.

The solemn atmosphere was suddenly ruined by the frazzled entrance of Galau as he almost fell through the door to the courtyard.

“He’s about to emerge!” Galau panted.

“What? Who?” Zac asked with some annoyance.

“Reoluv Er Suriav Prehavandar Dravorak,” Galau said in one breath.

“Did you just cast a curse on us?” Ogras muttered with a raised brow.

“No, that’s his name,” Galau said, almost jumping back and forth in impatience. “The Dravorak Dynasty is over 100 million years old, and it is the imperial family of an empire that is at least as strong as my Allbright Empire. I just found out that he entered the tower yesterday.”

“And this Reoluv is part of this family?” Zac asked, still not understanding what the big deal was.

The Dravorak seemed like a huge force, but there were a few of them around, especially around the core of the town.

“Reoluv is the fifteenth and youngest son of the current reigning emperor, born from the emperor’s favorite wife. He is someone who has received an entire empire’s blessings and resources. More importantly, he’s supposed to be extremely talented, and he is a strong contender for the throne, even though one of his brothers already has broken through to C-grade,” the young man continued. “Rumors are that the previous emperor has taken him on as a direct disciple.”

“This all sounds very impressive, but what does that have to do with us?” Zac asked, still confused.

Ogras’ eyes suddenly widened, and he looked up toward the sky surrounding the tower.

“A Dao Mirage,” Ogras muttered before turning back toward Galau. “Which level?”

“There is no doubt that he will pass the sixth floor, with some even saying that he has the power to reach the later levels of the seventh floor. But most are hesitant whether he

will actually be able to pass the seventh floor's final challenge on the 63rd level, since that hasn't happened for thousands of years," Galau said.

"Dao Mirage; haven't we already seen a few?" Zac asked. "What's the big deal?"

"Yeah, but that was one of the worst ones. If this Reoluv crashes through to the end of the seventh floor, you have a chance of actually breaking through your Dao Seeds. Meditating under the vision from the seventh floor is almost the equivalent of an epiphany," Galau excitedly said as he took out two boxes.

"These are the two Dao Treasures I promised. I was planning on presenting these after the climb, but this opportunity is too rare to miss," Galau said.

THE EIGHT CALAMITIES

“You’re not worried we will take the Dao Treasures and run?” Zac couldn’t help but ask. “Don’t you need them for yourself?”

Dao Treasures were obviously hard currency here, especially now that some big shot was about to emerge from the tower. Giving them out like this was to give up on either an opportunity for himself, or the chance to sell the treasures outside for a huge markup.

“I am sure I can trust in your character. Besides, I have managed to get my hands on a few more,” Galau said, but he quickly followed up with another sentence when he saw Zac’s and Ogras’ eyes light up with avarice. “I can’t part with those, though. They’re for my family members and myself after I’ve broken through.”

“Do you even need Dao Seeds if you want to become a merchant?” Ogras smiled. “Why not part with a few more of them?”

“The Dao is important for noncombat classes as well!” Galau said as he took a step back. “It can help us in all kinds of ways, just like with a warrior. Besides, I plan on becoming a hybrid class, at least for E-grade.”

“Thank you. We’ll remember this favor.” Zac nodded as he took out his prayer mat.

Time was of the essence, so he immediately rotated his Cosmic Energy through his pathways a few times to clear out the lingering effects of the alcohol. The sky was still the same

beautiful spectacle of shimmering stars, and the three silently looked up at the scenery in silence as the minutes passed.

The ethereal mindset as when he'd gazed upon the skies earlier soon returned, and he felt like he was on the verge of something. He didn't try to force it, though, and rather let the feeling naturally stir and grow in his mind.

The tranquility of the night was suddenly broken as a massive titan appeared in the space behind the tower. It stood thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of meters tall and seemed to be completely wrought out of metal. However, it was clearly not a golem or puppet, but rather a projection of a being made from flesh and blood. It just had a bluish tint like zinc or osmium.

Its head and torso were mostly obscured by the tower itself, as it actually stood behind the structure and didn't move, and Zac could only see the sides of the behemoth. That was just fine for Zac, as his eyes were glued to the things that it carried in its hands, which each was as large as an island. The Titan actually possessed eight arms, each one bare and bulging with muscles, and each hand held a mysterious object.

Most of the treasures did not seem to match the gruff and bulky figure of the Titan, but Zac looked at each and every one of them seriously. One hand held a flute made from a golden metal, and Zac felt like he saw a meteor shower when his eyes locked on to it. Another hand gripped a fan as large as a mountain, seemingly capable of causing a hurricane with a wave.

There was also a burning sword, a castanet crackling with terrifying bolts of lightning, a calabash releasing the sounds of a raging ocean. One hand even held a drum shaped like a volcano, emitting a fiery glow that reminded him of his visit to the magma world and the Fire Golems.

But his eyes only briefly swept over these items before they stopped at the two hands that each held a flower. One was a large basket flower, and it swayed as the Titan held on to its long stalk. The air around it seemed to be vibrating to the point space itself cracked.

Zac's eyes finally landed on the last item, a single lotus flower. His thoughts initially went to the massive lotus that was in the Abbot's possession, but he immediately realized the thing in front of him was in a completely different league. This was a grand treasure of the universe, containing endless power.

Its attunement seemed to be completely different from the Abbot's lotus as well, and its purple leaves emitted a chilling sense of death and putrefaction. It didn't feel like it released toxic plumes, but that it was pestilence itself.

There was something mesmerizing about the lotus, making Zac unable to move his eyes away. He barely had enough presence of mind to quickly cram his Dao Treasure into his mouth. His consciousness started to wander, and his vision was closing in on him. Just as he was about to drift away, he heard the seemingly distant voice of Galau speak up in a daze.

“It's the Eight Calamities!”

Zac had no time to react before his whole being was consumed by the lotus flower. His vision suddenly changed to show a battlefield where two endless armies fought. One army looked a bit like the lizardmen of the church, but they were more akin to humanoid dragons. The other force were actual cyclops, each reaching over a hundred meters in height.

At first glance, it might have been a foregone conclusion that the lizardmen, who only seemed to reach two to three meters in height, would be hopelessly outmatched, but reality proved different. The warriors somehow summoned, or more likely used massive war arrays to conjure, fiery dragons to battle their enormous foes.

The battlefield stretched into the horizon, and it felt like thousands of warriors died every minute, and the corpses created mountains of the unwilling dead. The resentment in the air was palpable, and it only grew worse as the war raged on for years and years. The losses were uncountable, and the boundless world itself was teetering on collapse from the accumulated resentment.

Terrible maladies sprouted due to the sea of corpses, but the armies seemed to be possessed, ignoring their increasingly

horrific bodies as they transformed and mutated from the corruption in the air.

A small purple flower quietly floated in a turbid pool of blood, hidden in one of the largest corpse mounds on the planet. It consumed the energies of everything around it and steadily gained power as the war raged on. The massacre only got worse, but the diseases and resentment oddly enough disappeared over time, and suddenly, it was as though a spell had been broken.

The war stopped, all thanks to a blood-drenched lotus having eaten its fill.

The grand generals, each one a Peak C-grade warrior at the least, called for a cease-fire. Everyone seemed to be horrified by their actions and looked as though they were walking in a living nightmare. Their eyes turned toward the thousands of corpse mountains as immense regret gripped their hearts. It looked like they wanted nothing more than to get away from this cursed world that had whipped them into a murderous frenzy, yet they stayed on.

They eventually found the reason for their salvation, a large purple lotus that rested in the middle of an ocean of blood. It had taken on their sins, their resentment, and their ailments, giving the two races a chance at survival. The generals bowed toward the grand treasure in reverence, no one having any ideas of taking it for themselves.

However, things suddenly took a disturbing turn as large welts started to appear on the people around the flower. Just a second later, flesh was dripping off everyone's bodies like melted wax. Not even the immensely powerful generals were spared, and they crumbled before they managed to reach any of the teleportation arrays nearby.

The unstoppable putrefaction spread like an invisible wave, reaping the little life that still remained on the once glorious planet that stood at the core of a star sector. The mountains of corpses were slowly absorbed as the lotus kept growing, and every millennium or two, another petal emerged on the flower.

Within that petal was sealed the lament of a million powerful warriors, forever unable to leave. The lotus kept slowly growing in its domain as the sole emperor of the planet.

But one day, a hand as large as a continent appeared above the desolate planet, and it reached down to grasp the cursed lotus. A torrent of pestilence rose up to meet the hand, but the lotus' attack was immediately defeated as a black coffin appeared out of nowhere, sealing the flower within.

The stone sarcophagus shuddered a few times, likely from the lotus releasing immense attacks to escape, but it quieted down again soon enough. The terrifying power the coffin now radiated was a clear signal that the lotus might be sealed away from the world, but was still very much alive. The moment the coffin opened again, all life would end.

The scene ended with the enormous hand rising through the atmosphere, leaving the cursed planet behind, and Zac's eyes opened just in time to see a screen appear in front of him.

[Fragment of the Coffin – Early – All Attributes +10, Endurance +80, Vitality +50, Intelligence +15, Wisdom +60, Effectiveness of Endurance +5%]

Zac looked at the line with incomprehension, not understanding how he had gotten there. He had imagined something along the lines of Petrification or Decay when considering the combination of Rot and Hardness, but the vision had rather created an odd Fragment. Was there such a thing as the Dao of the Coffin?

Was it because his thoughts had been on Alea lying in her crystal coffin for the past week? Zac felt that the vision of Alea lying beneath the Tree of Ascension somewhat mirrored what he had just witnessed during his epiphany. Alea was poisonous just like the lotus, and both were preserved within a coffin.

It made him confused whether what he'd witnessed was something that actually had happened, or whether it was just something his mind conjured to make sense of the insight that he'd gained from looking at the lotus in the Titan's hand.

Of course, the real issue was what the hell the Dao of the Coffin entailed. He could understand the concept, as a coffin was both hard and the corpses inside would rot away, but he didn't understand how the Dao of the Coffin would be utilized in battle. Was it defensive? Offensive? He simply couldn't tell.

Unfortunately, there was no way for him to try it out before he entered the tower either. His only clue was that he had actually lost a little bit of Endurance in favor of more Vitality and Wisdom when he fused Rot and Hardness. Endurance was obviously the main stat, but its somewhat balanced spread might indicate a Dao less focused on simply defense.

The projection had already disappeared by the time Zac opened his eyes, so he decided to close his eyes again to ponder on his newest Fragment. But his eyes were drawn to a gaping Galau, who sat a few meters away, looking at him with what looked to be a mix of elation and jealousy.

“Did you actually gain something?” Galau said with some shock in his eyes. “The fluctuations around you were quite massive.”

“Yeah, didn't you?” Zac asked with confusion. “I was dragged into a vision the moment I looked upon that Titan.”

Galau opened and closed his mouth a few times, but no words came out.

“You'll get used to it after traveling with that guy for a while.” Ogras sighed. “At least we'll hopefully get some soup while the general eats his meat.”

“What's going on?” Zac asked.

“That was the ‘Eight Calamities Titan,’ one of the rarest projections representing the 62nd level,” Galau explained. “Only those with a connection to one of the calamities will gain something from the items in the Titan's hands. Rumors say that special bloodlines might gain something directly from the Titan itself, but I haven't heard of anything like that actually happening, so it might be false.”

“Eight Calamities,” Zac muttered. “So those lucky enough to have a Dao that resonated with one of the treasures would get a guaranteed epiphany?”

“Perhaps not an epiphany, but they would make improvements.” Galau nodded.

“Then it’s perhaps thanks to you and your Dao Treasure I managed to take a step forward. I’ll remember the favor,” Zac said seriously.

It was true. The Dao of Death, or rather the Dao of the Coffin, was the remaining Fragment he’d felt most leery about completing before evolving, but he’d suddenly gained it when he was actually targeting his Life Fragment.

Even just before Galau came barging into their courtyard, he had felt he was on the verge of something, making him somewhat confident he had taken the first step toward a suitable concept for his final Fragment.

Of course, three low-grade Fragments were unfortunately still not enough for him to get his hands on an Arcane class according to the report he’d bought the other day.

But gaining the Fragment of the Coffin was definitely a step in the right direction, making Zac more hopeful for the future. It truly felt like his high Luck had helped him out again, presenting him with just the vision he needed.

“How does Luck work?” Zac suddenly asked the demon after Galau left their courtyard. “Could my Luck have caused that Reoluv to fail the final challenge in order for me to gain this opportunity?”

“Luck is an obscure subject, and I don’t know any specifics,” Ogras said hesitantly. “But I don’t think its effect would be that exaggerated. That guy reaching the 62nd level is exactly what was expected of him.”

“Yeah, but wouldn’t a guy like that have a few hidden means to reach even higher?” Zac ventured.

Ogras didn’t answer and rather opted to glance in the direction of the tower with a pensive expression.

EMERALD SKIES

Reoluv was inwardly fuming, but he still had to retain a dignified expression as he received the many congratulations from the various young masters and ladies from distinguished forces as he exited the tower.

Passing the 62nd level was respectable, but not what he had aimed for. His goal had always been to completely conquer the seventh floor, just like his master had once upon a time. But a small mistake had abruptly caused the end of his trial, even before he had used up his final hidden cards. It was just the difference of one level from completing the whole seventh floor, but that one level was like an endless abyss.

It was the divide between a talented cultivator and a genius of an era.

Conquering the seventh floor would have given him a shot at making contact with the hidden peak forces presiding over the sector, or perhaps provided him with the same sort of opportunity that had presented itself to Lord Beradan a few decades after he managed to conquer the seventh floor.

Winning the favor of an undying existence passing by their remote sector would elevate his fate to a level that not even becoming an emperor could match.

But it was all for naught.

It felt like a cosmic joke; a brief lapse in concentration made his token crack, which forcibly teleported him outside even though he still was able to keep fighting. He didn't even know that was possible, since the tokens were essentially

impervious to outside forces. Or did that change at the high-tier floors?

Reoluv gritted his teeth at the memory and quickly excused himself from the square full of people, citing the need to go home and ponder on a few insights he'd gained from conjuring the Eight Calamities Titan.

The truth was that the mental shock of falling short for such a stupid reason had even made him unable to completely immerse himself in the effect of the apparition, but perhaps the situation was still salvageable if he hurried home to his master's Dao Chamber. As long as he managed to push one of his Fragments to Medium mastery, the climb wouldn't be a complete wash.

Many impressed sighs and comments echoed across the square, praising such a genius that never let himself relax. But he didn't care as he crushed the token, even though he could stay here for another month if he wanted to.

At least there was one small comfort in this disappointing climb. There was at least no one in the area who would be able to beat his score in the short run, and he would have another chance in a few years.

"My Lord, it is done," Triv said as his Miasmatic body shuddered with excitement.

"Oh?" Adriel said with some surprise. "I thought it would take a few more days."

"We managed to sneak a handful of spectral squads behind their lines to place the final flags. They will start to corrode the environment, though, so it will be found out within a week that something is wrong," the ghost attendant confirmed.

"You don't need to explain to me," Adriel snorted. "I was the one who modified them."

"My apologies!" Triv hurriedly said.

Adriel waved his hand that it didn't matter as he thoughtfully stared at his crystal for a few seconds.

“Have we found out the source of undeath yet?” Adriel asked. “Those closed incursions teemed with Miasma, but I couldn't recognize its signature. I first thought it was Mhal who had somehow resurrected, but he was much too stupid to orchestrate something like that.”

“No, we sent a group to greet and possibly integrate the person who closed those incursions, but we were always too late,” Triv said. “We also tried to compare the residual energies to everyone here, but we couldn't match it either.”

It shouldn't be possible that it was one of his children. Adriel had never heard of a newly turned citizen ignoring the commands of its leader. Even those ignorant things scuttling around his domain would respond to the calling, shuffling toward him without hesitation. Had the undead warrior mutated to allow him to somehow resist it?

“There is something else,” the attendant added. “He can use the natives' teleportation arrays. The scouts believe that the warrior is an unaffiliated wanderer since he didn't respond to the call in the slightest.”

“So he's not a designated invader at least,” Adriel muttered as he started to pace back and forth. “Unaffiliated wanderer at F or early E-grade? A twist of fate? Or is a scion of the ruling clans bored enough to visit a baby planet?”

“If it's one of those young masters who have gained an interest in this world... should we back off?” Triv nervously asked.

“No need. If such a personage wanted this planet, they would simply visit me and claim it. That would be a pretty good outcome as well. A family that can see through the obscurations of the Heavens wouldn't be stingy with their compensation for claiming a world.” Adriel smiled.

However, Adriel's instincts told him that the mysterious warrior was not some scion of an ancient clan. He was just a Revenant Lich rather than one of the five blessed races, but he

represented the empire in this invasion. Even one of the purebloods would have had to respond to the call since it contained the authority of the Primo.

“Of course, there’s another possibility,” the Lich pondered.

“What?” Triv asked with confusion. “If not a turned citizen and not an unaffiliated wanderer, then what?”

“It might be related to the Mystic Realm,” Adriel muttered with a thoughtful smile. “We know it’s an abandoned research facility of the heretics of the Boundless Path. Did the Technocrats perhaps create a synthetic bloodline disconnected from the Call of the Empire? But why would they do that? Immortality?”

“What do you wish us to do, my Lord?” Triv asked hesitantly, knowing the far more knowledgeable Lich was simply asking rhetorically.

“Leave it be,” Adriel finally said. “We’ll ignore that man for now since he hasn’t shown any hostility against us. Perhaps activating the array might prompt him to visit me for a talk.”

“So we’re finally liberating this world?” Triv said with excitement. “We’ll finally be able to breathe again!”

“We have played passively long enough,” Adriel agreed as two green sinister lights lit up in his eyes. “Those humans and ants think our citizens are just targets to farm levels? It’s time for them to join my kingdom.”

“Miss Marshall, it’s bad!” Trevor screamed as he almost fell on the ground in his frantic entrance to the command tent.

“What’s going on?” Thea said with a bad premonition as she immediately ran out of the tent, and one glance was all that she needed to know what had scared Trevor so badly.

The sky was green.

Enormous azure lines crisscrossed a murky-green sky, and the air was rife with Miasma. Worse yet, she saw almost a dozen azure pillars reaching toward the sky in various directions. They looked a lot like incursion pillars, though death-attuned rather than the blue one she had encountered during the battle with the incursion neighboring Westfort.

But a second look helped Thea understand that the pillars weren't incursions, but rather a part of the massive array that the undead had worked on for the past months. They connected with some sort of unseen ceiling a thousand meters in the air, infusing the azure lines with a continuous stream of energy.

Had they failed? But they had all held up until now, sacrificing tens of thousands of lives!

“Shit, I thought we had more time?” Mark said with a grunt as he walked out of the tent as well. “This is beyond what I can deal with, miss. What do you want to do?”

Thea's mind was blank as she looked at the pillar closest to them. What did she want to do? How should she know? A year ago, she was simply running a small nonprofit that rescued stray animals, mostly with the help of her family's vast wealth. She knew nothing about warfare and leadership.

“I...” Thea stammered, her mind trying to grasp for a solution.

It was one thing talking about an array powerful enough to turn Earth into a world of death, but it was a whole other thing seeing it in person. How could they stop it? Or at least delay it? This was not something a swift stab with **[Petalstorm]** could solve.

“Take a breath,” Mark said as he saw her face. “You are not alone in this. You have both the family and the whole planet with you.”

Thea took a steadying breath to calm herself, and she started to go over the situation they found themselves in.

“According to Zac, it would still take a week or so for the array to truly activate even after it was completed. It seems

that those pillars are dragging energy out of the ground, converting it to dense Miasma, and finally funneling it to the inscription lines in the sky,” she analyzed. “Perhaps we can slow down the charge-up by stopping the flow of energy?”

It wasn't a solution, but it was the first step, helping the following steps to come easier. Just a minute later a group of scouts set out from their camp, guarded by elites decked in a terrifying number of weapons. They would spare no expense to reach the closest pillar to study it and relay images back to the command center.

Meanwhile, their army would launch a massive assault at the undead horde to make sure they didn't veer off toward the pillars to defend it.

But things quickly deteriorated as the scouts got close to the pillar, as all of them zombified with a speed visible to the naked eye. Thea and the other commanders could only helplessly look at the monitors as their party ripped each other to shreds. The scouting party didn't even manage to get closer than a few hundred meters before they were turned.

What was even scarier was that there was no sign of Miasma entering their bodies or any complaints of discomfort from the poor men. The change came abruptly and without any warning.

“We can try launching rockets at the pillars, but our munitions aren't enough to target all of these things. Besides, I fear that this issue cannot be solved with our mundane weaponry. If that were the case, the undead wouldn't have left most of the pillars unguarded,” Mark said with a sigh.

“Do it. We must try everything,” Thea said with a bleak expression. “I'll head to Port Atwood to see if anything can be done on that end.”

“We can only pray that man will choose to put his private plans on hold to help deal with this mess.”

“Do you have any ideas?” MacKenzie asked, desperately trying to mask the fear taking hold of her heart as she looked up at the pillar in the distance.

This wasn't in line with what they had learned so far. They should have had up to a month at the most, but at least a week before this happened. But it was hard to refute the pillar reaching into the sky.

Their appearance had caused everything to go awry, and with both Zac and Ogras gone, people didn't know who to turn to for answers. People kept looking at her, and she understood the fear and question in their eyes. They were wondering where her brother was. Zac and Ogras weren't slated to return for a few days, though, and there was no way for her to contact them.

“We can't even get close.” Ilvere sighed with a shake of his head. “Anything that gets within a few hundred meters of that thing will be turned into a Zombie in a heartbeat, and its domain seems to be spreading. We even tried taping a bunch of Divine Crystals on a barghest, but the crystals simply cracked, and the barghest was turned as well.”

“I know.” Kenzie sighed. “Thea Marshall visited me a half an hour ago, looking for Zac. She looked like she would explode when I explained that Zac was off-world. My hopes of getting a sister-in-law keep getting dimmer. Anyway, it looks like we will need to take down those pillars from a distance.”

“That lassie will wake up from her sleep sooner or later.” Ilvere smiled before returning to business. “Destroying the array flags will be quite difficult. They are dug far into the ground, making a direct assault from a distance extremely troublesome. You would have to destroy the whole area to get to the array, but we don't possess such force.”

“Not necessarily,” Kenzie said as she took out her brother's flying treasure.

“Wait. What are you planning?” the demon general asked with worry. “If Lord Atwood returns to find you turned into a Zombie, he will skin us alive.”

“I’ll be fine,” Kenzie said as she stepped onto the flying disk.

Ilvere groaned when he saw that she wouldn’t change her mind, and jumped onto the disk with some resignation. Soon enough, the two were soaring through the skies toward a pillar at the outer edge of the green canopy. It only took them half an hour to reach it, and the demon sighed in relief when he saw that it was completely unguarded. At least they wouldn’t have to deal with the undead elites.

Then again, the pillar itself was scary enough to keep everyone at bay.

“So what are you thinking, young miss?” Ilvere said as he hesitantly looked at the pillar a kilometer away.

“I have been working on something my brother left me the past week,” Kenzie said. “I think it will be helpful against the pillars.”

“Powerful offensive arrays?” Ilvere said as his eyes lit up. “That might work, but it needs to be a really powerful one. The pillars are also protected by a shield. Your old-world weaponry didn’t work on them, according to the report we just got from the human armies.”

“Perhaps not, but what about new-world weaponry?” Kenzie smiled as she released a swarm of newly manufactured drones from her Cosmos Sack.

She knew that her brother would freak out when he learned that she’d set up the whole production line just hours after he left, rather than slowly studying them for any latent risks. But she was tired of just sitting by on the side while people were getting killed, and Jeeves had no problems hacking the things.

An army of weaponized drones was a perfect counter against the sea of undead, as Kenzie saw it. They were mostly immune to the corrosive effects of Miasma, and even if they fell, they wouldn’t convert into new Zombies.

The drones flew out with shocking speed, and in just a minute, they had formed a circle around the pillar. Each of them was only a meter in height, and they didn’t emit even a

speck of Cosmic Energy. But Kenzie had great confidence in her children, and she made some final adjustments to their position with the help of her AI.

“Wha—” Ilvere said with wide eyes as he gazed at the unfamiliar machines with confusion.

But his questions got stuck in his throat as the flying machines, no larger than a child, each released a beam of terrifying energy straight at the foot of the pillar. When the two managed to open their eyes again, only a smoldering crater remained.

LAST DAY

Zac woke up early the next day and got ready to head out after training a bit more with [**Cyclic Strike**]. Unfortunately, it seemed that the small progress he had attained in the skill over the past weeks had been completely erased after gaining the Fragment of the Coffin. The Fragment completely overpowered the Seed of Trees, making it impossible to maintain a balance.

He could only pause his practice until he gained his final Fragment as well.

At least he could confirm that the odd Dao Fragment worked with his new shield, perhaps even better than the Dao of Hardness did. Hopefully, that meant that his Undying Bulwark class would still work as intended.

It was also a decent indicator that Fragment of the Coffin was a defensive Dao as well, meaning his final skill quest was also most likely completed. He didn't dare change into his Draugr form to make sure, though, as he was still in the Base Town. He would be stuck in his undead form for roughly an hour after shifting, which might cause unintended problems. But he was heading for the tower soon enough, and there would be ample time to go over things in there.

Today was the last day before entering the tower, so getting the additional Fragment ahead of time was a huge boon. Zac and Ogras had already decided upon what to do. They would visit the weekly auction once more in hopes of finding anything of value. It was their last shot before

returning to Earth, where they were limited to Calrin's selection once again.

No matter the results of the auction, they would immediately enter the tower afterward. They would spend one day inside, leaving one day afterward for networking. Provided that Zac managed to reach a floor high enough to warrant the attention of the larger forces, that is. In either case, they would have to return to Earth since their ten days were up.

The auction was pretty similar to the first one, though in the second-to-last segment, an item that piqued Zac's interest appeared. It was simply called a **[Heaven's Secrets Array]** and was said to upgrade Nexus Nodes.

"What is this?" Zac asked Ogras, but the demon shrugged with confusion as well.

"It's normally called an **[Information Array]**, but perhaps this is a special variant," Galau said, not showing too much interest. "It acts as a substitute if you're unable to upgrade your Nexus Node for your town."

"Upgrade the Node?" Zac asked with interest. "What does it do?"

"At the lowest level, a Nexus Node doesn't provide much information about the skills it sells or details about class choices. But if you manage to upgrade the status of your force, then all its Nodes will be more helpful. This array gives that kind of effect as well, but only to one Node," Galau explained.

"Buy it," Ogras said without hesitation.

"What kind of information?" Zac asked with interest, also pretty interested in purchasing it. "Does it provide better classes?"

"No, it can't help there. But it gives information about the type of classes, their main attributes, and things like that. It doesn't display everything, but enough to get a better idea of what the classes represent. It is a bit hard sometimes to understand the description, after all." Galau shrugged.

“Is it rare?” Zac asked, completely agreeing with Galau’s assessment of the cryptic descriptions of the class choices.

“I guess these things are slightly rare, but it’s still not too valuable,” Galau said. “Most people who visit this place are from forces that have upgraded their crystals the normal way and have no need for it. It’s meant for weaker and newly established forces as a stopgap until they get the real thing.”

Zac was immediately interested, and he would make sure to buy that thing unless its price got out of hand. It would help him to choose a class better in line with his goals.

“Next up is the [**Heaven’s Secrets Array**]. I know what many of you are thinking: ‘Isn’t this just an information array?’ Truth be told, the array itself is just that, but this specific array is still a bit special. It was crafted by a cultivator adept on the path of Karma, which has given the array a slightly mysterious effect.”

The auctioneer saw that he had managed to catch the attention of quite a few people, and he continued with a bombastic voice.

“It not only provides the benefits of an information array, but it even gives small Karmic hints of which choices might be best for you. It would be a marvelous opportunity for the youths of your factions who are unsure what path to pick for themselves,” the man said.

Zac was a bit disappointed in the extra function, as that wasn’t something he needed for himself. He only had two options at the moment, and he wasn’t so sure it would expand all that much even with his new seeds. Besides, he had already had a high enough Luck stat that his gut feeling was at least as effective as some small Karmic infusion into the array.

He had rather hoped that it would contain some hacking function that would give access to better structures in the Town Shop or better classes, but he wasn’t that lucky. Still, it would be an item that would prove greatly beneficial for Port Atwood, especially since the system was so new for everyone. Most established forces followed Heritages to choose their classes, but this was a great option for his people.

The price on the screen immediately jumped up to 200 million Nexus Coins, but the bidding already slowed down after 300. It clearly wasn't too valued, and Zac finally snatched it for the price of 380 million Nexus Coins. This was one of the types of items that might be very valuable on the outside, but here it went for a discount since people were more interested in items that could help them climb further.

Soon enough, they reached the final segment, but Zac didn't find anything else he wanted. The treasures were extremely good, but they were either too expensive or things that weren't suited for himself. A set of six small Spirit Tool axes appeared that Zac felt would be perfect for Emily, but they ended up with a price tag of 3 billion, quickly forcing Zac out of the bidding.

Soon enough, they reached the final item, and it wasn't something that Zac recognized either.

“Our final item in today's auction is something that might only enter our halls once every few years. It is the crystallized eye of a Pathfinder Oracle,” the auctioneer said before he paused for dramatic effect.

Zac, along with a lot of other people, looked extremely confused, but a low susurrus could be heard from the platforms up in the air.

“This mythical creature has long been hunted to extinction due to its marvelous nature, but now and then, a lucky hunter can find its crystalized remains in various Mystic Realms. Legend states that the Pathfinder Oracles could see the truths of the universe, which turned their whole bodies into a treasure for almost any field,” the auctioneer kept going.

“The eye of an oracle is the second most valuable part, with only its core superseding it. It can be used for a wide array of purposes. Almost any Spirit Tool would gain a great boost to spirituality from consuming it, and it can be used to upgrade most basic Specialty Cores. You can even plant it in your cultivation cave, and it will start attracting Origin Dao. It is truly one of the few treasures that almost any genius could make use of.”

Zac had only halfheartedly listened to the auctioneer's efforts to upsell his final item, but he soon showed full attention to the proceedings. Being able to upgrade the spirituality of a Spirit Tool was pretty amazing, but his axe had already awoken due to that mysterious rock. He was far more interested in the second effect. That large eye could upgrade almost any Specialty Core?

Wasn't this exactly what he needed for his Duplicity Core?

"Is this thing real?" Zac asked with a hushed tone to Galau, who looked at the scene with wide eyes.

"I can't believe such a good thing was put up for auction," the squirrely man said with shock. "The seller must be desperate for cash."

That was all the confirmation Zac needed. It truly possessed the capabilities that were advertised, and Zac immediately got ready for a heated auction. This was already the last item, so it looked like he would need to find a solution for Alea somewhere else than here. But if he bought this thing, he would at least be able to accomplish one of his goals for coming here.

But the auctioneer's next words were like a cold shower, quickly waking him up to reality.

"Opening bid is 5,000 E-grade Nexus Coins. The seller is also willing to accept payment in attuned Nexus Crystals at market rate."

Five thousand E-grade Nexus Coins was equivalent to 5 billion Nexus Coins, which was almost all the money that Zac had brought to the tower. Worse yet, he had already spent a decent chunk on his shield and various other items. Even if he included the 3 billion from Galau, he was just above 6 billion at the moment, and it felt very uncertain that would be enough.

His thoughts of borrowing money from Ogras and Galau were soon moot as the price rose with shocking speed. This time, there was no one placing open bids, but the number on the screen rose as the auctioneer kept screaming out the current price.

“Twelve thousand!” the auctioneer exclaimed with glee. “An— wait! Fourteen thousand! Twenty-two thousand!”

Zac’s eyes widened in shock at seeing the price, and he couldn’t help but inwardly mock himself for thinking he had a chance at that item. The price landed at almost 280 billion Nexus Coins, which elicited a small round of applause. Yet no one openly admitted to buying it, perhaps to avoid getting robbed. The eye was truly an item that someone might risk everything to snatch.

Even Ogras looked a bit shocked at the price. That was a significant amount of money even for a small D-grade force. They would certainly have it, but using it on a consumable item that could only benefit one junior was likely way out of their budget. Such expenditures could only be used on safer investments, such as allowing one of their ancestors to progress a step forward.

This only became more apparent when the System apparently didn’t spoon-feed powerhouses Nexus Coins from kills at higher levels. Zac had been shocked when he learned of it, but Ogras explained it with the fact that anything E-grade warriors and higher killed were worth enough money by itself. The System didn’t feel it necessary to reach into its own pockets to supplement their income.

Ultimately, beast parts were only so valuable. There were way more beasts than cultivators in the Multiverse, and something like an E-grade carcass would only garner any interest on a newly integrated planet like Earth. Among C-grade factions, such a beast might not even be considered food.

Therefore, gaining D-grade Nexus Coins required hard work even for Hegemons, which was why few F-grade cultivators would be able to fork out a quarter of a D-grade coin just like that. None of this helped Zac, though, and he could only wistfully sigh as the Eye went to the unnamed moneybags. The auction had concluded, and Zac was in no mood to stay on for the following festivities.

Their second visit to the Naspheyi Auction was the final thing on their agenda, and Zac couldn't help but despair a bit when he realized they hadn't accomplished a single one of their goals. He was still without any cure for Alea, and his chance at evolving his Duplicity Core had slipped through his fingers due to his apparent abject poverty.

An ember of anger ignited in his mind, no doubt fanned on by the splinter. It had already gotten restless after days of Zac's inactivity and tried to instigate something. So Zac was a bit muddled as they walked toward the tower, as he needed to spend some of his energy to suppress his violent tendencies.

It was getting late, but there was no point in returning to their courtyard. They had ample time to rest inside the tower. They had bought everything they needed, and Zac was unwilling to waste his accrued wealth on anything else at the moment. He felt tired of the whole Base Town and wanted to get on with the challenge already.

The buildings got increasingly grander as they walked down one of the main roads leading toward the immense tower that blotted out half the sky. Soon enough, the massive surface of the Tower of Eternity filled up half his vision, a massive block of white that pushed the blue sky to the sides. Even the grand towers and mansions they passed felt like small dollhouses compared to the impossibly large structure.

But even though the structures got larger and more refined, the number of people on the streets was generally decreasing.

Most people stayed in the middle and outer edges of the town since the risk of running into someone dangerous increased the closer you got to the tower itself. There were always some who went to the central square to look for carries or just to take in the sights, but people rarely lingered in the area unless they had the power to back it up.

After an hourlong walk, they finally reached the core area, the solitary row of extraordinary structures placed in a semicircle around the entrance to the tower itself. Each structure was as large as a town by itself, and inside, the most powerful forces in their star sector resided.

LAST OPPORTUNITY

“Is that the Zethaya Pill House you mentioned?” Zac asked as he looked over at the grand pagoda that emanated a palpable medicinal scent that could be sensed from where they stood.

Behind the pagoda was a garden that looked large enough to be considered a proper park, but a high wall obscured what went on there. Only treetops and the occasional roofs could be discerned.

“Yes, that’s them. The number one alchemy clan in the system.” Galau nodded with avarice flashing in his eyes. “Imagine being able to buy a few pills from them. I’d be able to double my investment simply by targeting collectors.”

“The door is open. Why don’t people just go in? I don’t see any guards keeping people away,” Zac muttered, unable to tear his eyes away since that might be the final opportunity to accomplish at least one of his tasks.

“There’s an extremely powerful restrictive array blocking the entrance. Most people would be turned to paste just by trying to enter the gates. You need the invitation of the Zethaya to avoid the array,” Galau explained.

“What happens if you simply endure the array and push your way through? Will you be able to buy things?” Ogras asked. “Or will you be attacked as an intruder?”

Zac’s eyes lit up as he heard Ogras’ question. Having an array to keep out the average people but allow the elites of the sector to enter would make sense. It would prevent a bunch of

tourists entering their shop while also allowing the family to make friends with unknown powerhouses.

“Well... I’ve heard of people pushing their way through and completing purchases, but I’ve also heard of people getting thrown out. I am not sure about the details,” Galau hesitantly said.

“So this place has been accessible from the start?” Zac said with a scowl at Galau. “Why have we wasted so much time at that auction house if we could simply have gone here on day one?”

“That array is crazy strong; you can only dream of entering if you can’t easily conquer the fourth floor. Entering it might cause wounds that will take weeks to heal,” Galau entreated as he looked at Zac with worry. “Furthermore, there is a high risk of injury even if you give up early. It might ruin our climb.”

Zac realized that he might have been a bit too restrained. If he had showcased some more strength, then Galau might have told him about this opportunity long ago, but even now the aspiring merchant believed Zac to be too weak to even think about barging in.

“Don’t worry; isn’t it just an array to keep out the rabble?” Ogras smiled before turning to Zac, clearly understanding what was on his mind. “See if you can find something useful for me as well. It’s not every day you get access to a stockpile like theirs.”

Zac took a deep breath and walked over toward the house. A group of people nearby first looked at him speculatively, as though they were trying to figure out which force he belonged to. Only the top-tier factions could get into a place like Zethaya, yet Zac was completely unfamiliar.

But those faces quickly turned into sneers when they noticed him stopping outside the array, clearly trying to figure it out. Zac didn’t mind the looks at all, as his eyes were trained on the space in front of him. He tried to glean what sort of array it was so that he could best prepare himself.

He had encountered all kinds of barriers during the hunt, and he felt confident in defeating most of them. But he wasn't without his weaknesses. His mental defense was good but not great, and he wasn't confident against any poisons that Zethaya's alchemists could concoct.

But his guts told him that the array wouldn't deal with poison or things like fire. It was a gatekeeper and a test, and it was unlikely that even an arrogant place like Zethaya would try to poison their presumptive customers. He felt it more likely to be some sort of restrictive array that required a certain amount of strength to push through.

Zac looked over at the group of humanoids who stood some distance away, looking at him like he was some sort of clown.

"Do you guys know what kind of array this is?" Zac probed.

Two of the people only ignored him, but the third spoke up after seemingly thinking it over.

"It's a general suppression array from what I've heard; it restrains both your mind and your body. It gets lighter if you block it with the Dao or strong skills. It's a test of power," the youth said. "But I haven't seen it personally."

"Thank you." Zac nodded and immediately stepped in.

He didn't put all his faith in that man's words, but he thought his words rang true. Some excelled in Dao while having a low Endurance, and others had amazing skills. It made sense that Zethaya would want to test for any sort of unique trait that would qualify aspiring guests as potential powerhouses.

Zac only managed to take two steps before he was stopped in his tracks. It felt like he was carrying a huge boulder on his shoulders, and the air itself had congealed into an impossibly thick sludge that required his body to strain to push forward.

But the strain was only slightly worse than the power required to unleash the second axe of **[Deforestation]**, and he didn't even feel the need to imbue himself with one of his

Fragments to proceed. After the brief stop, he started to move forward one step after another, walking through a beautifully decorated tunnel.

The tunnel was only fifty meters in length, but it took him over a minute to traverse toward the end, and sweat was starting to drip down his forehead from the exertion. What was a bit more embarrassing was that the tunnel turned transparent halfway through, and he noticed there were a decent number of people observing his entrance. He considered activating one of his Dao Fragments, but he felt it might be more impressive to push through without any assistance.

He kept thinking of ways to make sure the deal went through with the discerning clan, but his musings were rudely interrupted. A foot suddenly came out of nowhere, landing straight on his chest with a resounding thud. The attack itself wasn't anything special, but Zac was still within the array, which caused a tremendous strain. Zac felt some blood in his mouth, and he had no option but to act.

The Fragment of the Coffin spread through his body, turning it impervious. Not only that, it felt as though his rage imbued him with power, and a monstrous strength surged throughout his body to the point that it felt like he was bursting at the seams.

The unprovoked kick had well and truly pissed him off, and his instincts kicked in. His hand shot forward like a snake, and he grasped the ankle with enough force to cause some cracking sounds to echo through the tunnel.

“Wai—” a voice screamed, but Zac ignored it as he slammed the attacker into the ground with shocking force before he threw him out of the pill house like a piece of trash. Only a few cracked stones smeared with blood was the evidence that a struggle had taken place.

Zac didn't know if the man was alive or dead after that response, but he didn't care as he took the last steps into the pill house, his Fragment making the final stretch effortless. A glance showed that the man was lying motionless outside,

allowing Zac to focus on the matter at hand without worrying about him throwing out an attack from behind.

The whole shop looked like a luxurious lounge rather than a store, with groups of sofas and beautiful fountains creating a harmonious atmosphere. There were no pills or other wares on display anywhere, but there was a rich medicinal aroma in the store that made all of Zac's cells feel full of life and power.

The whole area was lit up by a glass dome in the ceiling tens of meters in the air, and he saw there were multiple stories that all had open balconies toward the central lounge. There weren't a lot of people inside, but he could spot a couple of groups scattered about, most of them looking over at Zac with curiosity.

But a small sense of danger suddenly pricked his mind, and his eyes turned to see a young human standing on the second floor, looking down at him with cold eyes. Zac frowned when he sensed the animosity since he had never seen that guy before. Was it he who sent out an underling to sound him out? And if so, why?

Was it someone from a force that ran one of the incursions he had closed, like the Ez'Mahal Empire? There were no obvious signs on him or his clothes that could give Zac a hint, and he didn't dare to use **[Inquisitive Eye]**. He was pretty sure that anyone who could enter a place like this possessed an item similar to his own bracer anyway.

The young man looked away soon enough and walked away from the balcony, disappearing out of sight. Zac could only drop the matter as he refocused on a clerk who walked toward him.

"We do apologize for the disturbance; that guest breached our rules and will no longer be allowed back inside," he said, though Zac could tell that he wasn't all that contrite. "I am Orbat, a clerk working for the Zethaya Clan."

"No matter. I passed through that array. Does that mean I can shop here?" Zac asked, not wanting to press the issue.

Their reception was an indicator that they did not put all too much value on him, only sending a clerk rather than whoever was running the shop at this moment. A large clan like the Zethaya would no doubt have a couple of people at the tower at any point in time, meaning they definitely could have sent someone with higher status.

That was the problem with a lack of renown. He was a nobody in the end, someone without strong backing. Even if he was powerful enough to break through the array, he was only someone with potential, whereas the usual guests at this place no doubt had living ancestors at C-grade.

“Certainly,” Orbat said as he smilingly led Zac to a sectional not far away.

“What’s on the other floors?” Zac asked offhandedly as he sat down.

“The Zethaya Pill House is both a store and a residential district. The Zethaya maintains friendly relations with many forces, and some choose to stay here during their climb, while others simply visit,” the clerk smoothly explained with his ever-present smile.

So only for big shots, huh? Zac thought with a wry smile as he shot a look toward the balustrade where he’d seen the man who emitted some hostility.

He was no longer anywhere to be seen, and Zac threw it into the back of his mind as he refocused on the task at hand.

“I am looking for two items. I am first in need of a pill or a treasure that can heal a fractured soul. Secondly, I am looking for things that can help evolve a Specialty Core,” Zac explained.

“We do not carry anything that can generally evolve Specialty Cores. I am afraid only extremely rare items like the Pathfinder Eye that appeared earlier has such a magical effect,” the clerk said as he took out a crystal, causing a screen to emerge. “However, we do have the capability to produce the following pills.”

Zac seriously read through the list, and he saw that there were six different pills that were geared toward evolving specific Specialty Cores. Unfortunately, none of them was the Duplicity Core, and he could only sigh internally in disappointment. However, this was a rare opportunity to get some clues at least.

“Does taking one of these pills guarantee an evolution?” Zac asked, not divulging that he wouldn’t buy any of them.

“Unfortunately, no; there is a chance of between 40 and 60% of a full evolution with the pills that are bought here. But even if the evolution is not successful, a strong foundation will be created, allowing for easier evolution down the line,” the clerk smoothly explained.

Zac slowly nodded and moved on to the second item he was looking for, the soul-mending treasure for Alea.

“May I ask if it’s a preparation for the tower, or whether it’s meant for a patient?” the clerk asked.

“Why does that matter?” Zac frowned.

“The Zethaya carries the [**Serene Soul Pill**] that can perform emergency repair on a fractured soul. It will not heal you completely, but it will stop the fracturing and allow you to slowly recuperate with the help of regular soul-nurturing pills afterward,” the clerk said. “However...”

Zac’s eyes lit up when he heard the explanation, but the “however” sounded extremely ominous.

“The [**Serene Soul Pill**] needs to be imbibed within five minutes of being wounded,” Orbat concluded.

Zac closed his eyes to restrain a surge of fury that lambasted his mind for a second, and took a deep breath to curtail the splinter locked in its Miasmatic cage. He needed to enter the tower soon.

“It’s for a patient; the wound is a month old,” Zac conceded.

The clerk nodded, some sympathy showing in his face. Zac frowned when he saw the clerk’s reaction, fearing that he was

simply out of luck.

“Well... there is something,” the clerk said after some hesitation. “There is an item in our treasury, but I do not have the authority to make any decisions regarding treasures of that grade. A proper Zethaya Clan member needs to give the go-ahead.”

“What item?” Zac asked with eagerness.

“I cannot divulge,” the clerk said. “Please wait a moment. I will consult the manager.”

Zac nodded in agreement, and he impatiently waited for the clerk to come back. His mind spun as he tried to come up with arguments for the Zethaya to sell him the item. It seemed like the item was something they kept for themselves in case of emergency or something, which probably meant its effect was pretty amazing.

Paying above market price probably wouldn't work in such a case, since the Zethaya didn't lack for money. Should he promise a favor if he could buy it? Would they care? Did he have anything else to trade with apart from money that would interest an ancient clan?

Soon enough, the clerk returned, but he was a bit pale and didn't dare to look up. Next to him was a young man wearing a luxurious blue robe. He radiated an impressive pressure, but it was more like a gently flowing river compared to Zac's usual aura of brutality. It was no doubt the Zethaya Clan member who could decide on the matter.

But Zac frowned when he noticed that a third person was approaching him, walking shoulder to shoulder with the Zethaya alchemist. It was the young man with the cold eyes who had stood on the second floor earlier.

Zac sighed as he realized that trouble had finally come for him.

PRAJÑĀ CHERRY

Zac looked at the approaching trio with some apprehension, afraid that the chance of a smooth transaction taking place might be ruined. He once more tried to connect the man in the red robes or the crest embroidered on his chest with anyone he had offended, but he came up with nothing.

He still wasn't sure exactly what kind of information had been released about him to the Multiverse from the twenty-odd incursions he had closed, but he felt it was pretty unlikely that the matters were connected.

He had only really started closing incursions for real around two months ago. Chances were that the youth in front of him was already here when it happened, so he probably shouldn't have heard anything. Or did someone specifically send an information packet to the tower because they knew that Zac would sooner or later arrive here?

It was a scenario that Zac felt was distinctly possible, but at the same time unlikely. The Zethaya was a real big-shot family, a Peak C-grade force. According to what Ogras estimated, most invaders were from between Middle D-grade to Early C-grade forces, with a few "lucky additions" like Clan Azh'Rezak.

Perhaps stronger forces would get access to incursions as well, but they would probably be sent to planets that already had Cosmic Energy and already powerful natives. Both Earth and the Ishiate planets had almost completely lacked Cosmic Energy before, and the Zhix planet had been only slightly

better off. Worst off had been the Moleman planet, since it was essentially half-dead.

There were three anomalies on their planet, though: the Technocrats, the Church of Everlasting Dao, and the Undead Empire. The empire could be explained by the fact that it was only some weak rural area of the empire that came. The Church and the Technocrats had likely snatched their spots by eradicating the forces that originally owned them.

Ogras' family had kept their qualifications hidden until their spot was secured specifically to avoid such a fate. The youth accompanying the Zethaya Clan member seemed to be of equal standing, indicating he was probably from a peak faction as well. So it was unlikely he came from one of the remaining incursions.

But what other enmities could there be? Did he recognize the origin of Zac's bracer? Greatest certainly seemed like a man who seemed to be good at creating grudges with his straightforward manners. Or did the youth sense the splinter in his mind and want it for himself? But he couldn't arrive at any conclusions, and the trio sat down opposite him.

"I apologize for the wait. I am Boje Zethaya. My attendant told me about your interest in a treasure that can mend a fractured soul?" the man in the blue robe spoke up with a smile.

"No problem. I'm Zac." Zac nodded, trying to maintain a balance of deference and poise. "That's right. I need something that can mend a soul that's been fractured for a while. She – the patient is currently enclosed in a stasis array to not get any worse."

The man in the red robe didn't say anything as he sat down. He only looked Zac up and down with a mix of overt hostility and disdain. Zac didn't want to give the guy an excuse to ruin his business, so he ignored the rude behavior even if it was a bit irking. Perhaps the guy was simply some sort of elitist who didn't like "commoners" entering his surroundings.

At least the Zethaya representative didn't carry the same sort of hostility.

The blue-robed man nodded and took out a small but intricate chest, and opened it for a short duration. Inside was a branch with a stone fruit attached to a thin stalk. Zac immediately knew it was a great treasure, as his cells screamed at him to consume the fruit, and the calling was even greater than when he'd first encountered the Fruit of Ascension.

“We do possess this [**Prajñā Cherry**]. It actually comes from an ordinary F-grade cherry tree, but a great Sage pondered on the Dao of the Mind beneath the tree for a thousand years, giving the tree and a few of its fruits spirituality. This cherry has been infused by the powerhouse and has miraculous effects on the soul, no matter if it is to heal or strengthen it,” the alchemist explained. “It is a precious Soul Treasure at the limits of what could be brought here.”

“What price do you have in mind?” Zac asked, trying his best to hide how much he wanted it.

“This thing does not have any set price,” Boje said. “The Zethaya Clan normally hires promising warriors for various tasks, and we would be ready to offer this item as a recruitment bonus. Of course, you would have to prove a strength worthy of this unique treasure first.”

“What sort of tasks? And how long would I be working for you?” Zac asked.

“Overestimating yourself,” the red-robed man snorted, but Zac ignored him.

Boje awkwardly smiled as he spoke up.

“We hire warriors for all sorts of purposes. Most choose to become guardians of our clan, signing lifelong contracts. Others join us for short durations like a decade or two. The requirements for the latter are a lot harsher, though. Someone wanting such a position would have to pass the sixth floor of the tower to warrant such a large payment like this cherry.”

Zac nodded in understanding. It wasn't too bad to pay a high price for someone to sign a lifelong contract. Those

treasures would strengthen the cultivator, which would benefit the Zethaya as well.

“What would a short-term warrior do?”

“Usually explore Mystic Realms with restrictions. There are some that have limits on attributes or levels, and we need strong warriors to explore for us, as we can't send in our elders. The clan would claim the majority of all the spoils you get inside, but you would still walk away with any titles and a part of the treasures. It's usually a great opportunity for any promising warrior,” Boje explained.

Zac felt that it sounded like a pretty good deal, but he also understood there was another side to the “opportunity.” If it was such a good thing, the clan would rather send their own people rather than spend a lot of money to send in outsiders. The risk of getting killed or crippled was no doubt high in the places the Zethaya alchemist talked about.

“I'm unfortunately unable to sign any such contract in the short term. Is there any way for you to directly sell the cherry instead?” Zac asked.

“This item is quite unique and something formed by chance. It is not something we can simply grow as we wish, so we are unwilling to part with it for Nexus Crystals or Nexus Coins. But our pill house is always interested in trades for items or intelligence of similar value,” Boje explained.

Zac slowly nodded in understanding. It might be the young man causing trouble for him, but his instincts told him that wasn't the case. A clan like Zethaya was already obscenely wealthy, and it made sense that they were more interested in unique treasures that could help them in ways that money could not.

The problem was that he wasn't walking around with any impressive treasures that he could trade for the cherry. The Amanita or the budding lotus were both probably worth as much as the cherry, but they were back on his island. Not that he would be able to bring them to this place anyway. The lotus was probably categorized as a Pseudo D-grade healing

treasure, which made it impossible to bring, while the Amanita was helping keeping Alea alive.

“Are you looking for natural treasures or items that might be of interest to study?” Zac asked.

He actually had two things in mind. The first was the Cyborg body he still kept in his Cosmos Sack. That thing was beyond durable, and perhaps the Zethaya could study it to create pills with similar effects. Any death squad or fanatic would want a pill that could help them drag down their enemies to hell along with them when they were facing death.

There was no doubt in Zac’s mind that the Cyborg corpse was something valuable. It was a creation of a top-tier Technocrat Faction, people who didn’t even fear the Undead Empire, if the little alien could be trusted.

Besides, getting rid of that thing might be for the best, in case Firmament’s Edge possessed some means to track the corpse. Luckily, the body was still only counted as Early or Middle E-grade, since he’d had no trouble bringing it here, but it should almost be considered a pseudo D-grade treasure, as he saw it.

The second item of note was the notebook regarding the Draugr corpse. It came uncomfortably close to his secrets, but no one here would be able to discern his Specialty Core thanks to his bracer. Perhaps the Zethaya would find the report interesting, or at least have the connections to sell the report to the Undead Empire for profit.

He could even sign an agreement that he would look for the samples when he came back and send them to the Zethaya. Then again, they could probably snatch the true Draugr body from Mhal’s clan since it seemed like a small upstart force.

If neither was of interest, he would have to try something else. Perhaps this alchemist needed a carry in the tower as well? He had already decided to display his Apex Hunter title if it came to that since that title was a clear indicator of extreme fighting prowess without divulging any specifics.

“Both are fine. We’re particularly interested in items that can either help in our research to create new pills or in methods of combating pill toxicity,” Boje said, looking at Zac with some interest.

Zac’s eyes lit up, and he reached toward his Cosmos Sack to present the Cyborg corpse.

“I have something that migh–” Zac started, but he was suddenly interrupted by a discordant voice.

“Oh? Isn’t this that treasure I was asking about the other day?” the red-robed youth said, finally speaking up. “Hadn’t we already reached an agreement for a trade?”

“Huh? Rasuliel?” Boje Zethaya said with confusion until his eyes widened slightly in realization. “Uh, of course. It must have slipped my mind due to the excitement with Prince Reoluv’s ascension.”

A surge of anger ignited in Zac’s chest when he realized that the youth had come to create trouble after all. It obviously wasn’t enough for the guy to stare at him with his shitty attitude. Zac immediately discarded the idea to take out the Cyborg, but he wouldn’t completely give up at this point. Hopefully, Boje Zethaya would choose profits over keeping this Rasuliel character happy.

“I have a corpse of a cultivator who was modified by a peak force to have a forced evolution when approaching death. He rose from a weak early E-grade warrior to touching upon the D-grade barrier in the span of one minute, releasing a shocking might that killed all of his enemies before he died of exhaustion,” Zac said, modifying the facts slightly.

“If you can figure out the process of this change, you might be able to create a pill that could mimic the effect. I’m sure that kind of pill would be desired by all kinds of forces,” Zac added.

Boje’s eyes lit up in interest when he heard the explanation, and it seemed that he was about to ask a few more questions about it. But he soon restrained himself and sighed with disappointment.

“I am sorry. The item does indeed sound interesting, but our pill house is known to keep our word. This treasure has already been claimed, and I can only apologize for my forgetfulness,” Boje said as he handed over a small vial. “Please take these healing pills as a token of my apology. They were concocted by my uncle and are some of the most effective healing pills in the Base Town. I wish you luck in your endeavors.”

Zac almost crushed the vial or threw it in the face of the alchemist, but he restrained himself as he put it away. Not that he would dare eat them after seeing how they acted, but he might be able to sell them for a premium later.

“My family will send over the payment within a month. Its value will no doubt satisfy you.” Rasuliel smiled as he claimed the small box and put it away before he turned to Zac. “I am *so* sorry about that, little guy.”

The world started to turn jagged, and Zac’s vision became tinted with red and black as fury took hold of his mind. The innocuous taunt had turned his smoldering anger into a blazing fire, and he was fast losing control. His body shook from restrained anger, and it was all he could do to not jump the two and rip them to pieces.

He needed to quickly find some secluded place to wrestle back control of his mind before he did something stupid. Zac arduously got to his feet and nodded at Boje with gritted teeth before he turned toward the exit. Rasuliel seemed to notice Zac’s weird state, and a taunting voice echoed across the lounge as Zac walked away.

“You said it was meant for a girl? Your Dao Partner perhaps?” Rasuliel laughed. “I am so sorry about that. Let’s hope she meets a more dependable man in her next life. Someone who isn’t foolish enough to meddle in the Tsarun Clan’s business.”

Zac froze as the words echoed across the room. His thoughts became a jumble, and soon enough, he didn’t even know where he was. His vision closed in on him, and his

consciousness slipped away despite his best efforts to remain lucid.

The last thing he heard before darkness consumed him was a bestial roar that was both familiar and foreign.

AFTERMATH

A dense killing intent suffused the whole hall, causing the numerous guests of the pill house to look over with consternation after hearing the roar. The source was obviously the interloper, who looked angry enough to spontaneously combust. His eyes had turned completely bloodshot, and he was already reaching for his Cosmos Sack.

Rasuliel was inwardly delighted the way things turned out. Sometimes Luck was as important as skill, and he had no doubt been helped by his massive pool of 72 Luck today. Who would have thought that the scoundrel who had somehow snatched the Thayer Consortium from underneath his uncle's hands would present himself here?

Furthermore, he was only some no-name cultivator who lacked any proper connections to enter this place the right way. And better yet, he was a hothead who only needed a little bit of goading to lose control.

He couldn't believe a person dumb enough to emit killing intent inside the Zethaya Pill House would be able to get inside, let alone snatch a Mercantile License that their family had targeted for decades.

The arrays in here would block any attempts at retaliation, allowing him to freely kill the interloper without repercussions. The biggest risk to his plans was if this Zac character crushed his token and fled, but as he looked at the man, who seemed to have lost all rationality, he knew his gambit had proven successful.

As soon as the fool got himself killed, he would hopefully be able to glean the whereabouts of those damn Sky Gnomes from his belongings. This level of contribution to the clan was almost at an elder level, and he couldn't imagine the bump in resources he would enjoy when presenting the signet and this man's body to his uncle.

The aura of the man in front of him kept rising, and even Rasuliel started to feel some pressure. But even then, he wasn't overly worried. Someone who could both get through the entrance array and even block Rudrik's strike was strong, but the Zethaya had spent hundreds of thousands of years to strengthen this place to the limits of what the System allowed.

"I apologize for the harsh words from my friend here," Boje said with a frown. "But I urge you to remember where you are. Violence will not be tolerated within these walls."

But the warning fell on deaf ears as Zac's aura kept increasing, and Rasuliel started to frown when he sensed an extremely sinister energy within it. It was unlike anything he had encountered before, and it elicited an intense sense of danger.

This guy mentioned some modifications that pushed one's power beyond the natural limits. Has this lunatic actually done the same to himself? Rasuliel thought, some worry finally creeping into his heart.

The worry quickly turned into a primal fear in Rasuliel's heart as the aura of the man suddenly skyrocketed, and a black rune appeared on his forehead. Lines started to cover his whole body as well, creating a pathway reeking of destruction.

Rasuliel suddenly found himself falling backward as he coughed up a mouthful of blood. Just looking at the fractal caused his soul to get cut, and a glance indicated that Boje had suffered the same fate.

"Stop!" Boje roared as the whole pill house hummed with power like a beast waking up from its slumber.

One restriction after another appeared in the air, and defensive treasures of inestimable value created an inescapable

net around the man who still stood rooted to his spot. But a wave of unadulterated destruction rippled out from his body, and the massive arrays cracked like they were some cheap talismans bought from a flea market.

Thoughts of escape filled Rasuliel's mind, but streams of terrifying power ensconced the whole lobby, cutting off any path of retreat. Rasuliel could only reluctantly turn back toward the human-shaped monster, and he took out a small tube from his Spatial Ring. There was no way he would be able to crush his token and escape from this evil star in time.

He could only bet it all on the cursed object in his hand.

Pain with enough urgency to jolt him awake plagued Zac's body. He found himself bruised and battered in the middle of a huge pile of rubble, every part of his body hurting beyond imagination.

His vision was a bit blurry, but he still saw the towering trees from [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] dissipating around him. When had he activated that skill? And why did it look so different from when he'd tried it out back on Earth? The leaves and trunks shouldn't be black.

And where the hell was he? He had been inside the luxurious lounge of the Zethaya Pill House just a second ago.

A broken-off head of a statue depicting some unknown mythological creature jogged Zac's memory awake. It had been the centerpiece of one of the fountains inside, but now the fountain was gone, replaced with broken pieces of stones and the crushed remnants of the furniture that sat around it.

Zac's mind still had some problems connecting two and two, and his head slowly swiveled around to take in the surroundings. A couple of familiar faces, many with minor wounds and looking haggard, stared back at him from a respectable distance, undisguised horror evident on their faces. It was the other customers and residents of the Zethaya who had spectated his entrance to the pill house.

Even further back, a small crowd had gathered, likely people who were visiting Tower Square. No one dared to take a step forward, and some were even running away after Zac trained his eyes in their direction.

Zac couldn't bother with the onlookers as his muddled mind tried to compute what the hell was going on. He knew he had been bested by the splinter once more, and it had caused him to completely lose control when he'd heard the taunts from that Rasuliel guy.

Normally, he might have been annoyed, but he still had years to find a cure for Alea. He wouldn't risk everything at this juncture just to forcibly steal a treasure. Doing so would cause unneeded enmities and more trouble than it was worth. But the accumulated anger from the Splinter of Oblivion had pushed his rage to unprecedented heights, ruining his plans completely.

Just thirty meters away, a young man in a blue robe lay huddled in a fetal position with multiple layers of arrays shimmering around him. Zac realized it was Boje, who was still fine, albeit somewhat worse for wear. Zac turned back to look around his immediate vicinity, and just in front of him, he could see the outline of another body.

He arduously looked down, but he almost immediately regretted it due to two reasons. The first reason was the huge wound that had simply deleted large section of his torso, which put both bones and innards on open display.

The second was the bloody head he held in his right hand, where his fingers were completely entrenched. His index and ring fingers were pushed all the way through his eyes, and the sockets were still leaking some mix of blood and brain matter. His thumb, meanwhile, was inserted in the victim's mouth, making it look like he was holding a bowling ball.

The head wasn't connected to a body, but a grisly and broken spine dangled from beneath. However, the matching headless corpse lay at Zac's feet, clearly indicating who it was.

Rusuliel Tsarun.

Zac groaned, as he knew that he had really caused a shitstorm this time around, but he didn't feel too broken up about it. He obviously regretted causing this trouble, but Rasuliel had been targeting him for some reason. This random guy had caused him so much trouble for no reason at all, and he didn't feel too broken up about killing him. People died for far less every day.

He irreverently threw away the head before quickly popping one of his best healing pills while he activated his Dao of Trees. His wounds were nothing to scoff at even with his terrifying constitution, and he needed to quickly restore his condition.

The trouble wasn't over just because he had killed his enemy. There was no doubt in Zac's mind that he had been the one to make the first move, meaning that retribution would come soon enough. Ogras appeared the next second as if reading his thoughts.

"We need to flee. *Now*," the demon said with gritted teeth.

His usual lackadaisical expression was nowhere to be seen, replaced by a mask of horror.

"The tokens?" Zac asked with a hoarse voice.

"The two of us were judged complicit in your madness; we're stuck here," Ogras said, waving the limp body of Galau in his arms. "This useless guy got so scared that he fainted when you tore down the whole netherblasted building. Throwing out that guy in the beginning wasn't enough?"

"Let's enter the tower, then," Zac said, opting to save the explanations for later. "People seem shocked enough to stay away."

"It just takes one; then all hell breaks loose. The bounty on your head is crazy," Ogras lamented.

Zac nodded, and the two unhesitantly sped toward the large platform in front of the tower after Ogras gripped the body of Rasuliel with a shadow tentacle. There wasn't any actual door to enter, but rather a teleportation array that took you inside.

He figured that they would be fine as long as they managed to get on the platform in one piece. What happened when they exited tomorrow was Future-Zac's problem. He would have a hundred days to figure out that mess.

The demon's words, unfortunately, proved prophetic. One impulsive cultivator started rushing after them, and with that, the floodgates were opened. Many chose to stand back, but more than half the remaining warriors in the square started rushing toward Zac, and a few cultivators emerged from the nearby buildings as well.

The fact that he looked half-dead with mortal wounds likely emboldened quite a few of the people who had an eye on whatever the System offered for his death. But they had drastically underestimated his constitution, and he still had some fuel left in his tank.

Better yet, he realized he had activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] during his rampage, and he still benefitted from its effects. He also still had his most powerful skill. He had apparently torn down the building without using either [**Deforestation**] or [**Nature's Punishment**] somehow. Perhaps it was the other guys who'd done the heavy lifting in the destruction they'd caused.

He clearly had activated [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] since he'd seen the trees just as they dissipated, but the effects of that skill weren't really offensive. He had a hard time seeing himself managing to destroy the pill house just by activating that skill unless he had misunderstood its uses when he tested it. Had he used it by instinct to avoid certain death?

There was the issue of the appearance of the trees, though. They'd looked corrupted for some reason, but he hadn't had time to analyze it before they were gone. He had only tried out the skill once on Mystic Island, and he wasn't sure of all its uses just yet. Perhaps it changed appearance due to circumstances just like [**Nature's Punishment**].

He would have to experiment some more inside the tower. Now was not the time. There were more pressing issues to deal with, such as the swarming bounty hunters right on their

heels. His body was full of complaints, but Cosmic Energy started to churn through his body.

The huge axe of **[Deforestation]** appeared in the sky above, but its powerful aura only managed to intimidate a scant few. The rest looked like they had eaten stimulants as they kept running toward him, and the whole square shuddered with power from their skills.

Zac had no compunctions about finishing what he'd started since these people wanted to kill him out of greed. His body screamed in protest from the exertion, but he felt that **[Hatchetman's Rage]** still had over ten seconds on the clock. It would be enough to do what needed to be done.

This time, he wouldn't hold back as he had against the undead horde, and the Fragment of the Axe effortlessly slipped into the huge hatchet in the air, causing a terrifying increase in its aura. A few with discerning eyes immediately turned to flee for their lives, but many still kept going.

A small shudder swept out across the square as the hatchet finished its trajectory, and the clamor died down in a second. Most of the attacks aimed at Zac were completely obliterated, with the few remaining losing most of their power. Ogras managed to clear those out with a few shadow blasts.

However, the results were not quite as impressive as Zac had imagined in his rage-addled brain. Only a dozen died from his attack, while an equal number sported pretty grievous wounds. A small part in the back of his mind reminded him that these were the elites who stood at the peak of the whole sector. Just pushing them back with your own power was a huge accomplishment, let alone killing a bunch of them.

Zac coughed a mouthful of blood, as activating the skill in his current condition had put an even worse strain on his body. The grisly wound in his side painted the ground he stepped on red, and he started to feel woozy.

Unfortunately, he didn't manage to deter everyone in the square just with that single swing. In fact, a few people with extremely dense auras had appeared as though out of nowhere, each of them looking like a god of war as they closed in on the

three. Going by Zac's pathetic appearance, they no doubt believed he was an arrow at the end of its flight.

His time was running out on his buff, so Zac could ignore his pain and unleash the second swing as well. The shocking **[Infernal Axe]** appeared in the sky above, and a coruscating wave of flames ripped out across the square, slamming straight into the attacks that came their way.

A chaotic mess of fire and dozens of other elements fought for supremacy in the square, causing a shockwave that launched Zac off his feet. It was at this time the timer for **[Hatchetman's Rage]** dissipated, causing a wave of exhaustion and pain to wash over him.

A sneaky cultivator seemed to have been waiting for this opportunity, and he appeared out of nowhere from the shadows with a sinister dagger poised to strike. But those very shadows immediately turned on the assassin and ripped him to pieces.

Zac's sight was starting to blur, but a storm of fractal blades blasted through the wall of flames from **[Deforestation]** and flew their way. Zac could immediately sense they contained the energy from a Dao Fragment, and some despair crept into his heart. He was completely spent, and he knew that defense wasn't Ogras' strong suit.

Swapping class was out of the question as well; the blades moved far too quickly. But the square was luckily only so big, and they had already reached their destination. With the help of Ogras moving them through the shadows, they found themselves atop the platform, and the Fragment-imbued blades hit an invisible wall.

The hunters stopped in their tracks as they looked at Zac with greed in their eyes. But they were unwilling to enter the platform since that would only send them into a separate version of the trial. They were no doubt more interested in staying until he reemerged. Zac looked down at the people with his bloodshot eyes, some residual anger reigniting when he saw their greedy expressions.

“I will rem—” Zac said with a hoarse voice that echoed across the square, but his grand proclamation was cut off as they were teleported away.

ELITES

“Pretty, why didn’t you join in on the hunt?” Leyara asked with interest as she looked over at her friend with a spurious smile. “Did you know that guy would be so strong? But I still think you would have a chance to trap him.”

“I’ve told you a thousand times, call me Daoist Summit Reacher,” the beautiful woman said with an annoyed look as she glanced at Leyara.

This family and their naming sense, Leyara lamented as she shook her head. And wasn’t it Swordmistress Grace last time?

The two sat at a friend’s viewing terrace that overlooked the Tower Square and the entrance to the Tower of Eternity. They had all gotten the quest, but only Ulmar and Presseus had made a move. The two now sat to the side with their frizzy hair, looking a bit embarrassed. They probably hadn’t expected to get drowned in a sea of high-grade flames infused with a Dao Fragment the moment they set out.

“So?” Leyara probed.

Pretty was the strongest person here, which meant she was one of the strongest people in the Base Town, especially now that Reoluv had left. Furthermore, as the granddaughter of that war maniac, she was probably loaded with nasty treasures perfect to create havoc. It was a bit surprising she hadn’t made a move considering the quest reward. It was something that only those with the stoutest Dao hearts would be able to resist.

“That guy was always so annoying, stupid upstart family. It’s not my problem he got himself killed. The latest Zethaya generation must have let their excessive wealth turn their brains into excrement for things to get out of hand like that. Why should I exert myself to clean up their mess?” Pretty shrugged with disinterest.

“But that guy who was with him came from your Allbright Empire, though?” Leyara said with an impish smile. “I remember him hiding in the corner looking scared at the party you held a month ago.”

Leyara was so bored after all these gatherings and auctions. There was finally something interesting happening, and she couldn’t help but try to stir the pot a bit to make things even more exciting. She knew things would get chaotic if Pretty made a move.

Pretty didn’t just have one or two suitors who had timed their climb to be here at the same time as her. Intergalactic dating was pretty hard, after all, especially opportunities to meet outside the gaze of the elders. No matter if she decided to help or hunt, the results would no doubt be spectacular to witness.

“I’m not from the imperial family. Why should I care about what some guy from our empire does or what company he keeps? I don’t even think he’s from the Emyrean Sector,” Pretty said with disinterest.

“Yeah... but your grandfather...” Leyara said.

“What does Grandpa have to do with some small squabbles between the younger generation?” Pretty snorted.

Leyara only rolled her eyes and gave up. It looked like she wouldn’t be able to drag her old friend into the mess.

“Besides, the fun has only started,” Pretty suddenly said with a smile.

“Oh?” Leyara asked, hope reigniting.

“Haven’t you noticed? We all still have the quest, even though a few minutes have passed. I think the Ruthless

Heavens doesn't feel this play has acted itself out yet. Won't he be kicked out of the tower in a day at most?"

Leyara's eyes lit up in excitement as she looked down at the large crowd who stayed by the entrance. Only a few were leaving, but most seemed content to simply wait, intently waiting for that lunatic to return.

"What do you think, Pretty?" Leyara said. "Will he survive? Do you think I should join in on the fun?"

"I know you don't care about which floor you end up on. Why should you join this fight? As for whether he will survive..." Pretty said with a mysterious smile. "I think he will surprise us all.

"And don't call me Pretty."

Catheya looked down at the square from the window far up in the tower belonging to the Undead Empire, her pitch-black eyes absorbing the candlelight like two black holes. Calmness had already returned to the core area after the destruction of the Zethaya Pill House, but a storm was still raging inside her heart.

"Did you find out the identity of the man?" Catheya asked into the shadows, prompting a dour Revenant to emerge.

"I am afraid not, mistress," the Revenant said with a bow. "The warrior entered the pill house by challenging their array, and he only identified himself as Zac before things deteriorated. However, I did manage to find out a few facts from one of the assistants."

"Oh?" Catheya looked over at Varo, the leader of her deathsworn and her personal steward.

"He was able to forcibly pass through the array by virtue of his attributes alone. His constitution should be quite impressive. Also, his main goal of visiting the Zethaya was to find a cure for a fractured soul. It seemed quite urgent for him," the steward finished.

“A fractured soul?” Catheya mumbled, her pale lips curving slightly upward. “The Zethaya had better pray that man never grows too powerful. Such a response when he came looking for medicine will no doubt plant a seed of intense grudge. Was that what he wanted to say before he got whisked away?”

“Do you wish us to prepare an ambush for him for when he exits?” the Zombie probed. “A free level would guarantee smoothly passing the seventh floor.”

“No, it would be shameful to use such a crutch in this place. Besides, I have some confidence in passing the seventh floor without any outside assistance. By the way, who was the man he killed?” Catheya asked as she looked over at her assistant.

“Rasuliel Tsarun. A main branch descendant of the Tsarun Clan, but only of middling import. He was a talent to be nurtured, but not in line for succession,” Varo said.

“Tsarun? Never heard of them,” Catheya muttered.

“They are a somewhat young force local to this remote sector. They have some connections to the local province of our empire, mainly providing high-quality corpses,” Varo dutifully reported.

“How many of that clan are here right now?” Catheya asked.

“One more main branch member, eight from side branches, and seventeen employees,” Varo said without missing a beat.

“Are you confident in killing them all?” Catheya asked.

“We might have to sacrifice one or two of our deathsworn, but our situation is generally favorable,” the steward thoughtfully answered, not caring why her mistress wanted to kick the Tsarun Clan out of the Base Town. “Rasuliel was the strongest member of their force. He likely carried most of their treasures as well, leaving the rest somewhat exposed.”

“Good, do it.” Catheya nodded.

“If I may, mistress. This might cause friction between the Kavriel Clan and the Tsarun Clan, negatively impacting their access to new bodies,” the steward added. “This province is newly formed and have few avenues for such resources.”

“What do I care about that? We’re only here because Master had an epiphany and needed to enter secluded cultivation for a few years.” Catheya shrugged. “If it truly turns into a problem, I’ll ask Master to compensate the local kings after he exits.”

“By your will.” Varo bowed and melded back into the shadows.

Catheya’s abyssal eyes once again turned toward the tower, her thoughts a confused jumble. There was no way that she was wrong in her conclusion. That crazy warrior carried a hint of aura from her clan’s progenitor. But that should be completely impossible.

Her family didn’t have any connection to this sector, and she and her master had only passed by here during their travels by chance. More importantly, their progenitor had left their clan well over a million years ago when she found herself facing the inevitable madness of advanced age.

She’d created two grand treasures to defend their clan against annihilation, and these treasures were still consecrated by the whole family once a year to maintain the aura of the progenitor. But they had never heard from the ancestor after she left, and everyone long believed that she’d found her end during her search for a way to break through.

Was the founder still alive? That would mean that she either had managed to break through or found a way to stave off the madness. She couldn’t wait for that axe-wielding warrior to emerge. Killing a couple of local noblemen would be a small price to pay for such a valuable piece of information.

But if the progenitor was truly alive, why hadn’t she come back during all this time? Was she trapped somewhere and needed assistance? And why had she left her mark on a

human? Was he her disciple? It sounded preposterous, but she had her reasons for believing it to be true.

There was an undeniable sense of death surrounding him. It might be impossible to sense for the humans around him, but how could a purebred Draugr of an ancient Heritage not feel the aura of undeath?

That warrior might hold the clues to the questions that ailed her, and she couldn't wait for him to emerge once again.

Just who was that man?

A rancid odor rose from the cauldron, telling Boje that he had actually failed in concocting a basic **[Golden Constitution Pill]**. It was one of the first recipes he'd learned while still a teenager, and something he would be able to concoct in his sleep. Yet it had failed today.

The knock on the door made Boje flinch in fear, a sheen of perspiration covering his forehead. He tightly gripped his fists in an effort to stop their trembling as he tried to get his fraying emotions under check.

"Enter," he said, trying to sound as unruffled and confident as possible.

He couldn't let the world know that the past encounter had scared him shitless. Others were discussing how to capture the man when he emerged in a day, but Boje only contemplated means of survival. They hadn't seen those eyes filled with unending madness or felt the aura sharp enough to wound souls.

The reward was certainly alluring, but he wouldn't challenge that god of death. He'd rather take his chances with the floor guardian at the sixth floor than stand in front of that Asura again.

The door opened, and his manservant entered holding a clipboard.

“The regeneration of the main hall is essentially finished, apart from some furnishings that are still being made. We paid 500,000 E-grade Nexus Coins to have the Bruckner expedite the process. But we expect it will take at least a month before the Boundless Heavens restores the array functionality,” Ulred said.

“That’s to be expected.” Boje nodded. “Take out our fourth and seventh sealed treasures to solidify the main hall.”

“The fourth treasure costs almost 100,000 E-grade Nexus Coins a day to keep active,” the steward reminded him.

“I’ll take responsibility for the cost,” Boje shrugged, not bothered by such a small amount of money. “We have many guests staying with us, and we need to show some sincerity. At least until the issue with that man has been dealt with.”

“Regarding that... What are your instructions?” the manservant hesitantly asked.

Boje knew there was some confusion amongst their ranks. He had immediately entered seclusion, citing a need to ponder on new insights gained from witnessing the battle. But truthfully, he had just been scared and wanted to hide away in his sanctum.

It was a shame that Rasuliel had gotten himself killed, robbing Boje of the chance of killing that idiot himself. The amount of trouble that guy had created for the Zethaya was inestimable. This Zac was completely unknown but insanely strong. Who knew if he’d pop out of nowhere in a few thousand years as a C-grade Monarch, destroying their strongholds one by one?

Such things happening was all too common.

Of course, he knew that he was the one to blame in the end. Rasuliel had stuffed his pockets full of rare herbs to help progress his crafts, and Boje had felt that it wouldn’t be such a big deal even if he bent the family rules a bit to reciprocate. His mind had been muddled from the opportunity of concocting a pill with such a rare item as a base.

It would probably have been enough to progress his craft to the next level. But now it was all for naught.

But the steward asked a valid question. How should the Zethaya respond?

“Send someone with an invoice for the furnishings and the **[Prajñā Cherry]** to the Tsarun Clan. Also indicate we’re expecting an explanation as to why Rasuliel initiated a fight within our compound, even going so far as to take out a taboo treasure while I stood right next to him,” Boje finally said.

“Certainly.” Ulred nodded. “And the man who entered the tower? There have also been quite a few forces who have approached us for information regarding that man.”

“There’s no need to hide anything,” Boje eventually said. “Tell them what we know. It’s not much anyway. But keep the seal on his transformation or the battle itself.”

“Certainly,” Ulred agreed as he scribbled down a few notes. “All the guests and personnel have already signed contracts of secrecy. It will not leak.”

“Good,” Boje said. “We’ll wait and see how things turn out tomorrow. Perhaps there is some way for us to turn this calamity into an opportunity.”

PIKER

Darkness quickly gave way to light, and Zac in his muddled state was a bit confused when he was met with a prompt that covered his whole vision.

[Tower of Eternity entered. Use pseudonym or real name?]

It was just like when the ladder system had been initiated back in the day, and Zac looked at the prompt blankly for a few seconds. The events that had just transpired made him unwilling to use his real name, but he also didn't want to be known as Super Brother-Man again. He had already introduced himself as Zac at the Zethaya, and Boje was still alive, so he was a bit unsure what to do.

But suddenly, he had a spark of inspiration.

“Zac Piker,” Zac said with a raspy voice.

Piker was his mother's maiden name, at least according to his dad. Zac had been one year old when they married, and Leandra took on Robert's last name. By now, Zac realized it was probably a fake name she'd used when she arrived on Earth, which made it a solid option to choose.

Picking this pseudonym was a way for him to signal his mother that they were alive. She would perhaps hear of the name somehow, especially if he climbed far enough, and come help them out with their situation back on Earth.

The scene quickly changed, and Zac found himself sitting by a campfire, joined by his two travel companions and a headless corpse. The moment the prompt disappeared, Zac felt a pang of worry, and he couldn't help but wonder if he had just

made a monumental mistake choosing that name. But done was done, and Zac rather focused on the others.

Galau had woken up at some time during their frantic escape, and he currently sat on the ground, looking as though his soul had left him. His eyes were glazed as they stared into the distance, devoid of thought and hope. Ogras was instead staring evenly at Zac, his eyes rife with unspoken words.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t expect that to happen.” Zac coughed as he scratched his chin. “But I did get a treasure for Alea, I think.”

Of course, his true feelings weren’t quite as calm as he wanted to let on. The splinter had thoroughly screwed him over this time, to the point of no return. Zac groaned as he reached for his Cosmos Sack and took out a Nexus Crystal to start restoring his energy.

The combination of his terrible wounds, using [**Hatchetman’s Rage**], and activating the first two swings of [**Deforestation**] had really done a number on his body, and he felt so weak that a level 20 would be able to wring his neck if they wanted to.

Luckily, he hadn’t suffered any wounds to his soul, so he had no problem activating his Dao of Trees to help recuperate. The Dao soothed his harried body, and he finally had a chance to look around.

If it weren’t for him remembering entering the tower, he would have thought they had left the special dimension and had been teleported somewhere on Earth. He knew that the place was magical from reading the missives available in the Base Town, and how it conjured realistic scenarios to act as trials.

But he had underestimated the Tower of Eternity.

Zac had somewhat expected to spot clues that this wasn’t real, like black walls in the distance where the trial ended or some details missing that would make the world feel hollow. But he was currently sitting in front of a fire in a small glade.

Around him was a tranquil leafy forest, and there was even a normal sky when he looked up through the canopy.

Nothing about this place felt like either a tower or some sort of trial, but rather a simple camping trip that brought back his memories to the day that the integration took place. They were only missing the trusty camper and a cooler full of beer to complete the experience. But everyone present obviously didn't share Zac's nostalgia.

"I'm finished," Galau said with hollow eyes from across the fire. "My cousins will tell the elders what transpired. I will be sacrificed to the Zethaya Clan in an effort to curry favor and distance themselves from you two lunatics."

"Well, this is our bad," Zac said, but corrected himself after seeing the face Ogras was making. "Fine, my bad. I got a bit heated, and things got out of hand. We will do our best to make things right for you."

"You can always say that we kidnapped you," Ogras finally said after releasing a heavy sigh. "We did carry you into the tower, after all."

Galau didn't answer, as he kept looking into the distance with a face full of regrets. Zac and Ogras could hear him mumbling under his breath, but Zac could only make out "*Why did I sit down at that table?*" Ogras only rolled his eyes before he turned to Zac.

"Are you okay?"

"Can you give me a few hours?" Zac sighed.

"It's fine. We're not short on time any longer." Ogras shrugged. "We'll wait."

Zac nodded in thanks and arduously got up from his sitting position, but he suddenly turned back toward the fire as he took out the small vial he'd gotten from Boje.

"Can you tell me what this is?" Zac asked as he waved it at Galau.

The youth initially wanted to ignore him, but he soon enough reluctantly got up to his feet to look at the bottle.

“It’s actually a bottle of High-Grade [**Serene Flesh Pill**]. It’s part of the Zethaya Pill House Serene Path—series of healing and nurturing pills. These three pills are worth almost 750 million Nexus Coins!” Galau blurted out. “The Zethaya truly have the best stuff.”

“Can you be sure that it’s not poisoned or something?” Zac asked.

He initially hadn’t planned on eating these things, but if he only relied on his own pills and constitution, he would be in bad shape for weeks, which was too much time to waste even within the tower. He literally had pieces of guts dangling down from the side, and he was hesitant to move around as it was.

Galau looked a bit confused, but his eyes started shimmering with a slight glow, indicating he was using some sort of ocular skill.

“It looks fine to me,” Galau said. “Besides, I think the Zethaya wouldn’t do something to create poison pills disguised as their healing pills. Such a thing would cause massive harm to their reputation. They would rather offer an extreme bounty for your capture if they wanted to deal with you.”

Zac felt it made sense, and he took out one of the pills, which looked like a pristine pearl. It was a lot better than any pill he had found during the hunt or bought from Calrin. His gut feeling didn’t warn him either, so he quickly popped the pill into his mouth as he went over to the body of Rasuliel. He searched through his clothes, but a frown started to emerge when he couldn’t find what he was looking for.

“Where is the Cosmos Sack?” Zac muttered, worried that he had lost it during the battle. “I clearly saw him putting away a treasure.”

“It’s probably the ring on his finger,” Ogras muttered. “Rich bastard.”

Zac suddenly remembered Calrin mentioning that the high-class Cosmos Sacks were jewelry rather than literal sacks.

They were a lot more valuable, as they required a craftsman proficient in the Dao of Space to create.

He twisted the ring off Rasuliel's finger and limped over to a tree some distance from the campsite. Zac needed to rest a bit and let the pill do its magic. His head was also a complete mess for some reason, and he needed to restore his mental state as well.

Sitting alone in the forest full of wounds made his thoughts go back to his first months on the island, where his body was always in various states of disrepair. He usually felt like a completely different person compared to the guy who kept getting himself in trouble while fighting the dumb demonic beasts, but sometimes it seemed like he hadn't actually improved all that much.

Zac restarted his recuperation with practiced ease as he went over what had just happened. The whole fight was just a jumbled mess in his mind, and he couldn't remember the details. Had he forgotten due to his anger, or had the splinter actually controlled him? The distinction was extremely important, and he quickly looked inward to check up on the splinter.

The **[Splinter of Oblivion]** was extremely docile at the moment, and it had retracted all its tentacles that usually tried to finagle their way out of the Miasmatic prison in his head. It didn't release any of that odd energy into his mind either, making the funnel completely empty. But that alone didn't bring any comfort to Zac at all, and the reason was simple.

One of the Miasmatic Runes was missing.

He had looked at the runes that encircled the **[Splinter of Oblivion]** many times in an attempt to understand them, and he was certain that there was one fewer of them now. Initially, there had been nine of them, but now only eight remained, making the gap between them slightly larger.

Worry filled Zac's heart, and he started to wonder if the protection of the mysterious Draugr lady was failing. If the runes disappeared with this speed, then he would lose all protection in just a few years. He might be able to reach Peak

E-grade in ten years if he pushed himself, but he knew that wasn't enough to control the effects of the splinter.

Or perhaps it had happened because he'd lost control due to his anger. It had empowered the splinter enough to break one of the runes, resulting in the destruction that followed. If that was the case, he would have to focus on ways to fortify his mind to avoid such a scene repeating itself.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much he could do about the issue as things currently stood, and he retracted his mind from the splinter.

He instead looked down at his finger to see that the ring Calrin had lent him had lost all its luster, and the large inlaid crystal looked like a murky piece of glass. Zac couldn't help but groan when he saw the sight. This had been his strongest defensive ace, but he only had one use of it, and it had been expended before he even entered the tower.

It was a poignant reminder that he wasn't invulnerable even with his massive pool of attributes. Everyone had their own advantages and hidden aces. That Rasuliel hadn't seemed like a peak genius, yet he had almost killed Zac even if he activated the ring. There was also the attack fueled by a Dao Fragment that almost hit him as they fled, indicating his level of insight wasn't anything unique in the tower.

At least his battle came with a few upsides, Zac reckoned as he turned his attention to Rasuliel's Spatial Ring. It had turned into an ownerless item since the guy died, allowing Zac to immediately bind it. But he was surprised when he saw the somewhat limited space when he inspected the insides.

The space was only a bit larger compared to the ordinary Cosmos Sacks that cost just a few million Nexus Coins. Zac had expected a spatial tool belonging to a rich guy like that to be able to store mountain ranges if needed, but he guessed he had severely underestimated the difficulty of making Spatial Rings. The space in his own Cosmos Sack was a lot larger than this.

However, it was a lot more convenient compared to the Cosmos Sack. He needed to physically touch a sack to take out

an item, but he could simply will the ring to spit out its contents since it was already on his hand. That would allow him to take out his axe or a defensive treasure a lot quicker, which might be the difference between life and death. He also knew that the space inside a Spatial Ring was a lot more stable, whereas Cosmos Sacks needed to be replaced at regular intervals so as not to lose the contents.

Just the ring itself was an amazing treasure worth well over a billion Nexus Coins, yet he knew that was only the tip of the iceberg after a cursory glance at the contents. He immediately found the box that Rasuliel had put away just before the battle started, and just that box alone almost made Zac feel the danger he found himself in worth it.

He still couldn't be certain that the **[Prajñā Cherry]** would be enough to heal Alea, but it would no doubt make her situation better than it currently was. If he could prolong the time she could stay inside the coffin to a few decades, he felt confident he would be able to find a few more treasures to feed her.

Perhaps the Tree of Ascension would be able to produce another fruit as well, and with its odd mutation it might be able to help the Poison Mistress.

Of course, the cherry was just one of a large number of treasures, making Zac feel that expending the charge on his ring to not be the end of the world. There were no doubt more defensive treasures in the spatial tool that Rasuliel hadn't had a chance to use during their hectic battle.

Zac took out one box or vial after another, glancing at their contents. All of them were clearly good items judging by their spiritual emanations, but he had no idea what they did. He could have Galau go through the things to find anything that would be useful during the climb. But he suddenly froze after opening a particular box.

Wasn't that the Eye of the Pathfinder Oracle?

THE PEAKS

Who would have thought that it was actually Rasuliel Tsarun who had coughed up a shocking 280 billion Nexus Coins to buy this thing? Zac had already learned that while the Eye was a precious item, it wasn't really worth such an obscene amount. Galau had explained that it would go for at most 100 billion Nexus Coins in the outside world.

There were many ways to upgrade one's Specialty Core, such as the pills Zethaya Pill House provided. Those pills cost less than a billion Nexus Coins, a far cry from the shocking amount the Eye had ended up at. Most proper Heritages with instructions on forming Specialty Cores also came with methods to evolving them, making Zac suspect that Rasuliel wanted the Eye for some other purpose than Zac himself.

Did Rasuliel perhaps have some urgent need for the Eye, prompting him to pay through his nose? That might have been why he visited the Zethaya Clan as well. He might have been looking for help in turning the Eye into some specific pill with the help of Boje or some of his elders back home.

Of course, Rasuliel's reasons for overpaying for the item no longer mattered.

Getting his hands on the Eye meant that he had essentially acquired everything on his list before arriving at the Tower of Eternity. Now he only needed to get out in one piece, and he would have all the tools he needed to burst out with a huge amount of power after returning to Earth.

He finally retracted his mind from the Spatial Ring and refocused on recuperating. The [Serene Flesh Pill] did wonders to his body, but then it still took a few hours before he felt well enough to even walk any distance. His wound was still an open mess, and one could see his body slowly growing new cells to restore the hole in his side.

Zac guessed that it would take a few days for his wounds to close completely, and a few days more for him to regain his full strength. It was an extremely long convalescence for someone like Zac with a huge pool of Endurance and Vitality, but it would have been even longer if it weren't for the pill.

There was an unmistakable aura of a strong Dao in his wound that slowed down his efforts to heal up, but he wasn't as helpless as when Mhal had infected him with the Draugr samples. He was slowly grinding down the foreign Dao with his Fragments, and it wouldn't be long before all of it was expended.

His Spirit Tool robes also had mended themselves by this point, which at least blocked the grisly sight of his wound. He got up to his feet with a grunt and returned to the campsite, only to find Ogras leisurely sipping wine from one of the dozens of vats he had bought during the past week. Galau still sat and stared despondently into the great beyond and didn't even give Zac a glance when he returned.

"He's still out of it?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Sheltered brat, all broken up over a little bit of mayhem," Ogras snorted with some derision before he turned to Zac. "Now, can you explain what the hell happened? The plan was for you to buy some healing pills. How did that turn into you tearing down the pill house of an ancient clan and ripping the head off this poor bastard?"

Even if the demon appeared unbothered on the surface, it was obvious he was a bit frazzled by the events as well. He looked back and forth between the headless body of Rasuliel and Zac, clearly trying to get a grip on the situation.

Zac sighed as he recounted the whole encounter from the moment he'd entered, adding on his own speculation about

Rasuliel being from one of the ousted families of Earth. He didn't hide the fact that they came from a newly integrated planet since he felt Galau deserved to understand the situation after having been dragged into this level of trouble.

“What? You're progenitors? But what about... Wait, he's from the Tsarun Clan?” Galau cried when he heard about the identity of the corpse. “Oh, Mommy.”

“You know about them?” Zac asked curiously and a bit accusatorily. “I still don't know why he targeted me. Do you have some sort of feud with them?”

“Ahem...” Ogras coughed. “It's the Tsarun, remember? Calrin's old friends?”

Only then did Zac remember why the name was so familiar. It was the old clan that had worked on stealing Calrin's Mercantile License for centuries. If that man knew who Zac was, then it would explain his hostility. Who knew how much time and effort the clan had spent only for Zac to foil their plans inadvertently.

“I wonder how that Tsarun guy could know that I was the one who helped Calrin, though,” Zac muttered. “It looked like he knew right away.”

“Who's Calrin?” Galau finally asked.

“A merchant targeted by the Tsarun Clan fled to my planet. I gave them a place to stay in exchange for a part of his business.” Zac shrugged.

“So you had already made that clan your enemy even before you came here?” Galau blankly asked, looking ready to barf. “Those guys are extremely overbearing. Their patriarch is dead set on elevating their clan to a peak faction, and they don't shy away from any means. They're almost bordering on turning into an unorthodox force, but they stay just within the limits to not get targeted.”

“Yes, I didn't expect them to be here, or that they'd find out about me.” Zac shrugged. “Do you know how that's possible?”

Galau's distraught eyes focused for a second, but a frown slowly crept onto his face.

"I don't know either. The world is full of mysterious skills and arrays, though. Do you wear anything bought through that store they were targeting?" he asked.

Zac considered for a few seconds before his eyes turned to the defensive ring given to him by Calrin. Ogras' eyes lit up as well as he looked down at his hand.

"I'll punt that little blue bastard over to the next island the next time I see him. Did he do it on purpose to make us complicit?" the demon muttered with annoyance before he wryly smiled at Zac. "I think our plan of feigning ignorance and handing over Calrin in case we meet the Tsarun elders is ruined now."

Zac could only snort in response. Ruined felt like an understatement after killing one of the young masters of the clan.

"The real issue is how you'll deal with this. Remember, we'll only be inside here for a day. By that point, those guys might have amassed a small army outside to welcome our return," the demon added.

"Well, can't we just zap out the moment we leave the tower?" Zac asked. "It's a shame to leave so early, but there's no option. The sixty-second limiter should have passed by now, right? Or maybe we can even leave from right here?"

"We can't leave the tower straight to our homeworld," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "You can only use the token to leave the tower, then you can use it again to leave this dimension. And I don't know how it works for us. This situation is outside my general knowledge."

"Maybe if we climb high enough, they'll back off?" Zac ventured. "Or at least hesitate long enough for us to teleport out?"

"Wait!" Galau suddenly exclaimed as he turned to Zac, looking like a drowning man finding a glimmer of hope. "Pretty Peak is in the Base Town! Can you ask her for help?"

“Pretty Peak? Who the hell is that?” Ogras said.

“The Peak family of the Allbright Empire!” Galau explained as he pointed at Zac. “He clearly has a connection to them, and they are both strong and overbearing enough to make the Tsarun Clan back down. Even the Zethaya might give them face if they know you are related.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Zac said, and he wasn’t lying. “Who are the Peak family?”

“Your bracer,” Galau said. “It is no doubt made by someone from the Peak family. They utilize a unique crafting method that’s easily distinguishable if you know what to look for.”

“So that spiel about the fear in our eyes the other day was all dogshit? You simply recognized the bracer this guy wore and figured we were strong?” Ogras snorted.

“Well... I did not really lie. I simply didn’t explain all my reasons for employing you.” Galau coughed before his face once again was marred by despair. “But what good did my planning do? No one will believe the authenticity of my climb after having seen your rampage. You will no doubt reach the sixth floor, perhaps even conquering it.”

“Tell me what you know about the Peak family,” Zac said with interest, ignoring the complaints of Galau.

He had held back on mentioning Greatest and Average since he didn’t want to expose his connection to them, but it looked like it was for naught. Galau had known about it since the start and had even used the connection as a measure of his strength.

“It’s a unique family in the Allbright Empire. It can’t really be called a clan since there are only a hundred members or so in the family. But all of them are crazy strong. The patriarch of the family is Ultimate, one of the four Marshalls of the Allbright Empire. He is a friend of the emperor himself,” Galau said.

“What about Pretty? Is she Ultimate’s daughter?” Zac asked.

“No, granddaughter. Her father is Strongest, the eldest of the three sons of Ultimate. The other two are Greatest and Fiercest,” Galau said.

“What’s with these names?” Ogras snorted.

Zac kept asking a bit about the family without making it obvious whom in the family he had a connection with. It turned out that the Peak family actually lived in the capital of the Allbright Empire, but most members were out battling. Greatest had headed to the Red Sector in order to find dangerous criminals to fight.

The Red Sector was apparently one of the more remote zones of the Allbright Empire, and bordering it was a large unclaimed sector with a huge number of spatial anomalies. It made both teleportation arrays impossible to construct while also making it extremely dangerous to travel with Cosmic Ships.

This had turned the sector to a mostly lawless no-man’s-land where unorthodox forces, pirates, and other dangerous people hid. The Allbright Empire often launched assaults on the area, but it was an absolute rat’s nest that was almost impossible to completely cleanse.

Apart from the Allbright armies, the Red Zone was also rife with bounty hunters and mercenary squads hoping to make a killing inside the unclaimed territory. The numerous anomalies created a unique atmosphere that regularly gave birth to valuable treasures. Sometimes extremely valuable items were even spat out through a spatial tear, coming from god knows where.

It was in that chaotic space that Greatest sought to hone himself through bloodshed.

Zac suddenly remembered the conversation between Greatest and Average. He had mentioned asking the Red Emperor to allow Average to enter some Eternal Legion. Was the Eternal Legion one of the punitive armies that regularly tried to clean out the pirates and other scum in the lawless zone?

Zac's mouth turned upward slightly when he imagined that gaudy teenager being forced to fight ruthless pirates or crazy cultists while still at F or Early E-grade. Even strong E-grade warriors should be at risk there, as people who had the ability to traverse between planets should be very powerful.

He wasn't all too worried about his safety, though. Greatest's family was a lot more impressive than he had imagined, and there was no doubt someone hiding in the shadows making sure that Average didn't actually kick the bucket.

But Zac knew that just because he had met those two during his Sovereignty trial, there was no way that he could completely rely on them to clean up his mess.

"I truthfully have no connection with that family. I only got this bracer through a chance encounter," Zac said. "I had never heard of Pretty Peak before today, so I doubt that she would extend a hand to help with our situation."

Galau looked completely crestfallen, but Zac was internally delighted. Greatest was from a force far stronger than he had expected, with multiple C-grade powerhouses in its ranks. Perhaps he could ask this Pretty for a way to save Earth from the Great Redeemer.

THE LAW OF THE LAND

The problem was that Zac's connection to the Peak family wasn't all that deep. It had simply been a chance encounter between himself and Greatest. Perhaps they would have lent a helping hand if it were before, but now he had a bulls-eye on his back due to the quest.

It was one thing for them to stand up against a solitary D-grade warrior, but another thing entirely to create enmity with all the forces in the Base Town in order to protect him.

"We'll just have to play it by ear. In case we get split up later, remember to stay until the time runs out so that we all exit this place at the same time," Ogras said as he walked over to Galau. "Get up. There's no time to waste."

"You are from a recently integrated planet, so you don't understand just how troublesome the people you've offended are. We need to figure out a way to make amends!" Galau said as he finally dragged himself back to his feet.

"We won't apologize to those assholes. Why was it so hard for them to sell one puny healing treasure?" Ogras snorted. "I say good riddance. Seeing how they acted they would just have caused problems for us even if we cowered in their presence. Might as well be proactive and kill them first."

Zac nodded in agreement. He wouldn't have acted the way he did if it weren't for the splinter in his mind, but he was pretty annoyed even without it. That guy had wanted Alea to die out of pure spite, even though they had never met before.

All because of some unverified clue that he had some connections to the Thayer Consortium.

“Anyway, let’s get going,” Zac said after throwing the demon a nod in thanks for the support. “How do we get to the next floor? This place is a lot more open-world than I expected.”

Galau looked at Zac incredulously, obviously shocked at how uninformed he was. Ogras wasn’t as surprised, of course, as he was the source of most of what Zac knew about the tower.

“The tower contains various challenges, and which challenge you will encounter at a specific floor varies. The only way to completely prepare for a climb is to be good at everything, which is of course impossible,” the demon said.

“I know that,” Zac snorted. “I might have been preoccupied with the matters back home, but read a missive. But it doesn’t look like this forest has any challenges, and I haven’t gotten a quest.”

Zac was a bit annoyed with himself that he hadn’t prepared better now that he actually stood inside the tower. He had been so consumed with finding all the things he needed for himself, Earth, and Alea in the Base Town. Ogras had already mentioned that you could brute-force your way through the tower, but he needed to get a better grip on how things worked now.

Besides, it wasn’t like Ogras was a wellspring of information. Getting anything out of the demon when it didn’t benefit him was like squeezing water out of a rock.

“It can be anything. It can be passing an array, like you did at the pill house, finding a treasure, identifying the source of a curse, saving someone,” Ogras explained and listed a handful of other challenges the demon himself had encountered.

Zac nodded, remembering having read about those and a few other scenarios that were quite popular in the trial. Unfortunately, the missives only covered the lower floors,

simply mentioning that the tasks would grow more and more complex the higher you climbed.

It was somewhat indicative of the System's priorities. In the early floors, there were multiple ways to pass a trial. If you had a broad skillset, you could make your way through the levels with minimal fighting, and you could even hire people to do the work for you.

But the higher you climbed, the more focus was put on a personal strength. Book smarts wasn't enough; you needed to prove yourself through combat. Zac even guessed it would be extremely difficult to carry others through the later floors. The System would probably set up trials that required individual contribution to avoid having to give out free rewards and treasures.

Besides, he already knew that the System put limiters on talismans and arrays, making sure you couldn't simply break the tower with the help of your rich ancestors.

Even then, the broader your skillset, the better you were bound to do in the Tower of Eternity. After all, the trials were supposed to mirror various scenarios you might encounter while out exploring. You could make do even if you were only good at hitting things, which essentially was Zac's situation, but your road would be a bit bumpy.

Even knowing that, there wasn't much he could do about the situation. He didn't have time to learn a bunch of side professions while Earth was on the brink of ruin.

Problem was, now that he was here, he simply didn't have anything to turn his axe on.

"Don't be so anxious." Ogras laughed, clearly understanding Zac's thoughts. "Just treat it as real life. We just need to look around, and the Ruthless Heavens will provide a path." The three finally got ready to leave the glade they wound up in, and Zac put the headless corpse of Rasuliel into his Cosmos Sack after some deliberation. Perhaps it would come in handy for some reason when they emerged from the tower.

“By the way, what was the reward?” Zac suddenly asked with some morbid curiosity as they walked. “What was my life worth?”

“One free level.”

“One free level? That’s it?” Zac asked incredulously, and he even started to feel a bit insulted by the System.

“That’s a huge reward!” Galau said. “I’ve never heard of such a big reward before at the Base Town. It’s usually things like clue crystals that provide hints on how to complete a single quest, but yours is simply one free level.”

“Oh, so a level for the tower? Still, what’s the big deal if you get to one level higher?” Zac asked.

“Because it might allow you to completely skip the final challenge of a floor. Over 90% of all trial takers get stuck at that final threshold. The difficulty is way higher there than the earlier levels. Blasting past that trial will get you fame, rewards, and a better title,” Ogras explained. “Just look at Reoluv. If he’d managed to kill you first, he would reach the fabled eighth floor rather than being stuck on seventh. It’s the difference between a once-a-decade talent and a once-a-millennium genius. I’d be tempted to take you on right now myself if you weren’t such a monster.”

Zac only rolled his eyes in response, but he suddenly realized that Ogras wasn’t just messing around. The demon was subtly telling him that the quest was still active. And while Galau felt like a slightly hapless youngster, he wouldn’t be here unless he was an elite.

It wasn’t unthinkable that Galau would try to kill him sooner or later, as that would not only let him pass another level, but it might also allow him to survive the storm that was no doubt brewing outside the tower. If Galau presented his head to the Zethaya or Tsarun Clans, he might even get a huge reward.

“Well, thank you for your restraint,” Zac quickly answered, adding half-jokingly. “I guess I will have to sleep with one eye open.”

The three walked through the tranquil forest for the better part of an hour, and interestingly, there wasn't a single predator in sight. He did spot a level 20 bird, but it was pretty small and kept a wide berth from the three.

This was, of course, fine with Zac, who was in no fighting condition at the moment, but it was a bit confusing for someone who had been primed to fight some Peak F-grade boss to complete a trial. Zac was just about to ask what was going on when the scenery changed.

The forest gave way to cultivated farmland that stretched out across the horizon, and a small farming village could be seen in the distance. The whole scene felt extremely calm and idyllic, but Zac was dragged out of his reverie by a prompt from the System.

[The Village of Whittlecreek of the Bravorian Kingdom has lately been subject to an increasing number of raids from Fallen Goblins. Find out the source of the new threat.]

“Did you get the prompt about Whittlecreek as well?” Zac asked curiously.

“Yes, this is our first trial,” Ogras said as he pointed at the pastoral village in the distance. “I guess it can be categorized under information gathering. Let's head over to the town first.”

“This all looks so real,” Zac said as he looked at the town and the farmers tending their fields in the distance. “I can't believe the System creates whole illusory worlds like this for all the trial takers coming to the tower. The energy expenditure must be shocking.”

“Well, that's actually a subject of some debate,” Galau said, finally getting into the spirit of adventure. “Some rather believe these people are all real, while others say the worlds are real but the people are illusions or lifelike puppets created by the System. They do all give Cosmic Energy when killed, though, which gives more credence to the first theory.”

“The Ruthless Heavens can simply provide energy itself,” Ogras countered. “And no one has ever encountered a trial

taker outside the Tower of Eternity. It is not just sending us to random worlds.”

“That’s true.” Galau nodded before turning back to Zac. “The reason that some believe these are just puppets is that they simply ignore all comments about the tower or the world outside. It doesn’t matter what you do or say, these villagers will truly believe they are from Whittlecreek in the Bravorian Kingdom.”

“The people are also never surprised to see and are seldom hostile against other races, like they don’t even know that a huge golem or a humanoid fish is standing in front of them. The villagers would still welcome Mr. Azh’Rodum even if the quest was to rebuff enemy demons,” the merchant added. “Though they would create some justification in their minds, like he was a traitor to his people.”

Ogras had introduced himself using the name of the demon town on his island rather than his true last name even before they entered the tower, and Zac guessed he had done the same when prompted by the System. The demon still didn’t want any clues about his situation leaking back to the demon hordes in case it would bring trouble to either his grandfather or Earth.

There was also the issue of Karmic threads and other troublesome skills. Not using your true name wasn’t a foolproof plan, but it did make various types of information gathering slightly harder. That was another reason Zac chose to use his alias as well, apart from sending out a hidden signal to his mother in case she was listening.

“So how would we normally complete a trial like this?” Zac asked.

“This is the very first level, so it should be possible to complete quickly,” Ogras said. “I would guess that there is a clue in the town itself that would allow us to complete the trial, or at least give us a clear hint of where to go.”

“But that’s the easy way; what about defeating the guardian or whatever?” Zac asked.

“The guardian would probably be the boss of the Fallen Goblins, and we would no doubt find out where he is soon after entering the town,” Ogras said. “Completing it the normal way would be to find out why the goblin tribe moved here. My guess is that a rival country is trying to weaken them by tricking these vermin to raid the farmlands.”

Zac looked over at the talkative demon with surprise. It sounded like he had thought everything through and already formulated a plan. He even seemed to have an in-depth understanding of the mechanics of the tower itself, which allowed him to infer hidden clues.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “Remember, I was a lot weaker the last time I was here. I wasn’t even level 60, so I focused on gathering intelligence rather than fighting. The guy I hired was a bit of a meathead, so I had to help out where I could.”

“What?” Galau blurted out. “Why would you head here so early?”

“I was bored.” Ogras shrugged, clearly not interested in divulging his precarious situation back in his old clan.

Zac kept asking questions as they walked over toward the town, and Ogras simply told him to play the part. It made things easier if you inserted yourself into the setting in a believable way. In this case, they would say they were warriors who had come to look into the newly emerging threat. That way, the villagers might be more inclined to share information with them.

He also underlined that they shouldn’t attack random people. It could quickly make things get out of hand. For example, it might garner the ire of some nearby nobleman of the Bravorian Kingdom who would rush to the village for revenge, and such an individual wasn’t necessarily within the expected strength of the floor they were on. Many climbs had ended early due to cultivators taking too large liberties while inside, where they took the opportunity to act despicable while out of prying eyes.

After all, no one would ever know what happened during a climb unless they retold the story themselves.

“But why would the System design such an elaborate place like this?” Zac asked. “Why not just present a series of increasingly strong opponents for us to fight? This place must cost an insane amount of energy to keep running.”

“Have you heard about the origins of the System?” Galau asked.

“Of course, the Limitless Empire created it to nurture warriors for their war,” Zac said.

“Exactly. The System has changed a lot since that ancient era, but its main prerogative remains. It needs to create powerful warriors. You shouldn’t see this place simply as a trial to get a good title, but as a training ground to hone your skills,” Galau explained. “Everyone who comes to the tower is an elite the System has deemed worth nurturing, and this whole place is a massive incubator.”

“And I am not talking about your skills or your Dao. This place teaches you to think,” the youth added. “That’s what I believe anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with confusion.

“You can look at it this way. Most people who come here are from established factions. They might have good insights and high attributes, but they have lived generally sheltered lives under the protection of their elders. I have no doubt that you as a progenitor have seen far more battle than almost any warrior you encountered in the Base Town,” Galau said.

Zac nodded, feeling it made sense. There was no reason for a clan to throw their youths to the wolves to grow like he did. It might create one or two powerhouses, but most would end up dead. Almost no one was willing to rear their young generations like that.

But that also meant that they turned out like Average, people having the technique but not the grit to make it through a harsh battle.

“It seems you understand. The tower throws you into a large number of unfamiliar situations, allowing you to gain not just experience in fighting, but also how to solve various types of situations you might encounter in the future. The things you learn today might save your life in a Mystic Realm in the future,” Galau finished.

Some excitement started to well up in Zac’s heart as he listened to Galau’s explanations, and he couldn’t help but look forward to the trials now.

Until now, there had only been a fight for survival, where he was thrown into one perilous situation after another. Now he could relax and enjoy some exploration and adventure, all while honing his skills.

It was nice to finally get a breather.

TABOO ORIGINS

Kenzie exhaled with a tired sigh as she waited for the drones to return to her side. Jeeves was doing all of the calculations when she commanded the flying machines to strike her targets, but the AI ran on her spirit energy to function. Destroying one infusion pillar felt even more draining than using all her Daos to battle for half an hour, even though she didn't even leave the flying treasure.

Ilvere silently gazed upon the destruction, not even bothering to comment as he directed the treasure toward their next target. He had assisted her for her campaign the past two days, taking care of all minor details so that she would only have to worry about the pillars themselves. No one else had accompanied the two out of security concerns.

Kenzie had felt a bit stupid after realizing that bringing the demon general might have opened a can of worms, but the general solved the issue by immediately creating a contract of silence after she destroyed the first pillar. It stipulated that he would keep silent on all matters regarding MacKenzie Atwood, and there was no time limitation. As for remuneration, it was only one Nexus Crystal a year.

Ilvere was a trusted general under her brother and Ogras, and she had initially felt it was unnecessary to go to such lengths regarding such a small issue. But the demon had said it was as much for himself as for her, as he didn't want his head to leave his shoulders when Lord Atwood returned in two days.

She initially wanted to refute him, but she honestly wasn't sure what the truth was any longer. Her brother had changed during the past months, and she wasn't just talking about the transformation that everyone was forced to undergo to survive in this new environment. He had become harsher, more paranoid. It honestly wasn't impossible that he'd kill Ilvere just to make sure nothing would leak out about their Heritage.

Of course, the demon general only knew a part of the truth. She had explained the drones by saying that Zac had found the Technocrat incursion while in the underworld, and he had decided to take their technology for himself to protect Earth. It was taboo technology, but things were getting desperate, and her brother had made the decision to bear any repercussions by the System for using them.

Luckily for her, Earth had been somewhat technologically advanced before the integration, and it was impossible for a demon like Ilvere to properly understand the vast gap between the tablets and cars of old Earth and the futuristic drones crammed full of shocking technology. He thought that Zac had put some of their engineers on analyzing the drones before they quickly were deployed into battle, which was of course ludicrous. It would probably take years to reverse engineer this type of technology, if they ever managed to do it.

As for repercussions, Jeeves assured her there would be none. It was something that her AI was still vague about, but it had on multiple occasions assured her that he would not draw any ire from the System for its existence or actions. She wasn't sure what to believe about that claim, though. Her AI was a great teacher, but how could it control what the System would do?

Since Ilvere was in charge of driving the flying treasure toward the next pillar, she closed her eyes and focused on one of her training regimens. She formed four thin strands of Dao Energy in her mind and started to arduously weave them together into an ugly braid. It required extreme control of her Dao Energy, and it didn't have a lot of applications, but it did help her in various ways.

Braiding her Daos allowed her to take the first step toward fusing them in the future while also helping her to more naturally use multiple Daos while battling. She could only infuse two of her elements into an attack at the moment, but Jeeves assured her a full infusion of all four was possible.

Can't you help Zac a bit and create a training program for him as well? Kenzie entreated for the umpteenth time. You know he's struggling with this type of stuff.

[No. I cannot get involved with him,] the synthetic voice answered as usual. [I cannot.]

But why? Kenzie lambasted in her mind, her usual caution thrown to the wind due to stress and exhaustion. You know he is the best shot for us all surviving. If he fails against the undead, we'll all die. Unless you tell me, I won't feed you any longer!

[...]

[Pain. Fear. Loss.]

Kenzie's vision suddenly changed to an enormous chamber. Her eyes were instinctively drawn to a large insignia depicting nine horizontal lines of increasingly short length forming a downward-pointing triangle. One vertical line cut straight through the nine lines, splitting the triangle in two, and the ends of the line were sticking out a bit on each side.

There was not much else to see in the chamber. The walls and floor were a pristine white, and the lack of details made it impossible to guess whether they were ten meters or hundreds of meters away.

The only other exception to the endless white was the machine.

The machine was beyond anything she had seen before, no matter if she talked size or complexity. It was built in concentric circles where it formed an upside-down pyramid with its tip pointing toward her vantage point.

Even the small tip that stopped fifty meters or so above her head was over a hundred meters wide, which made it almost incomprehensible just how large the machine was at the far

thicker base at the top. The chamber itself must be tens, perhaps hundreds of kilometers in diameter, judging by the machine. The construction dwarfed anything she had ever encountered.

Even the Mystic Realm she had spent a lot of time inside recently wasn't as big as this single room, judging by the size of the apparatus.

The tip of the machine was neither flat nor sharp. It rather ended in thousands of spikes aligned toward her. Each one thrummed with enough power to tear a hole in the fabric of space, and her vision swam from focusing on any single one of them.

Each of the spikes felt like a doomsday device, each one of them containing their own unique way to destroy the world. Four of them actually resonated with Kenzie's soul, making her realize the spikes contained the Daos of Tinder, Loam, Waves, and Gust. But if her Dao Seeds were snippets of a fragment of a grand truth, then these spikes contained the real deal.

Was Jeeves trying to appease her by giving her a hint into her Daos?

A flashing light interrupted Kenzie's inspection, and the scene changed to one of utter destruction. The machine was mostly gone, and fragments from the construction scorched almost beyond recognition floated in an empty space illuminated in blue.

Two massive vaulted domes with enormous cracks floated in the distance, each surrounded by a nebula of technological debris. She tried to look closer, but she soon lost sight of the domes as her vision slowly turned away. She realized she was in space as well, slowly rotating from her own momentum.

But the odd sights didn't end, and something even more shocking waited for her as she spun 180 degrees. Endless oceans of lightning covered the darkness of space, creating a spectacle of an impossible scale.

The lightning was too scary, and Kenzie felt it contained the power to destroy everything in the world. And its scope was *massive*. She spotted a whole planet being swallowed inside the lightning like a small pebble in a pond, which meant the lightning at least covered an area as large as a whole solar system.

Kenzie couldn't make sense of what happened, and then the scene was over.

What was that?! Kenzie asked with shock, barely coherent enough to not speak aloud.

The magnitude of what she had witnessed was far beyond anything she had encountered so far. It made her remember the Dao Visions that her brother had recounted for her. Such a thing like the machine or the sea of lightning wasn't something someone from their little planet should come into contact with.

The power in that lightning was terrifying. She had no doubt that if just one wisp of lightning from that ocean grazed Earth, only a scorched husk would remain. There was something primordial about it, like it contained the wrath of the universe itself.

Your origin? Kenzie ventured when Jeeves didn't directly answer.

[Probably.]

But what does that have to do with my brother or why you won't help him?

[I don't know.]

After that exchange, the AI turned taciturn and refused to answer any further questions. But Kenzie was still happy about the result. She had glimpsed what was probably the origin of Jeeves, which was also a clue to finding Mom.

That large insignia was the first clue, and she made sure to memorize it properly. The second clue was that terrifying lake of lightning. Was that the System itself descending on the Technocrats? She knew the two forces were at odds, but she hadn't heard of the System actively going against them. It

seemed to usually work circuitously by giving quests or restricting the Technocrats in various ways.

Kenzie opened her eyes and resumed looking at the passing landscape, since Jeeves wasn't in the mood to talk any longer. These past two days, they had been in constant motion, closing one pillar after another with the help of the drone swarms.

However, the next target was likely their last one. The drones were all spent, and they would require at least a week to convert Cosmic Energy to whatever energy they used to fly about. It was an extremely convenient technology to never require any upkeep, but she wished they just had some batteries they could swap out at this juncture.

It took them two more hours before they reached the pillar by flying at maximum speed. The pillar was the same as all the others, an azure beacon of energy left alone in a desolate area. No Zombies or other guards were stationed around it, giving them free rein to do what they wanted. It was a bit odd, but it felt like the undead truly didn't care if some pillars were destroyed.

It was due to the redundancies, according to Jeeves. Since the undead had managed to activate the array, a pathway had formed in the sky. That pathway was self-sustaining and slowly filled with Miasma by the beacons, and destroying a pillar would only hamper the rate the pathway was filled. It wouldn't stop the array itself. You'd need to destroy the Array Core to do that, and that thing was no doubt in the heart of the Dead Zone.

How such a thing was made was beyond Kenzie even after her intense study of arrays. It was likely a higher-tiered array compared to the basic ones she had learned thus far. An array surviving even after its flags were destroyed was no doubt the result of some high-grade technique that might have been unknown to the small sect where Zac got the information crystals.

Kenzie ordered the swarm of drones to emerge once more and form a circle around the beacon. A high-intensity blast

followed, and the next moment, the pillar was replaced with a smoldering crater. Kenzie nodded in satisfaction and recalled her spent drones, but a dozen of them were suddenly destroyed as a female voice drifted across the area.

“So your ilk is still skulking around on this planet after all. Makes sense you wouldn’t want to give up that base. But you made a mistake when deciding to meddle with the empire’s affairs. You should know that the conquest won’t be stopped for any reason.”

The next moment, terrifying energies were released from the ground as another Miasmatic beacon shot into the sky. In the middle of it, a blurry figure floated in the air, teeming with power.

“She’s too strong,” Ilvere said with a frown as he infused the flying disk with a lot of Cosmic Energy. “I’ll try to block her attacks as we flee. Let the young master and Lord Atwood deal with her when they return.”

“Left!” Kenzie suddenly screamed, prompted by Jeeves, who had awoken again.

But it was too late.

Ilvere unhesitatingly followed her advice, but his reaction wasn’t quick enough. A lance formed of what looked like crude oil slammed straight into the disk from below, cracking the whole flying treasure in two. Horror filled Kenzie’s heart, as they were over a hundred meters in the air.

“Down you go.” The undead woman’s laugh echoed across the area.

Help, Kenzie shrieked in her mind, knowing that she was out of her league.

**[Initiating Battle Protocol, full utilization. Time remaining:
1 minute 36 seconds.]**

WHITTLECREEK

The trio soon enough reached the main gate of the ramshackle wall surrounding the village. It looked like the fortifications had been erected hundreds of years ago, but the townspeople had let it deteriorate. The only sign of recent maintenance was a hole in the wall that had been filled with rocks and logs in a clumsy effort to close the gap.

The gate was open, but an old guard gave them a glare as he blocked the path into the town. Zac didn't sense any threat from him, and he could tell that the guard was around level 40 at best. There was also no aura or pressure emanating from him, telling Zac that the old man was wholly unimpressive and likely without even a Dao Seed. He was most probably a mortal who had gotten to this point by fighting the local animals and splurging on the occasional Nexus Crystal, and the chances of reaching E-grade were next to zero.

“Who are you lot?” he gruffly asked as he looked back and forth at the trio with a clear hint of suspicion. “What do you want with Whittlecreek?”

“We're adventurers who heard of the plight of your fair town,” Ogras said as he righteously slapped his chest. “We have come to investigate the appearance of those dastardly goblins.”

“Oh, did the guild send you?” the guard said, his eyes immediately brightening in anticipation.

“The guild? Ah, yes, the guild did send us.” Ogras nodded after a brief lapse. “I am sure you've been instructed to co-

operate properly?”

“Great! I will inform the mayor! My name is Keldor; just find me if you need help with anything! I wish you the best of luck,” he said as he hurried away toward a large manor at the other side of the town.

Zac gave Ogras an amused glance, not used to his heroic demeanor from before.

“What? Might as well have some fun with it.” Ogras shrugged as they passed through the gate. “Once again, remember the rule. Do not kill innocents inside the tower. There have been many reports of extremely powerful old cultivators jumping out of nowhere when the normal citizens get killed rather than the targets of the trial.”

“I heard you the first time. Besides, do I strike you as a person who would run around killing people willy-nilly?” Zac snorted.

“Well, not really,” Ogras conceded before he threw Zac a scathing glance. “But you also didn’t strike me as the type of person who would obliterate the shop of one of the most influential forces in the star sector, so what do I know?”

Zac was about to refute the demon, but he realized he didn’t have a leg to stand on. Ogras still wasn’t aware of the whole story regarding the splinter, so even he must have felt that the whole thing looked like the actions of a madman.

“Well, I am all better now. I won’t do something like that again.” Zac sighed.

“I’m sure,” the demon snorted before he got serious again. “So what do you want to do? Find the goblins or investigate the source?”

Zac was stumped for a second before he looked around the picturesque town for a bit. It was easy to forget that he was actually undergoing a trial, and that he was inside a mysterious tower in some hidden pocket dimension of outer space.

He hadn’t really considered his tactics before coming. He had just planned on smashing through everything as quickly as possible before going back to Earth. But after having walked

past the beautiful fields and having arrived at this place, he felt the same sense of calm as when he sat in the courtyard gazing up at the stars the other day.

Those moments of tranquility were hard to come by in his current reality. The moment he stepped out of the tower, he would have to enter a series of life-and-death battles to take out the last enemies on Earth. But he was now given a hundred days to slow down and adjust his state of mind for a bit.

He knew he couldn't treat the tower as a vacation, as the higher floors took time to complete, but he also didn't need to rush to the peak. He would be weakened for a while longer due to his wound, so he was in no hurry to rush to the harsher floors.

Besides, he felt that what Galau had said about learning to think made a lot of sense. He had been fighting tooth and nail for a year since the integration, but there were still huge holes in his knowledge. He knew a bit about arrays and how to swing his axe, but nothing else. Completing the trials the intended way was a chance for him to actually widen his skill set.

“Are there any benefits to completing levels quickly?” Zac asked.

“Not really, except that it gives more time for the difficult trials further up,” Galau said with a shake of his head.

“I thought so.” Zac nodded. “Let's try to complete the quests the normal way for now. We can start pushing harder if we notice we're running out of time.”

Galau didn't have any objections, not that he had much of a choice. He could go ahead and kill the Goblin Leader if he wanted to, but if he exited the first level without Zac and Ogras, then they would be separated for the rest of the climb. They would have to physically touch every time they stepped into a portal, or otherwise, their cooperation would end.

“Let's split up,” Ogras said as he started to saunter toward what was obviously a tavern. “Just ask around for any clues you can find.”

“I will assist... in the tavern,” Galau said with a cough.

Zac wryly shook his head in response before he started walking in the other direction. He didn't mind that the two didn't care about the mission, as he wanted to get a feel for how the trials worked for himself anyway. He tried to put himself in the shoes of an actual adventurer who truly had arrived due to the goblin threat.

Provided that they weren't able to eradicate the whole goblin tribe with a swing or two of their axe, how would an adventurer go about solving this matter? Zac started to walk up to one townsman after another, trying to find clues to the situation.

The whole town was full of farmers, and Zac was a bit confused as to why they all stayed in the town rather than tending their fields. But he soon understood that it was due to the goblins, who would stream out of the forest and kill solitary farmers when the opportunity presented itself.

They only went out in large groups now to tend the fields once every week, and they had to let the crops fend for themselves most of the time now. A lot of people worriedly talked about weeds and parasites ruining their crop, or that they wouldn't be able to pay this year's tax to the local Lord.

Zac was shocked by the reality of it all, and he could understand that there was no consensus on whether these people were real or not. He even tested mentioning the Tower of Eternity and the System, but they truly simply ignored those things like he'd said nothing at all.

Ogras was proven right, as it was no secret where the goblin tribe stayed. They had taken up in an abandoned mine some ways into the forest. The villagers had tried to root them out with the help of their strongest warrior, the mayor. The campaign had ended in an embarrassing defeat, resulting in the mayor still being on bed rest to recuperate.

But no matter whom he asked, he couldn't find a hint of why the goblins suddenly had arrived. The villagers all assumed that it was simply bad luck, or that the goblins perhaps had been pushed out of their old domain by a rival

tribe. They didn't look too deeply into the matter, and most of them seemed to take it as a general inconvenience that would soon enough be sorted by the Lord and the guild.

Zac sighed in exasperation after having walked around for thirty minutes questioning the townspeople. The base of the Fallen Goblins was easy enough to find, but he was not one step closer to completing the actual mission. Was he unsuited for this type of work, or was he simply asking the wrong questions?

A sudden movement in the periphery of his vision caught his attention, and he flashed over to see what was going on. He had noticed this type of movement multiple times already, but he had ignored it since his danger sense didn't warn him at all.

Sharp pain in his side immediately made him regret using **[Loamwalker]** to move around, and he grimaced, as it felt like getting stabbed. His scrunched-up face also had the additional effect of scaring the daylights out of two small children who had been spying on him from behind a large bale of hay.

The young boy, who looked no older than five, immediately jumped into the bale in an effort to escape, while the even younger girl stood rooted in place like a deer in headlights.

"I'm not someone dangerous. I am from the guild," Zac said as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I'm here to help your parents."

He felt a bit weird lying to children about who he was, but at least it seemed to have the desired effect, as the girl visibly calmed down.

"Mister, are you here to beat up the goblins?" the girl curiously said as she looked up at Zac with big eyes.

"I am." Zac smiled as he tried to remember how to talk to children. "But I am also trying to figure out why they came here in the first place. I don't want any more of them coming here after I've left."

"It's the ghosts!" the girl said with certainty in her eyes. "The grown-ups don't believe me, but I saw it!"

“Jinny, shh!” the subdued voice of the young boy emerged from within the hay. “We’ll get in trouble again.”

“What ghosts?” Zac asked with piqued interest.

He didn’t know what connection some ghosts had with goblins, but this was the first hint of something out of the ordinary since he’d arrived here.

“Me and Bulb were visiting the tower, and we saw a ghost! Then the goblins came not long after,” the girl exclaimed.

“Jinny...” The entreating voice emerged again as a snott-nosed face popped out of the haystack.

“We are not allowed to go into the forest, but we snuck out when the grown-ups were busy,” Jinny said with a low voice. “We saw the old-man ghost in the tower! He looked like a bad man.”

Zac started to understand what was going on after a round of questioning. These two kids had gone exploring in the forest while their parents were out tending the fields roughly two weeks before the goblins first appeared. They had happened upon a large tower, and they saw what they believed was a ghost walking around its base.

The sight had scared the wits out of the children, and they had immediately run back to town to inform the villagers. Eventually, the mayor and a few of the townspeople went over to scour the area, but they came up with nothing. The parents thought they were lying and simply punished the two for going into the dangerous forest alone.

“Thank you for the information.” Zac smiled. “I will make sure the ghost doesn’t cause any trouble.”

The kids enthusiastically nodded before they skittered away, and Zac walked over to one of the villagers to ask about the tower.

It turned out that the tower had once been a part of the defensive line of the Bravorian Kingdom, but the country had expanded its borders three hundred years ago. The war had transformed Whittlecreek from a border town to a safe village in the heartlands. The guard tower had been abandoned soon

enough, and it had stood in the mountains untouched for centuries without causing any trouble.

Zac couldn't be sure, but it certainly sounded like the clue for a simple mystery fitting for the first level of the Tower of Eternity. Armed with this knowledge, he turned to the saloon, where he found Ogras chatting up a cute farmer's daughter working double as a waitress. Galau wasn't as talkative, and he rather seemed determined to drink himself into oblivion.

A full barrel of some locally brewed liquor was placed next to him, and Zac saw that it was half-emptied already.

"How does buying things work here?" Zac asked curiously as he sat down opposite them with a groan.

"Nexus Coins," Ogras said with a grin. "But you will usually not be able to bring anything outside."

"Usually?" Zac asked with piqued interest, almost forgetting why he came here.

"It's a gamble," Galau said with slurred speech. "It's a small chance anything you find is real."

QUESTING

Zac slowly nodded. It was messing with his head a bit, not knowing whether everything around him was real or not. From what he had heard so far, it was both and neither. He also briefly wondered if his high Luck stat would skew the ratio of real to fake items in his favor. Perhaps he would walk out of here an extremely rich man.

Or perhaps the System would decide Zac hadn't suffered enough, and turn all his items illusory.

"Things here also have their own pricing. Sometimes a precious item might only cost a tenth of what it costs outside. You can take a gamble and buy it, and you might make a fortune when you exit," Ogras added.

"Is there any way to discern what's real and what's fake?" Zac asked with interest.

"Nope, not that I know of at least," Ogras said with a shrug. "Perhaps some factions know of a method, but why would they share such a thing with the masses? Oh, the rewards from completing a floor are always real as well."

"Eat it," Galau burped from the side, drawing a confused look from Zac.

"If you find something useful, it's best to use it immediately if you can. Everything is real while you're still inside the tower. The Ruthless Heavens will not reach into your belly to pull the item out," the demon said.

Zac nodded in understanding as he ordered a huge dinner. He wasn't in a rush to head to the tower since Ogras was

happy idling about, and Galau seemed intent on finding the bottom of the barrel. There was still some time remaining on his weakened state brought on by [**Hatchetman's Rage**] anyhow, and the nasty wound in his side still pained him.

“I think I found the clue, by the way,” Zac said as he gorged himself on a huge flank steak.

“Oh?” Ogras said, clearly disinterested.

Zac sighed at the lackluster response, but he still carried on and explained the situation with the tower.

“Sounds like that’s it.” Ogras nodded after hearing the description. “We can head there after finishing things on this end.”

That was fine with Zac, as having walked around the town had caused his wounds to flare up again. Taking it easy while he recuperated was just what he needed. The three only set out two hours later, at which point Ogras was forced to carry Galau, who had drunk himself into oblivion.

As expected of the first level, they didn’t encounter any trouble finding their target. It was the only building on the desolate mountain, and it rose almost a hundred meters into the air. Along with the guidance of Zac’s Automatic Map, they found the place in no time.

The demon threw the still-sleeping Galau on the ground and showered him with water from one of his canteens, making him wake up with a sputter. The scene made the demon snicker before he started to scout the area.

“There’s no one here,” Ogras said as he looked around. “That wizard guy you mentioned is probably long gone.”

Zac nodded, and the three walked inside the dilapidated tower. Nothing seemed to be out of place. In fact, the place was pretty much picked clean, and the only residents seemed to have been a bear and a bunch of birds, judging by the droppings everywhere.

The base floor contained a couple of side rooms holding nothing, and the only path led upward. Zac immediately

headed for the stairs, but he only got a few meters before he was stopped.

“Wait.” Galau spoke up and pointed at a dark corner. “There’s an array hiding a set of stairs leading downward.”

“How do you know?” Zac asked curiously.

He liked to believe that he had some attainments in spotting arrays after his time trapped during the hunt, but he hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary at all. That a depressed and still half-drunk merchant managed to find something he missed was a bit humbling.

“I have a pretty decent inspection skill,” Galau conceded. “I mainly got it to help me discern whether items I wanted to buy were fake, but it sometimes comes in handy in other situations.”

Zac nodded in understanding, and the three walked down, their descent spearheaded by Ogras. The demon would have to do most of the heavy lifting while Zac was on the mend, but it shouldn’t matter on the beginner floors.

The area at the foot of the stairs was in a lot better state than the levels upstairs, which had pretty much been reclaimed by nature at this point. The dust was swept away, and it looked like someone had lived here recently. There were both bedding and a table with some scribbled notes, but Zac couldn’t read it.

No one was there, though, meaning the wizard or whomever the children had seen had likely left some time ago. The three only needed to look around for a minute before Ogras found a hidden passage, and they proceeded even further down to find a hidden chamber that was directly cut into the mountain foundation.

There was only one item in the room, a golden crown lying on a pedestal. The crown seemed to be a bit small for a human’s head, but what was most concerning about it was that a black mist that formed hazy fractals slowly swiveled around it. It might be a Spirit Tool, or the fractals might be a defensive array inscribed into the pedestal.

“It seems to be a cursed object,” Galau said with a frown as he looked at the crown. “We might be abl—”

However, he didn’t get any further as a cannonball slammed into the crown with enough force to almost tear a crack in space. It was Zac, who scouted out the thing in his customary manner. A loud snap could be heard before a distant wail entered their ears.

A sinister aura spread across the room, but it was quickly crushed when Zac unleashed his Dao Field from his Seed of Trees. The sinister atmosphere only lasted for a second before the basement returned to its original state.

The metal ball had completely crushed the treasure and the pedestal it lay on. The fractals were forcibly broken as well. Galau looked at the scene of destruction mutely before he slowly turned to Zac with an incredulous expression. The demon sighed from the side, but he didn’t comment.

“I... I was about to say that we might be able to cleanse the item, allowing us to take it with us. If it turned out it was a real treasure, we might have been able to make some money...” Galau said with a wry smile.

Zac coughed with some embarrassment, feeling he had committed a rookie mistake. He’d even opened up his wounds in his eagerness to help out, which made him feel doubly stupid.

“Well, it’s just some random trinket at the first level.” Ogras shrugged. “Even if it turned out to be real, it would be worth a pittance at best.”

Zac nodded in agreement before looking around in curiosity.

“What now? Do we need to kill the goblins as well?” Zac asked.

Ogras was about to speak when a hidden door suddenly slid open in the wall opposite them, showcasing a lit hall inside. The three immediately walked inside and found a platform that looked just like the entrance to the tower itself.

“Is that it?” Zac asked, and he couldn’t help but feel some disappointment at the lack of excitement.

“The first floor is essentially a tutorial floor.” Ogras smiled. “Anyone who has gained the requirements to receive a token should have no trouble completing it. Almost half of all climbers finish the second floor as well.”

“Then why the carries if it is so easy?” Zac asked.

“The problem comes from the third floor,” Galau explained. “The final level is especially tough for the average elite. Many are willing to buy the carry just for that trial alone. A few might have been able to complete it themselves if they went all out, but they would rather pay a few billion to guarantee a reward and the better title.”

Zac nodded in understanding, and the three stepped up on the platform, and it immediately started to hum into life. He looked back toward the stairs they came from, and it was a bit unsettling knowing that the whole world he had just visited might just cease to exist since it had fulfilled its purpose.

The next moment, he found himself sitting by a table in a rowdy tavern, with Ogras and Galau joining him. The other customers were almost all some sort of beastkin, resembling panthers a bit with their golden eyes and black fur. The occasional humans and elf-like humanoids could be seen as well, meaning the place they found themselves in wasn’t completely homogenous.

Most of the beastkin seemed like warriors rather than the farmers in the last floor, and pretty much everyone was decked in armor and some manner of weaponry. A few of them almost looked like a walking arsenal, as they were covered in daggers, swords, and anything sharp they could carry.

Even though they looked pretty ferocious, Zac still sensed they weren’t too strong, perhaps around level 50 or so at best. He would personally place them at the same strength as the Valkyries. Zac guessed they actually wouldn’t meet any Peak F-grade warriors until they reached the final level of the first floor after having seen the average strength of the first two levels.

[The Kingdom of Eyrvar has launched a quest to clear out the Fungal Depths of Lake Varia. Claim the riches in the depths before the mercenaries or the Royal Army.]

“Lucky,” Ogras said with a whistle. “A treasure quest.”

“How’s that lucky?” Zac asked with confusion. “Aren’t most of the treasures fake anyway?”

“Well, yes. But if you snatch a whole hoard of items, then chances are that at least one or two of them is real,” the demon explained.

“It seems we’re not the only ones after the treasures, though,” Galau whispered as he listened in on the conversations at the neighboring tables.

“Excuse me,” Ogras said as he walked over to the next table over with a large cask of the local liquor he’d bought from a waiter. “We just arrived to the area and heard about the quest. Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Sit down, lad,” the mercenary said, his eyes peeled on the jug of liquor.

“Why did the kingdom suddenly give such an order?” Ogras said, feigning interest.

“The depths are crawling with those goddamn monstrous crustaceans. They would rather waste our lives than their own in clearing it out,” one of the men said with a snort. “Rumors are there is an evolved alpha leading the swarm.”

“Crustaceans? Like big lobsters?” Ogras asked with confusion.

“More like crabs,” the mercenary explained. “Nasty pincers and sharp legs. Pretty smart too.”

“So why are there so many taking up the quest if it’s so dangerous?” the demon probed.

“The pearls,” another man said after taking a huge swig. “It’s no secret in this area, so I might as well tell you. Some clams produce magical pearls in the lakes at the bottom of the caverns. Those pearls can be used to prolong your lifespan.

Each pearl is worth a pretty penny, and you can keep what you find, according to the kingdom.”

“I see, thank you. We will have to think about if we’re ready for something like before heading down.” Ogras nodded with faux hesitation as he turned toward Zac’s table. “Oh, by the way, when will people start the mission?”

“Tomorrow.” A beastman burped. “That’s why we’re getting drunk today.”

“Let’s go,” Ogras said with a loud voice to Zac and Galau. “We are behind these people. We need to gather provisions and weaponry if we want to join tomorrow.”

His words elicited a couple of guffaws from the beastkin, who kept drinking contentedly. Zac and Ogras followed the demon out of the tavern, and they found themselves in the docks of an alien port city. A few enormous ships were anchored a few hundred meters out to sea, and dozens of smaller vessels could be seen sailing back and forth.

A constant bustle was taking place with people coming ashore or embarking, even though it was the dead of night. Zac whistled with appreciation as he looked around. Was this what Port Atwood would look like when it advanced? He had been afraid that the use of naval ships would decrease as people became stronger, but perhaps that wasn’t necessarily the case.

“What gear would we need for something like this?” Zac asked with some confusion as he turned to Ogras. “Doesn’t sound too complicated.”

“Of course we don’t need to gather gear from some shabby store here,” Ogras snorted. “I just wanted to head out immediately without arousing suspicion. Do you want to let those animals get their paws on our pearls?”

“It could be some basic specimens of **[Longevity Clams]** they were talking about,” Galau added thoughtfully. “Their pearls can be used in concocting pills that improve longevity just like he said. Each pearl is worth millions on the outside. Tens of millions if their quality is good enough. We’ll make a

great profit if even a handful of the pearls are real. We're pretty lucky to get a scenario like this."

"Lucky, yeah..." Ogras said as he shot Zac a pointed look.

REMUNERATION

Zac understood what the demon was inferring. Was his uncommonly high Luck attribute finally starting to bring him some fortuitous encounters? So far, his Luck had mainly been helping him stay alive from ambushes, but he had long known that the attribute could also increase the chance of lucky encounters.

His Luck had increased from 149 to 182 after gaining his two Fragments, which wasn't a small boost. It meant that he also had passed the old attribute limit of the F-grade, 175 points. Perhaps that came with some new boosts as well? Zac couldn't tell, and there seemed to be no one who knew how it worked in his surroundings either. Even Alyn only had a hazy knowledge of the subject, and his attempts at getting information packets on the subject had failed. So Zac could only speculate apart from the fundamental knowledge that higher numbers were better.

It didn't take a lot of effort for the trio to learn of the location of the so-called Fungal Hollow. It was a region a few hours north of the town where a river caused a large section of brackish water. A mid-sized mountain rose out of the ocean in the middle of the delta, and that mountain contained the Fungal Hollow.

The group wasted no time as they pushed north, using the moonlight for sight as they ran along the coast. They passed a few fishermen's villages immediately after exiting the town, but soon enough, the coastline turned completely desolate. It was probably due to people not daring to be neighbors with

aggressive crab beasts who could emerge from the depths at moment's notice.

The moon and its luster reflecting on the ocean waves were the only sources of light until they finally saw a few large braziers burning in the distance. The flames came from the fortress that the kingdom had built to keep a watch on the river inlet and to both counter the crustaceans and to stop any enterprising pirates from sailing inland.

The moment they saw the flames, Zac knew they were close, but they didn't continue to the settlement ahead. Zac instead took out one of his Creator Vessels from his Cosmos Sack, and they immediately set sail. Galau seemed to be a bit confused by the ship, as the Creators had actually put the insignias of the Allbright Empire on them to mask their true origin. But he didn't bring it up, and Zac didn't bother to come up with some excuse.

Zac hadn't expected to use the boat for its intended purpose, but he had rather been inspired by Alea's tactics. The Creator ships had blown up half a town with the help of their offensive arrays in the battle with the undead, making them a great offensive tool. Their hulls were also extremely sturdy to survive the beasts of the sea, making them good shelter in a bind.

But now it came in handy, as it allowed them to reach the mountain reaching up through the muddy water without giving away their actions to the royal army. Infiltrating the mountain didn't prove much trouble either, and they smoothly proceeded further and further down into the depths of the mountain, hidden by Ogras' shadows.

The interior of the mountain reminded Zac a bit of a miniature version of the underworld, as there was a mix of tunnels and caves large enough to house small villages. But instead of Molemen, the caves were half-submerged in water and crawling with crabs that were up to three meters tall. But Zac could see that the beasts were even weaker compared to the mercenaries, though there were far more crabs than beastmen. Only a couple of swings of **[Verun's Bite]** would be needed to decimate a whole cave.

But they didn't want to start a battle because that might alert scouts hiding on the mountain, so Ogras led them through a confusing maze of tunnels in their descent. Now and then, they were unable to proceed without walking perilously close to the crabs, but with the help of Ogras and their array disks, they could slip past without raising any alarms.

It only took them half an hour to reach the bottom, which was an enormous cave that seemed to lead out to the ocean. There was a shallow and crystal-clear lake covering most of the area, and the three immediately spotted their target. Quite a few crabs were walking about, and they noticed that the largest crabs were actually eating the clams, shell and all.

Perhaps the clams and their precious pearls could help the crabs evolve or at least level up?

But the so-called crab king was nowhere to be seen, and Ogras soundlessly killed the few dozen crabs in the cave before they sealed the exits with soundproofing arrays. After that, they had free rein to loot pearls to their heart's content.

Even Galau seemed to finally get over his despondency due to his life plan going awry as he cracked open one clam after another to look for pearls. There was an almost manic gleam in his eyes as he arduously forced open the shells, and it made Zac think of Calrin. He had to admit the squirrely young man had the right temperament for a merchant.

Unfortunately for Galau, he traveled with two people far stronger than him. He had the will but not the power to loot the treasures in front of him. It took him almost twenty seconds to force open one of the sturdy clams, but Zac simply crushed them with a twist to extract the pearl within.

Ogras wasn't as strong, but he managed to poke holes in the shells with pinpoint accuracy, allowing him to take out the pearls without even forcing open the shells. In the end, it was Zac who came out a winner, claiming almost half of the pearls, with Galau barely getting a fifth of them.

The moment the last pearl was extracted, a prompt sounded out and a teleportation array appeared by a bank of the subterranean lake. Seeing how easily they completed the

level, Zac better understood that things weren't quite equal for everyone who entered. Getting a suitable floor quest could both make and break someone's climb. If it were Zac climbing alone, the second level would have played out pretty differently.

He would no doubt have been spotted soon after entering the mountain, and then he would have been forced to fight his way down to the treasures in the depths. Perhaps even the kingdom on the other shore would be alerted, turning the situation extremely chaotic.

Considering they were still only on the first floor, Zac would no doubt have been able to blast through all resistance without breaking a sweat, but it might play out differently on the later floors. He could only pray that his high Luck would overpower the animosity the System seemed to have toward him, giving them suitable challenges at the end of their climb.

The following levels went quite smoothly where they completed one quest after another without encountering any real trouble. They didn't rush at all, but it still only took them three days to reach the 9th level. Galau's mood had gotten noticeably better as time went, and by this time, he had mostly recovered from the shock.

He even seemed to be a bit excited about the prospect of having befriended a future powerhouse, often reminding Zac to come to him in case he wanted to sell loot from Mystic Realms or the like in the future.

The 9th level placed them at the foot of a mountain, and the quest was to defeat the Bandit Lord who had made the peak his home. It was the first time the quest directly told them to do battle. The other eight quests had been possible to complete with only minimal battle, with the option of finding the floor guardian to kill instead.

In fact, they had barely fought at all during the first eight levels. Only a few unlucky sentries had been taken out so that they could complete the quest the intended way.

Climbing the first floor had given Zac a good grasp of how things worked, and he realized that it was always better to

complete the quest than kill the floor guardian. Following the quest almost always taught a valuable lesson or led to some sort of treasure, whereas killing the guardian would make you miss that opportunity.

The treasures might turn out to be fake in the end, but the gained knowledge was real, and Zac vowed to only kill his way out of a level if he really couldn't figure out the quest.

"I can take charge of this one," Galau suddenly said as they ascended the mountain, showing unusual proactivity.

"What's going on? Have you accidentally eaten some stimulants?" Ogras said as he shot the merchant a suspicious stare. "What if you faint again and get yourself killed?"

Galau deflated a bit, but he mustered his courage as he stuck out his chest.

"You have done most of the work, so I should contribute a bit as well," Galau said.

Zac smiled a bit, somewhat understanding Galau's thoughts. He was no doubt a bit cowardly, but he did have a good heart. He wanted to help out and prove his worth during the climb, but he knew that they soon enough would encounter challenges that might prove too dangerous. So he wanted to knock out a few floor guardians early to shore up his contribution.

"That's nice of you, but that's okay." Zac smiled. "Days have passed without me fighting, and I could use the exercise. I get a bit antsy if I don't fight for too long."

"Unless you want to see him rampage again due to lack of bloodshed? You missed most of it last time," Ogras snorted. "It's quite spectacular."

Galau paled as he looked at Zac like he was a dangerous animal before he restrained himself.

"Well, I will simply stay back and support, then. It is good to exercise a bit as you're recuperating. But remember, moderation is important." Galau coughed.

Ogras only rolled his eyes as they continued up the mountain.

“But that brings us to another topic,” Galau said, looking a bit uncomfortable.

“What’s that?” Zac asked as he looked around for hidden traps.

“Our original agreement was for you to help me reach the thirtieth floor so that I could convince my elders to let me start a business. But now that your extraordinary might has been put on open display, that has ruined any chance of that happening. In other words, shouldn’t we revisit the issue of... remuneration,” Galau said, his voice getting lower and lower as he saw Zac and Ogras stop and direct emotionless stares at him.

“I agree,” Ogras eventually said, getting a surprised glance from Zac. “The price you quoted was for a carry by two unknown cultivators. But now you are hiring one of the most famous youths in the sector. How can 3 billion be enough?”

“Wh—” Galau stammered. “I-I just realized it would be bad form to change the terms mid-climb. I apologize for bringing the matter up.”

“If you say so,” Ogras snorted.

The three reached the peak soon enough and found a weathered fort taking up a large part of it. There was only one way to enter unless you climbed up the sheer wall, but that would no doubt leave you exposed to bandits staying in the base.

“You guys stay here,” Zac said as he openly walked toward the closed gate.

What he’d said earlier was partly true; there were a few things he needed to confirm. First of all, he was simply curious about the power of a floor guardian. He wanted to personally fight all of them so that he would be able to give helpful pointers to the people of Port Atwood. As far as he knew, he was the only one who had a token so far, but as people started

to reach level 50, more would no doubt get the chance to come here.

And even if no one from Port Atwood got a token, there were still Thea and Billy, both of whom should qualify for this place, as far as Zac was concerned.

But the part about needing to fight to avoid losing control was a lie. The splinter in his mind had been completely silent since his outburst in the pill house, and it didn't even release a smidgeon of the odd energy that usually seeped into his mind.

He was rather worried about something having happened to his skill after having seen the black trees surrounding him as he woke up from his stupor in the rubble of the pill house. Zac had his guesses about what was going on, but he needed to confirm them.

Energy surged around him as he walked forward, and a red array sprang up around the fortress, signaling that he had been spotted. That was just fine with Zac, and he released **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. The scenery of the mountaintop started to drastically change as one tree after another started to grow.

The trees quickly rose to over fifty meters in height, and some even started to grow from the wall of the fortress, making it seem that the place had been deserted for hundreds of years. The trees themselves were of a traditional leafy variant with green leaves and brown trunks with bark.

There was one exception, though, a singular stout tree that appeared just behind Zac. Its trunk was still light brown, but its leaves shone with a golden luster. Around the tree, four white ropes were tied, each of them full of intricate knots. Hanging from the ropes were some unknown talismans, but Zac couldn't recognize the script on them.

It looked like something that fit in an old temple, and it did emit a dense aura of life. Zac's cells swelled to life as he felt one with nature. It was like he was strolling through his own garden rather than toward some bandit's lair. Zac looked around and sighed in relief.

It looked like the splinter hadn't corrupted his skill fractals after all.

FLOOR GUARDIAN

The bandits quickly understood that the trees sprouting up everywhere were bad news, and various attacks soared out to destroy them. But the projectiles harmlessly shot straight through, hitting the mountain or sailing far out into the air.

It had taken Zac a while to understand the skill as well, but he eventually figured it out. The trees were mostly projections, a way for his spirit to change the surroundings to suit him better. It created an effect similar to a Dao Field, where he was at his optimal state while his interlopers were somewhat weakened.

The only “real” tree was the tree behind him that provided a direct buff to his Strength and Vitality, providing 10% each without any downsides like [**Hatchetman’s Rage**]. Zac also guessed that the skill counted as being inside a forest, which renewed the boost he got from [**Forester’s Constitution**].

Attacking that tree would work, and cutting it down would cancel the skill. But the tree wasn’t just helpless. Each rope on the tree represented one defensive charge that could be used to protect itself or Zac, allowing it to stand long enough for Zac to come and protect it if needed.

The skill even worked as a detection skill, as the trees essentially were his eyes and ears. Anything within his forest was within his purview, and it would take a pretty good stealth skill to move about unnoticed.

All in all, it provided a little bit of everything, helping Zac round out his Hatchetman class. It wasn’t as flashy as Ogras’

equivalent, where he turned into a shadowy angel with his five-meter wings, but it was a skill that he could always use to gain an edge during battle. Zac also guessed it would be useful in the battle against the undead, as the golden tree emitted an intense amount of life, which might counteract the Miasma.

Its functions did overlap a bit with the general skills [**Mental Fortress**] and [**Nature's Barrier**] he had bought for himself, but no one would say no to having multiple layers of defense.

When the bandits noticed that their attacks didn't have any effect, they instead focused their attacks on Zac, but it was extremely hard for them to hit him. He was in his own forest now, and being one with the surroundings pushed the efficiency of [**Loamwalker**] to new heights, making him seem like a forest spirit that flitted back and forth amongst the illusory trees.

He reached the gate without getting hit once, and one swing of his axe cracked the shield and gained him entry.

“Another bounty hunter?” a gruff voice sounded the moment he entered the fortress. “But my head is not so easily claimed.”

Zac immediately sensed some danger and jumped forward, but he was still caught inside a massive explosion. The bandit had used an offensive array like a mine. A snap could be heard from behind as one of the ropes fell from the tree, and a green wind rose simultaneously to protect Zac from the flames.

Zac was a bit surprised a floor guardian would fight dirty like that, but he soon found his bearings as he spotted his target. It was a humanoid who stood almost three meters tall, and the humanoid most closely resembled an ogre, though his skin was dark gray.

There was no hair on his head, and there were four large tusks in his mouth that created a bestial image for the bandit. He was a mix of fat and muscular, with a big belly but arms thick enough to look like trees.

Zac actually felt that [**Verun's Bite**] might be more suited for a being like this, or better yet, Billy's massive club. But the guardian was unarmed, perhaps only relying on his massive and meaty fists. He wore thick bracers to protect his forearms, though, and a couple of knives almost as large as swords could be seen dangling from his belt.

He was also accompanied by a dozen or so bandits who all were of the same race, though they were almost a meter shorter than their boss. The Bandit Lord tried to slap one of the trees with his massive palm in annoyance and growled when it passed straight through.

"I don't know why you play with these dumb illusions. It won't save you," he said before he stomped the ground, seemingly in frustration.

The area rumbled for a second before a dozen spikes shot up at Zac. Each of the spikes was imbued with some sort of Dao, though only an early seed, and Zac was taken a bit by surprise once again. He had thought that the ogre would be a similar class as himself, going by his attire, but it looked like he was rather some sort of geomancer.

A large fractal blade grew out in front of the edge of [**Verun's Bite**], and it soon detached as Zac instructed it to hunt down the bandits while he focused on the big boss. The illusory trees even moved about, forming what looked like an arena that enclosed the two of them.

It was nothing like the cage of his other class, and the bandits could simply walk straight through the enclosure if they wanted to. But it still had its uses. Zac had noted that a higher concentration of trees around him increased his control over the area, making him sense the tiniest fluctuations of Daos or Cosmic Energy. Perhaps getting boxed in like that also negatively impacted the mental states of his enemies, making them feel trapped.

But the bandit didn't seem bothered by getting "trapped" inside the ring of trees at all, and his beady eyes glared straight at Zac as he summoned a large boulder to chuck at him. It was

infused with the same Dao as before, but Zac simply turned the boulder to gravel with a punch.

The floor guardian of the first floor might be the first Peak F-grade warrior he had encountered since entering the tower, but the ogre was far from being a match to someone like himself. Zac only decided to battle because he wanted to take a look at his skill once more, and now that he could confirm **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** worked as usual again, he saw no need to prolong the fight.

One step brought him in front of the Ogre, but the huge bandit was prepared. A chain of explosions erupted, swallowing the two in an inferno. Zac had multiple ways to defend against such a surprise attack, but since he had his new skill up and running, he might as well use it.

Another snap from behind allowed him to be enclosed in nature's embrace once more, and after a brief hesitation, he also imbued his body with the Fragment of the Coffin to make sure he avoided his wound opening up again. The flames raged all around him for over ten seconds, making Zac look around in confusion.

Had the Bandit Lord decided to blow himself up?

But the flames eventually abated, and Zac could once again see the ogre in front of him. He was covered in a layer of rock, and Zac had seen the earth mages among the demons perform the same trick. The Ogre had found an interesting fighting method that took advantage of the high durability of a geomancer, but how could his Endurance match up to a monster like Zac? He would need a far larger bomb to break through his defenses.

"How are you ali-?" the bandit roared, but he didn't get any further as space split from a swing of Zac's axe.

The body of the Bandit Lord fell apart into two neatly separated pieces, and a small surge of Cosmic Energy entered his body before it dissipated once more. The underlings had already been decimated by his Fractal Blade, and it returned to hover around him once more.

Zac released **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, and his two companions joined him in short order. Neither of them looked too surprised that the battle took less than a minute, and they stepped into the teleportation array that had appeared in the courtyard of the fortress.

But this time, Zac wasn't transported to a new world to explore, but he rather found himself in the black space that might as well be the System's waiting room. As expected, a prompt appeared soon after.

[First Floor Complete. Rewarding Title.]

[Choose Reward: Weapon, Skill Crystal, Nexus Coins]

Zac looked over the three options and chose Skill Crystal after just a second of deliberation. It was just the first floor, so none of the options were likely to be anything amazing. A Skill Crystal might benefit someone back home, though, or it could at least be put in the Merit Exchange.

The darkness disappeared, and Zac found himself on the deck of a boat sailing on a turquoise ocean. Apelike humanoids scurried around all over the ship, and all of them wore the same type of livery, indicating they came from the same force.

A crystal had appeared in his hand, and he infused some of his energy into it to see if it was something he could use immediately.

[Frozen Enclosure – Create a sphere of ice that surrounds you. The strength of the shield increases with Intelligence.]

Zac sighed and put the crystal away. He had no affinity with ice, like all other elements, and it was obviously a mage's skill. It would probably have a terrible efficiency if he learned it, so he didn't bother. His sister might find it useful, though, as she was an Elementalist. There were only so many skills a class gave, and this might be a nice addition.

Galau appeared a second later, and Ogras came last after half a minute. Neither of them had very excited expressions, meaning they hadn't made any huge hauls either.

“Didn’t think that you would immediately get the title,” Zac commented as he opened his Title screen.

The new title had appeared, and just as expected, it was a Permanent Title rather than a Limited one.

[Tower of Eternity – 1st Floor. Strength +5, Endurance +5, Vitality +5]

“I think it’s to lessen the need for a second run,” Galau said. “It’s still worth it to come back here if you make large improvements, or if you were unlucky during the first climb. But the things you gain inside the tower generally won’t warrant another tower run since you cannot get treasures for completing the same floor twice.”

“I got five points in three attributes; is it the same three attributes for everyone?” Zac asked.

“No,” Galau said with a shake of his head. “It boosts the three attributes you focus the most on.”

It made sense. Zac would have preferred some Dexterity or Wisdom to shore up his weaknesses, but he knew that the third floor at least provided all attributes. And the fact that he got the title immediately worked in his favor. There was no way he would be able to return to this place, and getting the titles directly meant that he would have an even better chance of reaching a higher floor.

“What did you think about the boss?” Ogras smiled.

“The weakest a Peak F-grade warrior could possibly be,” Zac said. “I can’t believe anyone who arrives here wouldn’t be able to defeat him.”

“Failing is exceedingly rare, but now and then, someone messes up horribly or underestimates the challenge,” Galau said. “But failing on the first floor is generally pretty shameful. Not something you’d share with others.”

“Things will quickly get harder, though,” Ogras warned. “Of course, it won’t be too bad while we’re still on the second floor. But don’t get lax.”

Zac nodded as he closed his eyes to rest. Even if a couple of days had passed, he still felt some lingering pangs from the wound in his side, though he could use most of his strength if the situation called for it. If it weren't for the pill he'd gotten from the Zethaya, he would no doubt still be bedridden, and that fact alone made Zac mostly forgive Boje's actions.

The ship soon anchored outside a solitary island, and the three found out the quest was to look for clues to a hidden inheritance of an "Ascendant," which they discovered was what these apemen called a D-grade powerhouse after some probing.

"Can we take the inheritance for ourselves?" Zac asked, feeling they had hit the jackpot.

"Quit dreaming," Ogras snorted.

"Some quests task you with finding clues to extremely valuable items, such as divine treasures or long-lost inheritances like this one. But those are almost always fake. It is a huge gamble to try to snatch such a thing," Galau started to explain.

"First of all, the inheritance is likely not on this island. We would have to set sail with these apemen for weeks rather than continuing on to the next floors," Ogras continued. "And when we finally arrive, we'll most likely just find another teleporter to the next level."

"But it is possible for it to be real?" Zac asked.

"There have been some reports of such things turning out to be true, but the odds are extremely low, even worse than with treasures. It's only really worth trying for such a thing if you find yourself stuck, unable to climb any further," Galau answered.

"That's one of the reasons why people keep pushing themselves to climb even if they know they won't beat the floor guardian they're at. Their title won't improve from climbing another few levels, but they might find an opportunity like this," the demon added.

PENALTIES

The trio soon joined the monkeys in scouring the island, and with the help of Galau's superior investigative skill, they found an odd fluctuation beneath a lake. They could have explored it themselves and risked falling out with the simian sailors, but they instead called for the captain, who awarded them each with a small sack of E-grade Nexus Crystals as thanks.

Most of the crystals would most likely turn to dust the moment they exited the tower, but they would work just fine while they were still inside. So all of them happily took the reward, as it meant they would save on their own stock.

The following floors went quite smoothly as well, as the difficulty could be easily managed by anyone of them. Zac did, however, note that the setting of the quests started to subtly change. The quests on the first floor had all taken place in civilized areas such as towns or established countries, with the exception of the floor guardian hiding on a mountaintop.

But that changed with the second floor. The surroundings they found themselves in were more wild and untamed. The first level of the second floor took place on the tropical island, and the seventh was on an island as well. The third level took place in a fallen kingdom where order was rapidly crumbling.

They were tasked with escorting one of the surviving children of a once-great noble house to an ally waiting outside the town, and were ambushed by both rebels and random bandits who saw how richly decked the lordling was. But a blast of Zac's massive and blood-drenched aura was all it took

to force them all to run for the hills, allowing them to complete the quest without lifting a finger.

Zac felt he'd learned a lot from their quests, and he more and more understood the crazy gambit of the Lotus Emperor. He had split himself into 10,000 incarnations to live a multitude of lives. If this method ever came to fruition and he could fuse his incarnations back into one being, just how deep would his knowledge of the universe become?

The final level of the second floor was a simple quest to save a faltering town bordering a massive forest from a dangerous beast in the area. After asking around, they learned it was some sort of recently evolved reptile and that it possessed shocking speed.

"It's usually like this," Ogras explained. "The final level of a floor almost always requires a proof of strength to conquer. You can't just luck into a quest that suits your skill set. Strength is ultimately the true language of the Multiverse."

"The 9th level of a floor requires you to defeat a floor guardian 95% of the time, with the final 5% requiring proof of Strength in other ways." Galau nodded in agreement. "And be careful, the strength will sharply rise compared to the things you've fought so far."

"It's only the second floor, though," Zac said, but he still took out his axe just in case.

"That's true, but the attributes of the beasts are around 40% higher because there's three of us," Galau said.

"That much?" Zac said with surprise. "What would happen if I brought ten people to carry?"

"Nine is the limit, and the floors would be almost three times as hard," Galau said. "Most carries only bring one or two people. Taking too many might negatively impact your own climb."

"Wait, will we still be penalized after leaving you on the 32nd level?" Zac asked with a frown.

A 40% boost in attributes wasn't a problem now, but what if it stayed when he assaulted the fifth- and sixth-floor guardians? That would be a pretty huge handicap, and he wasn't so sure that 3 billion Nexus Coins were worth it.

"Any floor one enters together with others will be adjusted accordingly, even if some people drop out early," Galau answered before a hesitant expression entered his face. "I didn't mention it because I was sure you knew."

"So we'll only be penalized on the fourth floor?" Zac mused. "That's not too bad."

He had high confidence in defeating a floor guardian of the fourth floor even if it had a 40% attribute boost, and afterward, the penalty would decrease, making it not too difficult bringing Ogras compared to going at it alone.

The benefit Ogras would bring would no doubt supersede a 20% bump in the enemies' strength.

"Any idea of how to find the beast?" Zac asked after they had walked in the forest for two hours.

"I thought it would show itself since we've restrained our auras," Ogras muttered before he turned to Galau. "You should have something to solve the situation."

"Ahem... the person providing the tower carry generally includes all the materials for the climb itself in the price," the merchant said. "But I do have some items for sale that might help. Best prices in the forest, heh."

Both Ogras and Zac stopped when they heard the mention of money, and another standoff commenced.

"But then again, it's just a small trinket," Galau stammered, clearly feeling the pressure. "Here. Simply place this in an open space. If the beast is nearby, it will no doubt come."

Galau handed Zac a small ball with a stench that made his nose hair curl up. It smelled like the thing contained a mix of old diapers and rancid meat, all pressed together into a ball of unholy horrors. The stench was so unbearable it made him question life, and the only reason he didn't throw it away was

that he was afraid it would break into pieces, making the smell even more unbearable.

“What the—” Ogras groaned, looking about ready to hurl. “I’ll keep watch from the trees.”

The next moment, he disappeared, no doubt to escape the smell. Galau was already running as well, leaving Zac with the hot potato still in his hand. He didn’t want to spend one more second than necessary with that cursed object in his hand, so he simply left it on a stone and jumped into some bushes that were just outside of the smell.

At least the ball turned out to be pretty effective, and their target arrived just thirty minutes later.

The beast was actually a large snake rather than a reptile, and his hair stood on its end when he looked at it. He still was a bit emotionally scarred after his desperate battle with a mutated snake during the first week of the integration. He had been way too close to death at that time, and there was still some lingering fear deep in his heart.

The snake was at least not as big as Slither, Verana’s pet, as it only reached a bit over ten meters in length. It was deep brown with green spots on its back, and for such a large snake, it was pretty slim. It slithered between the trees with surprising agility, and it reached the puke ball in the blink of an eye.

An enraged hiss emerged from the snake’s maw when it realized that it was just bait rather than whatever the ball pretended to be, but at that point, Zac was already running toward it with his axe at the ready. However, the snake turned its head with shocking speed and spat out a green mist that immediately covered a hundred meters in front of it.

Zac’s brows rose in shock, and he hastily infused his body with the Dao of the Coffin as he held his breath. The mist was clearly poisonous, and Zac frowned in consternation when he realized the mist burrowed itself into his pores even after having activated his defensive Dao.

He was just about to switch to the Seed of Trees to start purifying the invading poison, but he noticed a startling

change that made him stop. The Dao of the Coffin might have failed in keeping the poison out of his body, but that apparently didn't mean it was helpless against it. It was actually refining it instead.

The mental energy that was spread throughout Zac's body was attacking the poison like white blood cells and turning it into normal Cosmic Energy that seeped into his body. In other words, the snake's attack was restoring Zac's energy rather than harming him.

Was this the effect brought on from the Dao of Rot? He had already discovered the properties that were akin to those of Hardness, but now he also witnessed the Rot. His thoughts briefly went to the lotus locked inside the coffin in his vision, the basis of his Dao Fragment. Corruption locked in a hard exterior.

So what if the hard shell let poison seep through? The interior was meant as a prison for such things anyway.

The snake hadn't realized that its wide-scale attack was ineffective though, and it immediately went in for the kill when it noticed that Zac had stopped moving. But a flash of light was all it saw before its massive head was removed from its body. The beast was still too weak to prove a worthwhile opponent for him to hone his skills, so he didn't want to waste any time on it. He was more interested in observing the changes inside his body.

Zac sat down in the middle of the poison haze, and he slowly tried to understand what the Dao Fragment did, and if there were some other benefits it could bring. Unfortunately, he didn't find out anything else, but it was an interesting topic to keep looking into. Galau and Ogras arrived soon after the poisonous clouds dissipated, and the demon immediately headed for the carcass.

"Do you need an antidote pill?" Galau asked as he reached for his Cosmos Sack.

"No need," Zac said with a shake of his head. "A poison of this level won't affect me."

Galau nodded in understanding, not seeming too surprised by the fact that Zac was fine. Having some means to handle poison was a basic precaution for any wandering warrior, so Galau probably thought he had some skill or treasure that protected him. But there still was some hesitation as he looked at Zac.

“What?” Zac asked.

“Why aren’t you using your shield? You paid so much for it, but I’ve only seen you take it out to play with a few times,” the merchant asked. “Are you thinking of repurposing the material after all? I could buy it off your hands, but you would take a small loss.”

Zac blankly looked back at Galau for a second, realizing what he meant. It must truly look a bit odd for him to pay through the nose for the shield only to not use it at all.

“Why bother defending against weaklings like this? Might as well directly kill them to get things over with. Would almost be a dishonor to such a nice shield to waste it on some large worm,” the demon said from the side as he extracted a large sack from the head of the snake.

“The gall bladder?” Zac asked curiously. “Do you know how to make antidotes?”

“What antidotes?” the demon snorted. “I want it for my liquor.”

“You can do that as well?” Zac asked with interest. “Does it have any benefits?”

“It might have some benefits if the wine is good enough,” the demon said after some deliberation. “But I mostly want it for the taste. Haven’t been able to drink any good snake wine for a while. Besides, it’s better than just stowing it away and hoping the gallbladder is real.”

Zac nodded, understanding that this might go under the “eat anything you can while still inside the tower” umbrella, and left the demon to his devices.

Galau helped Zac extract the fangs and poison sack. The poison wasn’t very strong, but who knew if it would be useful

in the future. An array had already appeared in the clearing not far away, and Zac started to walk toward it.

“Wait,” Galau suddenly said, and Zac noted that the demon hadn’t moved either.

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Take a look at this,” Galau said as he took out a small array disk.

He placed a Nexus Crystal inside the disk, and it lit up and fired a projectile straight into the air a second later like a firework. It looked a lot like one of those flare guns that you kept on a boat in case you got stuck at sea, and it illuminated the whole area in a blue luster for almost a minute before it dimmed.

“What’s that for?” Zac asked.

“For us to find him,” Ogras explained.

“The change of the third floor is that we will no longer emerge at the same position,” Galau explained. “We will be placed in the same area, but there will usually be some sort of barrier between us. Beasts or cultivators, for example. But it can also be arrays or other things.”

“So you’ll shoot off one of these when we arrive at a new level, and we’ll come to pick you up?” Zac asked.

“Exactly. Blue means no danger; red means I’m in danger. So, uh, if you see a red light, please hurry,” Galau said.

“Was this how you did it as well?” Zac asked.

“Pretty much. The guy who helped me had a mother-daughter array that allowed him to find me, and I simply hid in the shadows until he showed up.” The demon nodded.

“Fine, let’s go,” Zac said with some anticipation as he walked toward the array. “Perhaps we can finally find some decent sparring partners on the next floor.”

Galau didn’t say anything, but rather just looked at Zac like he was a lunatic.

MASTERY

Sweat ran down Zac's back as he weaved back and forth among the pack of plagued Apes. Their quest was to cleanse the area of corruption, but Zac had found the insane beasts living in the area excellent sparring partners.

The progression through the third floor had gone quite smoothly, but the quests started to become harder. Twice they'd decided to just find and kill the guardian rather than completing the quest, as it was simply more convenient than wasting multiple days on a single level of the third floor.

One of the times they had been tasked to lead the defense of a town beset by a beast horde for three days until reinforcements could arrive. Zac had hoped to use those beasts to work on his skills, but they proved too weak to make any real progress. After a few hours, all of them were tired of killing an endless deluge of critters who were only around level 50 to 60, and Ogras flashed over to kill the alpha to end the level early.

The other time some knowledge of arrays was needed, and neither of them would be able to solve the problem without spending a couple of days in research. They once more decided not to waste time on such a low level and destroyed the body of the deceased ancestor that the array was supposed to restrain. It made the descendants quite pissed off, but it didn't matter to them, and they moved on to the next world through the array.

They had also gotten a chance to see Galau's skills in battle, and Zac had to admit that he was much stronger than

expected. Due to his timid character and somewhat cowardly nature, Zac had always thought that he wanted to switch occupation mainly due to lack of talent in combat. But that probably wasn't the case.

A red flare had illuminated the sky when they arrived at the sixth level, making Zac hurry over with the help of **[Loamwalker]**. He had found Galau desperately fighting off a huge pack of mangy wolves with a large two-handed sword. Both the choice of weapon and the aggressive battle style created an odd disconnect with the usually timid youth, and Zac could only attribute it to his clan.

They seemed to be solely focused in one direction in hopes of one day creating a real powerhouse, and all their youth were probably required to follow the same Heritage. The Heritage itself was one that felt pretty similar to his own battle style, one of full-frontal assaults and massive swings causing widespread destruction.

The sword even contained a familiar feeling as it crushed rather than cut the beasts, and Zac realized it was a high-tier Dao Seed of Heaviness. Galau had chosen a different path than himself, though, so the feeling the swings emitted was slightly foreign to Zac. They seemed to go more in the direction of Ilvere, focusing on momentum and impact.

The scene had made Zac question how someone with such a class would swap into a mercantile class, and the answer was simple. Galau's hope was to gain the option of choosing a traveling merchant class with the help of his year of trading in the Base Town and the impressive profits he had accrued.

Such a class would be a hybrid class, focusing both on battle and business. After all, one would need the prerequisite power to defend oneself while traveling the endless worlds of the Multiverse. A merchant couldn't simply put his life and his goods in the hands of hired guards, he needed some capabilities of his own in case the guards proved insufficient or if they even turned on him.

Otherwise, the third floor was not much different compared to the second. The settings of the quest were quite

similar to the second floor, with the differences being the enemies being stronger and that they started in different locations.

Most average warriors they encountered were between level 60 and 75, and the level guardians were all recently evolved just like the snake of the second floor. The three had continued to push through the levels at a rapid pace and only stopped their progress at the 8th level at Zac's insistence.

His body was finally as good as new, perhaps even better than usual, as the splinter was still completely silent in his mind. That together with the setting made Zac confident that he could finally make some progress with his skills. He had essentially spent the first two floors as a vacation to decompress from the constant running back and forth on Earth.

It was only after he had slowed down in the Base Town that he realized he was tired to the bone. Stress and trauma had accumulated on top of each other, but he had simply pushed it deep down, as there were too many things that only he could handle. And if he didn't, then people would die.

Besides, the enemies were too weak for him to be able to push himself at all, which made it pretty much impossible to improve his skills. Simply activating a skill over and over wasn't enough to improve the proficiency of the skills. It was a lot more efficient to find insight in the midst of battle.

And the monkeys were simply perfect sparring partners.

The corruption they were supposed to root out had turned them extremely aggressive and almost as tireless as Zombies, and their bodies were sturdy enough to take a beating without dropping. Best of all, there was a huge number of them occupying the valley, so the risk of him running out of targets in the short run was quite slim unless he unleashed **[Deforestation]**.

A punch imbued with murky energy ripped toward him, but he effortlessly redirected the force downward with his palm, giving him a huge opening to cut the beast's head clean off. The edge of **[Verun's Bite]** was already by the throat of

the monkey, but it only left a shallow cut before Zac backed off again.

The monkey became doubly enraged after having been toyed with like that, and a burst of black energy rose from its sturdy frame.

Zac felt he had thought about the Dao in too shallow a manner until now. He had considered them almost the same as a skill, a boost that would make his active skills more powerful. But the Dao was so much more than that. The Dao was the deeper truths of the universe, what everything was based on.

This was something he had realized after talking with Galau over the past days. The youth wasn't some great warrior, and neither was he from some peak force in the sector. But his family could be considered a strong Peak D-grade force with hundreds of D-grade warriors, and they had a rich warrior culture.

The way the youth spoke about the Dao was a lot deeper and more reverent compared to Zac, like it was the basis of everything. Even worse, Galau hadn't strictly said it, but he had indicated that if Zac didn't get a deeper grasp of the Dao, then he risked getting stuck in a bottleneck or, even worse, creating a shaky foundation for future cultivation.

This was something that Zac absolutely wanted to avoid, but he somewhat knew the reason for his current predicament. For one, he came from a world recently integrated, and the Dao wasn't an ingrained part of his life yet. But more importantly, he had advanced too fast.

Not only that, but he had also done it mostly through artificial means. Some of his insights came from battle, but it was mostly his skill visions and treasures that had propped up his Dao through unnatural means.

His situation with his Dao insights was akin to pill toxicity as he saw it. He had eaten too many "pills" related to the Dao, and while he had gained a tremendous burst in power in just one short year, it had damaged his foundations. He felt he

needed to get a better command of his Daos if he wanted to keep smoothly progressing in the future.

Lacking understanding of his own Daos would not only negatively impact his fighting prowess, but it might hamper him in all kinds of ways.

Alyn often talked about the importance of a foundation. The most important part of becoming a successful cultivator was taking things one step at a time and not hurrying for quick gains. Moving too quickly might inadvertently cut your path of cultivation short, as you found yourself having created a cracked foundation that couldn't support your continued progress.

Luckily, there wasn't any actual toxicity in his body; he was only suffering from progressing too quickly. The problem was easier to solve than such a troublesome matter like actual pill toxicity. He would simply have to slow down his cultivation as soon as he had dealt with all the threats to Earth.

He would take a couple of years to digest everything he had learned since the start of the integration and stabilize his foundations while shoring up his weaknesses. It would slow down his progress, but it would probably also quicken it in the long run. Besides, wasn't there some time to do it now?

He kept the Fragment of the Axe active in his axe as he tried to pry out all the secrets it contained. The words written at the beginning of his guide to formations felt all the more poignant as he marveled in the feeling of man and axe becoming one.

It is folly to believe the study of formations to be differentiated from other pursuits such as alchemy or even fighting. All are children to the same parent, the boundless Dao.

It was not that his skills became stronger by infusing them with the Dao of the Axe. The skills themselves were part of the Dao, and imbuing them with the truth of their origin allowed them to exhibit their real power.

Or something like that; Zac couldn't be too sure.

But he felt he was on the correct path, and he kept at it for hours, a lone human fighting a sea of enraged beasts. The church that had “hired” them for this mission stayed outside the valley, as the corruption could affect people as well.

However, Zac had found that his Dao of the Coffin had no trouble refining the energy just like with the poison, grinding it down to unattuned energy that was expelled from his body. Zac suspected that if he weren’t stuck in a bottleneck, he’d even be able to use the cleansed corruption to open up nodes, though he would have to sit in this valley for years to absorb enough energy for a single node.

But Zac felt it was an important distinction. He might not be able to absorb Cosmic Energy like a cultivator, but he could perhaps build his own system. He could get himself poisoned on purpose and then slowly convert the poison into energy.

He wasn’t sure if it was efficient enough for it to actually be worth the time and suffering, but it was worth keeping in mind. For now, he let his Dao Fragment passively course through his body as he focused on the axe.

There would be time to work on the Dao of the Coffin after they had left Galau on the 32nd level.

He had considered swapping over to his Draugr form in this secluded valley, but he had eventually decided against it. He really wanted to try his two new skills, but he still didn’t have too great a grasp on Galau’s capabilities. The Allbright nobleman might be spying on him at this very moment; it wasn’t like he had the ability to know if that was the case.

He had already drawn a large enough target on his back from his actions, and he didn’t want to tack on the fact that he ran around with two classes. Who knew what the reaction would be if that got out to the forces waiting in the Base Town.

It didn’t mean he had nothing to do just because he couldn’t work on his Undying Bulwark class. His primal axe kept sweeping along the aggressive monkeys, following a set pattern, switching between sweeping arcs meant for

widespread destruction and quick jabs meant to maim or grapple enemies.

It was the method provided by [**Axe Mastery**], and he had been working on pushing that skill toward the peak in the past day. He was swapping between using the training fractals to guide him for an hour and then trying to apply those tactics in battle against his extremely willing sparring partners.

The monkeys were luckily extremely fearful of his Dao Field for the Dao of the Coffin, likely because it could destroy the corruption in their bodies. The moment he unleashed his Dao Field, which now had a diameter of over a hundred meters if he pushed it, the monkeys would run for the hills.

Pushing Axe Mastery to the peak was probably not something that would help him in the tower, but it was still something that needed to be done. It was proof of a basic grasp of his weapon, and something that would positively impact his class choices. How would he get a good axe class if he couldn't even be bothered to max out his most basic axe skill first?

His efforts paid off soon enough, and a prompt told him that he had finally reached the peak of the skill. A familiar sense of pressure in his mind made Zac's eyes light up, and he quickly flashed away from the valley while he blasted his Dao Field at full force to deter the monkeys from following him.

He found a secluded spot and put multiple layers of arrays down before he sat down and closed his eyes. The skill had actually provided him with another vision, and Zac's heart beat with excitement as he let the vision take him away.

CREATION

A warrior drenched in blood swung his intimidating two-handed axe, causing a wave of destruction to ripple outward. The attack created cascading explosions that cleared out a large swathe of rabid rats that tried to drown a town. There were millions and millions of them, but the axe warrior stoically took down one swarm after another.

The vision changed to a wiry warrior with two jagged hatchets who created a blur with his frenzied swings in the arena. The swordsman desperately blocked one strike after another, but he was soon drowned in the avalanche of attacks. One of the hatchets snuck behind the guard and cut off the swordsman's arm, and from there, the result was a foregone conclusion. The arena erupted in cheers as the Hatchetman held a decapitated head in the air triumphantly.

A man wearing a gentle expression sat beneath a tree in a glade, carving an intricate figurine with the sharp tip at the edge of a grisly war axe. One could have thought he used a small engraving knife judging by the intricate details of the wood carving. But a snap of the twig brought the man out from his reverie, and he looked up to see a group of beasts encroaching on his domain. The congenial face was instantly swapped with one of fury, and the axe started to drip with blood as he lifted it toward its targets.

The warlord laughed maniacally as she decapitated one warrior after another with a swing of her axe. She had some time ago forgotten how to use a shield, as she was consumed by her bloodlust, and she instead used it to cave in skulls or

break bones. Her axe keened with its master's glee, and the two created a song of madness and fury as they roved the battlefield together.

One scene after another flashed past Zac's eyes, showing all kinds of axe-wielding warriors in the midst of battle. Some relied on raw strength while others on speed as they launched furious swings at their enemies.

Some had fused their axework with various elements, often ones rife with destruction. Flames and blood were common traits, as was wind. But one of the more powerful warriors shown actually seemed to use insight into the Dao of Space, as his swings could pass right through a mountain to hit the target hiding on the other side.

There were also some unexpected usages of the axe. One vision showed a man wielding what looked like a halberd like it was a massive paintbrush, and he drew large fractals in the air with the weave of his weapon that unleashed massive attacks. Another one used hundreds of small flying axes that rapidly spun around him like a swarm of angry wasps.

There was a clear inclination toward certain types of elements and styles of battle, though, which Zac felt made sense, as not all Daos fit equally well with the characteristics of an axe. Some had created successful systems that stood out from the norm, but most followed the pattern of a blood-soaked warrior, just like himself.

However, Zac started to frown when he didn't sense any insights coming from the barrage of visions. He was starting to wake up, and it was usually at this point that he would incorporate the visions into his Dao, pushing it one step further. There was no resonance and no Dao Stars descending on him to push his Fragment to Middle grade. It was almost like he had just watched an action movie.

It was cool, but it didn't connect to him on a deeper level. Zac kept trying to grasp on to something to spark an epiphany, but he reluctantly had to give up after an hour after the vision ended. He looked up with a frown, unsure what had gone wrong.

Was it because of the tower?

He had already known since the start that improving one's Dao within the tower was pretty much impossible. Time dilation cut one's connection to the "heavens," as Ogras explained it, and Zac immediately understood what he meant after his first real battle.

There was usually a resonance to his actions when he fought, like his moves and attacks contained a deeper truth. But that was completely missing inside the tower. The Daos still worked just fine, but everything felt hollow, for lack of a better word. This didn't affect the strength of the Daos or his skills, but it was simply impossible to move his Dao Fragments forward this way.

It was so bad that he was even pretty sure that he wouldn't be able to gain anything after exiting the tower. He had initially thought he could fight a couple of harsh battles inside the tower and then ponder on the fights outside. But he had already realized that this was likely a fool's dream.

There were no sparks of insight born through battle in the tower, and the Dao was clouded for him. And perhaps this was what had ruined his vision bestowed from his class. Had he missed the opportunity to push one of his Dao Fragments to Middle grade because he had pushed one of his skills to the Peak while inside the tower?

It would be extremely frustrating if that was the case, but Zac had some reason to believe that there was something else in play. Ogras had already said that you could benefit from things such as Dao Treasures while inside the tower, even though the effect was worse than outside. The treasure itself contained Origin Dao, which allowed him to move his Dao Seeds forward even inside the time chamber provided he had the necessary insights to match.

It should have worked the same way with the vision, as it was an epiphany brought by his class. But there was not even a hint of pushing his Dao forward, which made Zac a bit suspicious there was another possibility. What if it wasn't a Dao Vision?

The skill [**Axe Mastery**] was essentially a basic training skill that would allow him to gain a fundamental understanding of his weapon, and reaching the peak meant that he had completed the basic training course. But that didn't mean he had mastered the art of the axe.

He was still just a beginner, a brute who fought more with his attributes than any sort of mastery of his weapon. What if the vision was a way for him to gain inspiration as to how to move forward from his basic mastery? It showed him various masters who had forged their respective paths with the axe, opening a world of possibilities for him.

That might have been the first step in attaining the Fragment of the Axe if one followed the normal proceedings. He would first master [**Axe Mastery**], and from the vision gain inspiration on how to improve his combat further. That would eventually lead to an insight that could form a Dao Fragment. But he had skipped this normal path due to his access to all the Origin Dao on Earth and the Dao Funnel.

Or perhaps he was simply deluding himself to make himself feel better, Zac thought with a sigh. But he felt he wasn't all that far off the mark with his guess. He would have heard about a second vision by now if there was such a thing, as the Mastery skills were extremely common.

He wasn't in any mood to ponder on his Daos or the vision any longer in either case, and he instead took out one of his information packets instead. He perused them a little whenever he was free or when he needed to clear his head. This time, he once again looked at the package that broached the subject of Arcane classes.

The restrictions for attaining an Arcane class still felt distant even after gaining his second Dao Fragment due to the lucky encounter with the calamitous lotus. The most basic requirement was a Medium Mastery Dao Fragment, but that was just the start.

Zac had until recently felt that achievements wouldn't be a bottleneck for someone like him. He had achieved almost the impossible by rising as a terrifying progenitor who had

snatched up most of the titles on Earth. Not only that, he had somehow gained dual races and classes, pushing his power and attributes to shocking levels.

Those advantages had snowballed into a list of achievements that would probably even shock the scions of the powerful clans in the Base Town. How many would be able to close multiple incursions in a week while fighting all alone?

However, Zac had been thinking about achievements too shallowly. The most important facet of gaining the fabled rank of an Arcane Master was not defeating strong enemies or accumulating a large number of titles. It was about creation, about a spark of genius that opened up new avenues.

Zac grimaced when he reread the snippet from the information package he'd bought the other day. This seemingly innocuous paragraph almost felt like it was targeted right at him. It would appear that the largest bottleneck to gain an Arcane class wouldn't be his Dao Fragments, but rather this part.

What is creation? It is about leading rather than following, a desire to push boundaries further and reach a higher sky. If you simply follow a Heritage to get stronger, you have likely already failed. Each Arcane Master is unique, a genius across the eons.

How can one reach the peak by mindlessly following others?

The words resonated deeply with Zac, and he was doubly thankful that he had come to the tower in the end.

Until now, he'd kept moving forward with a reactive mindset. He had been thrown into this messy reality unwillingly and had tried to make the best of the situation one decision at a time. He had tried to be proactive when he chose his Undying Bulwark class, but his lack of knowledge had still made it backfire a bit.

He was still pretty sure it was mostly fine, though, as it was obvious that he could steer the class in other directions more suited to his cultivation path.

It was only after meeting Yrial he got a proper cultivation path and started to think about cultivation from a long-term perspective as well. But even then, he simply followed Yrial's path and modified it for his two classes. His master had walked the path of a cycle, and Zac followed in tow without thinking too deeply about it.

That wasn't to say that his path of life and death was bad. He still felt it was the by far best option considering his unique situation. But was there really a need to create a cyclic change as Yrial did with fire and ice?

He needed to figure out something that would be perfect for himself if he wanted to have a shot at an Arcane class. Or was the path he had devised already good enough to be considered a "creation" as the information packet described? Zac's instincts told him that wasn't the case.

But try as he might, Zac couldn't just conjure a unique path out of thin air. His foundations were too shallow for something like this. Perhaps the old Abbot could do it, as he was obviously a great genius in the Dao of Karma, but Zac wasn't talented in that way. He could only pray that getting pushed to the limits over the following months inside the tower would open a path for him, something great enough in the System's eyes.

For now, he would focus on what he could do. His skills were the most obvious apart from getting better acquainted with his Daos. He opened up his skill window for the first time in a while to take a look.

Normal Skills

Inquisitive Eye (Early): See through their secrets.
Upgradeable.

Book of Babel (-): Enlightenment through understanding.

Mental Fortress (Late): Enduring Stability.
Upgradeable.

Thousand Faces (-): If you hate who you are, change it. Upgradeable.

Nature's Barrier (Late): Brave a thousand storms with Gaia's protection. Upgradeable.

Beauty Yrial's Great Transformation Skill (-): If only this skill could fix your face as well.

Class Skills

Axe Mastery (Peak): The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable.

Chop (Peak): There is greatness in simplicity.

Forester's Constitution (Middle): Man and Nature, one entity. Upgradeable.

Loamwalker (Late): Trod the unbroken path. Upgradeable.

Nature's Punishment (Peak): Awaken the wrath of the world. Upgradeable.

Hatchetman's Rage (Late): Burn with the vengeance of a forest fire. Upgradeable.

Deforestation (Middle): Their army is the forest, and you are the Hatchetman. Upgradeable.

Hatchetman's Spirit (Early): Oneness with nature. Upgradeable.

He had to admit his success was pretty varied and random. He was still only on Middle proficiency for **[Forester's Constitution]**, but he had already reached Peak with **[Nature's Punishment]**. Meanwhile, **[Cyclic Strike]** wasn't even added to the list because he hadn't even reached Early proficiency yet.

Zac had also been shocked to see that Hatchetman's Rage had skipped Middle proficiency entirely to jump to Late stage after his rage-out at the Zethaya Pill House.

It seemed that his splinter had greatly assisted him in his skills related to anger, as many of his recent gains had come from the splinter pushing his rage to new levels. First, it was witnessing Alea falling in battle, and then it was the battle in the Base Town.

Even Deforestation had jumped one grade, which had to be considered a great speed of advancement since he had only used the skill a handful of times.

It was great that the splinter also provided some benefits, but made him slightly leery. He didn't want to rely too much on anger when fighting, even though it boosted his strength. But rampaging was what beasts did, and Zac didn't want to prove Ogras right by turning into an actual netherbeast. He felt he had at least a decent head on his set of shoulders, and he should try to apply it to his fighting.

Or was he better off leaning into the anger?

FERMENTATION

Zac quickly discarded the thought of letting his anger take the wheel. That felt like a great way to become a raving lunatic, especially with the splinter still in his head. He would gladly take the upgrades it provided him, but he didn't want to rely on it any more than that.

The splinter only helped with a scant few of his skills, and a few other skills showed disappointing progress. Inquisitive Eye was still stuck on Early proficiency, which didn't really surprise Zac. He no longer used it since it had essentially become superfluous for him. There was no point in using it on weak enemies, and strong enemies were too powerful for the skill to work on them.

He had tried to purchase the ocular skill Galau used, but the youth didn't possess the actual crystal. He had bought the skill from a skill house on his home planet, which essentially was like an open Dao Repository.

Warriors short on cash could spend some time working in conjunction with the inscribers of the skill house to produce Skill Crystals, and the remuneration would depend on the quality of the skill and the number of uses the crystals contained in the end.

The subject of Skill Crystals had always made Zac a bit confused, especially the high price they commanded. He had always wondered why they weren't cheaper. Couldn't you just copy the skill a thousand times and sell it across the Multiverse? Such a thing would no doubt push the price down from the exorbitant prices they had today.

But it was through Galau he finally realized that creating Skill Crystals was extremely arduous. First, it needed the owner of the skill to have completely mastered it. Just reaching the peak of the skill wasn't enough, one needed to know its ins and outs completely to the point that it almost came like breathing to them.

Secondly, it required a skilled inscriber to translate the insights of the warrior into an inscription embedded in the crystal. The two had to work together for months, sometimes even years for high-grade skills, to create the crystal, creating a huge opportunity cost.

Of course, this process could be somewhat sped up if the inscriber and the warrior were one and the same. In fact, many wandering cultivators learned the basics of inscriptions for this very reason. If they ever found themselves hard on cash, they could spend some time refining a Skill Crystal or two. It wasn't as good money as hunting powerful beasts, but it also didn't put your life at risk.

Some even traveled the Multiverse collecting popular skills in order to learn them and resell crystals at other planets for a profit. The fact that Skill Crystals usually only lasted for a couple of uses guaranteed a constant demand as well, as long as the skill was strong enough.

Inheritance Crystals like the ones in his Dao Repository were far rarer, and they required extremely expensive materials to not deteriorate after a skill fractal was extracted. It also required a Peak D-grade inscriber at the least, and it wasn't something some hobby inscriber could create. The Inheritance Crystals in the Towers of Myriad Dao were no doubt the result of a labor of love that took the original Brazla centuries to complete.

As for the other lacking skills like **[Forester's Constitution]** and **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, Zac wasn't really sure how to progress them. Forester's Constitution had only upgraded once, and it was while he ran through the corrupted forests of the Dead Zone. Since then, there had been no improvements in the skill, making Zac believe it might need constant exposure to various forests to progress.

Unfortunately, that wasn't something he could train on command, and he could only hope that some of the following levels would take place in locations that would benefit the skills. As for **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, he had no idea how to improve it just yet.

For now, it looked like he was done with his training session, and it would probably be more efficient to delve deeper into his Daos on the higher floors. Zac got back to his feet and quickly made his way back to the small town some distance from the valley that the church had turned into a temporary command center.

"How goes the investigations?" an acolyte standing guard asked as Zac approached.

"I think I may have found a lead," Zac answered offhandedly. "But I need to confer with my associates."

"That's great!" the acolyte exclaimed. "Your colleagues are currently meditating in your courtyard."

Zac nodded and walked toward his courtyard, where he found Galau going over the haul from the past floors while scribbling in a book. His focus was so great that he only noticed Zac's return when he stood right next to him.

"Oh? You're back?" Galau asked. "Are you taking a break, or are we done with this level?"

"I have accomplished what I needed here. I will probably go higher if I want to improve my other skills," Zac said. "Where's Ogras?"

"He's out back with the barrels. He might actually have a talent for brewery," the youth said.

"Who knows?" Zac smiled. "He might change vocations as well."

"Did you find out anything about the corruption?" Galau asked.

"I found a spot in the valley with much denser energies compared to the rest. The source is probably around there, but we might need your eyes to pinpoint the source. I also have an

idea of how to deal with it,” Zac said as he walked toward the back of the house.

But he suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned to Galau.

“Are you familiar with mastery skills?” Zac asked.

“Of course, why do you ask?” Galau asked with confusion. “I have [**Sword Mastery**] due to my class.”

“I just reached Peak proficiency and was shown a bunch of visions. But I didn’t gain any Dao insight from it. Is that because of the tower?” Zac asked, some worry creeping back into his heart.

“Dao Vision?” Galau repeated before he shook his head. “No, the mastery skill doesn’t provide that. The visions simply give various examples of how you can further your studies, but it’s not required to follow. If you have a Heritage, you’ll simply follow that instead.”

Zac sighed in relief, realizing he had been correct with his guess. He thanked the youth and went around the back of the building the church had allocated for them.

“What the—” Zac exclaimed the moment he walked around the corner, as the whole backyard was filled with over a dozen massive barrels, each holding hundreds of liters of liquor.

“Just how much did you buy in the Base Camp?” Zac asked with shock as he walked up to a vat to smell the fragrance.

“Half of it was bought inside the tower. Remember the 21st level? It was dirt cheap over there.” Ogras smiled. “I am experimenting and trying to improve my odds of keeping my stuff.”

“How so?” Zac asked with interest.

“Refined items have a higher chance of staying in your Cosmos Sack when leaving this place, but I have no skills in refinement. So I throw various things into the vats to see what will happen,” the demon explained and pointed at the bottom of the large vat in front of Zac. “Look inside.”

Zac threw Ogras an amused look before he peered into the bottom of the massive container, and his brows rose when he realized just how wasteful the demon was. Apart from a few handfuls of various Spiritual Herbs they had picked up along the climb, there were dozens of small shimmering balls lying at the bottom.

“Are those the longevity pearls we found?” Zac said with surprise.

“Yes, that is now my ‘ten-thousand-year wine.’ I am sure it will be a great hit,” the demon said with glee.

“You know people will think that the wine has been fermented for ten thousand years if you call it that?” Zac snorted.

“Exactly, which will allow me to charge more for it. Not my fault they don’t know their wine.” The demon shrugged.

Zac was about to refute it, but he honestly didn’t know what to say. Instead, he could only change the subject to why he’d come back here.

“I’m done with things here,” Zac said. “I think I will need to find real enemies if I want to improve my other skills. What about you? I haven’t seen you working on your skills at all.”

“I got my class twelve years ago. Even if I were hiding my amazing talents from my family, most of my skills would have reached the peak by now,” the demon said with a roll of his eyes. “Only the new skills I got at level 75 remain, but those will not improve because I activate them among some trash monkeys.”

Zac nodded and took out and looked at the tower token. It had been inside a fortified bag that ran along the small of his back the entire time, as it wasn’t possible to put it inside a Cosmos Sack for some reason. It was a truly mysterious item. He had clearly crushed it to arrive at this place, but he’d found it back on his waist in perfect condition when he’d arrived at the Base Town.

It looked mostly the same, with one side covered in inscriptions. But since he entered the tower, there was also a

small corner that said how long he had stayed inside. It was written in some general script that was widely used across the Multiverse. Zac still hadn't really mastered the language just yet, but he at least knew the numbers.

Twelve days had passed since they entered, meaning roughly three hours had passed in the outside world. Had things calmed down on the outside now, or was a whole army already stationed and waiting outside the tower? The bounty had remained on his head all this time, after all, according to Ogras.

"I know that look," Ogras snorted as he placed a heavy lid on one vat after another before he stowed them away in his Cosmos Sack. "Just focus on the climb. We can't do anything about what's going on outside apart from climbing as high as possible."

"You're right." Zac sighed.

The three set out from the town in short order, and Zac led them to the area where he had found the high concentration of corruption. Zac kept his Dao Field out at all times, as he was tired of fighting the monkeys, and they arrived at the spot uncontested. But when they were a few hundred meters from where Zac guessed the source was, Ogras stopped with a sour expression.

"I won't go closer than this. That energy is wreaking havoc in my body; any closer, and it will get annoying to cleanse," Ogras explained with a frown. "You'll have to deal with this alone."

Zac looked over at Galau, who looked pretty bad as well, even though he had produced some sort of talisman that cleansed the area around them. It looked like he wouldn't be able to use his ocular skills to figure things out.

"It's fine. I'll do it." Zac shrugged. "But you'll have to deal with the monkeys after I leave."

His target was a large black boulder that seemed placed there rather than a natural part of the valley, but as Zac walked a few circles around it, he couldn't figure out what was so

special about it. There were no inscriptions on it, and he couldn't find any other signs it had been tampered with either. So why did it emit such nasty energies?

“Just break it,” Ogras shouted from the distance as he sliced a frenzied monkey into pieces. “These bastards won't relent while you are over there.”

Zac nodded and went back to do what he did best. Why bother racking his brain when one good punch would do the trick?

One massive slam was all it took for the boulder to be reduced into rubble, and Zac started to sift through the wreckage for clues. It only took him a few seconds, as a thick black haze shrouded a particular piece of the rubble, and even Zac started to feel the effects of the corruption, even though he ran the Fragment of the Coffin to the fullest.

He could probably destroy the source with a swing of his axe, but curiosity got the better of him, and he walked over to get a better look at the object. A quick inspection from a distance made it clear it was some sort of fossilized bug that had turned into what looked like onyx unless it was an extremely lifelike sculpture.

The bug was slightly larger than a baseball and appeared to have three sets of wings and six sets of legs, making it diverge from the beasts of Earth. It was also evidently clear that it was long dead, so why did it emit such terrifying energies?

“Please hurry. The corruption is getting dangerous!” Galau shouted from the distance.

Zac shrugged and threw the fossil or statue into his Spatial Ring, and it joined all the other foreign objects he had collected over the past twenty-odd levels. The moment he stowed away the bug, the corruption in the area started to dissipate almost immediately, allowing Ogras and Galau to relax a bit.

Was it that easy?

Perhaps it wasn't meant for people to be completely immune to the effects on this floor, but they rather had to

figure out a way to destroy the item from a distance. Zac looked over at the other two, and Ogras shrugged as he pointed at the array that had appeared among the rubble from the boulder. Zac shrugged before he joined the two, and they moved on to the final level of the third floor.

This time, they found themselves on a set of expansive steppes, and the only break from the sea of tall grass was a small nomadic village in the distance.

[Challenge the chieftain for the defining treasure of the tribe.]

“You can wait here,” Zac said as he started to walk toward the village, but he was suddenly stopped by Ogras.

“Wait. Let me do this one.”

HEARTLESS

“Looking down on me, are you?” Ogras muttered to himself while cracking his neck as he moved toward the village. “I still remember you running around in a bloody dress like a lunatic.”

Ogras had seen the look in his eyes, and the words of caution had sounded like some elder cautioning children not to run too close to the barghest pit.

Of course, Ogras knew that Zac’s remarks came from a place of concern, but it was a stark reminder that the gap between the two kept widening. It felt like there was an untapped and unceasing wellspring of potential inside that monster’s body, and if the man didn’t evolve soon, he’d start fighting D-grade powerhouses.

Just a few months ago, Ogras had still felt confident in defeating him if he went all out and utilized some underhanded tactics. But now? He didn’t even dare think about it. If Ogras wasn’t mistaken, the guy actually possessed two Fragments now on top of his already monstrous body. And if that wasn’t enough, he had enough Luck to bend reality around him in his favor.

Was the man the second coming of the First Defier? Would he also rip the heavens in two while still being a piddling mortal less than a hundred years old?

Ogras could only snort at his wild imagination and refocus on the task at hand. He had spoken with vigor just now, but he truly wasn’t completely confident in taking on this task.

Judging by everything he knew of the trial, he believed that the third floor shouldn't prove too difficult with his recent improvements, but he couldn't be sure.

"I fed you so many good things, you asshole, you'd better contribute to your daddy today," Ogras muttered as he tapped the metal casing around his shadowlimb with his spear.

A subdued shudder made the metal cast hum for a bit, but Ogras couldn't tell if the annoying critter living in his shadows agreed or not. But the thing hadn't actively worked against him during battle at least, and it mostly seemed somewhat cooperative.

Now if it could only stop trying to possess him as well, then everything would be swell.

At least the creature came with some benefits now. Using the **[Fruit of Bonding]** had actually turned it into a registered companion, which was a lot better than the crude way that asshole had stitched their souls together. It even came with a small attribute bonus now, boosting both Dexterity and Intelligence.

Name: Ogras Azh'Rezak

Level: 75

Class: [F-Rare] Shadowblade

Race: [E] Demon

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood

Manual: [F] Grey World Mudra [14%]

Titles: Demon Slayer I, Adventurer, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Tower of Eternity – 3rd floor, Betrayer, One Against Many, Butcher, Chosen of Dao, Invasion Breaker, The First Step, Beastmaster

Limited Titles: Astral Pond – 20m

Dao: Fragment of the Umbra – Early, Seed of Mirage – Middle

Companion: [F] Ka'Zur Planeswalker

Strength: 272 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]

Dexterity: 541 [Increase: 23%. Efficiency: 105%]

Endurance: 148 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]

Vitality: 99 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]

Intelligence: 108 [Increase: 13%. Efficiency: 100%]

Wisdom: 69 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]

Luck: 49 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]

Free Points: 0

Nexus Coins: [F] 480,687,176

His title screen might not match up to that brute, but Ogras still felt a sense of accomplishment as he looked over his attributes. He had superseded even his most optimistic calculations by over 30%, mostly thanks to his Fragment and new titles.

He had even passed his dream goal of hitting 500 Dexterity without eschewing his Strength in a bid to get a better class. Just the thought of evolution almost made his hand twitch in anticipation. He had kept himself from checking the crystal after the experience with the Funnel, not wanting to let himself become complacent in this place.

The mediocre start to his path of cultivation would require a long time to correct, and he needed to eke out every advantage he could get. Upgrading his Tower Title was the first step, and next he needed to sniff out some Limited Titles to fill out his quota and boost his somewhat pitiful number of mid-grade titles.

He was truthfully a bit surprised he hadn't heard of any leads on Earth. Had that odd Mystic Realm pushed aside all the smaller ones that usually glommed on to a newly integrated planet? It would be nice if they could get their hands on a Trial Array, like his family's Astral Pond. But the chances of that happening before they evolved were pretty slim.

Besides, such arrays could take years to set up, and even if MacKenzie had shown shocking skill with arrays, it required deeper insights. He remembered that their pond had taken the ancestors eighty years to create after expending countless treasures.

It seemed unlikely he would gain any new titles before he evolved, but such was life. His vision had been broadened lately, but that didn't mean he could become greedy. Hopefully, Zac would get one as a reward from the Ruthless Heavens after gaining control of the whole baby planet.

Ogras threw a last look back at Zac and their mobile crystal mine before he went toward the barbarian camp. A large humanoid chieftain holding two massive scimitars walked out to meet him, and he only roared as he slammed the flat side against his bare chest, creating a sound that resembled the call of the Azh'Kir'Khat war drums.

"Hey there," Ogras hollered with a smile. "If you would be so kind to hand over your defining treasure, then we'll be on our way!"

"You want to claim the Whisk of O'Chagga, stonewalker?" the man shouted. "The spirits won't allow such sacrilege!"

The demon couldn't help but blanch at the corny situation, but the mention of the whisk made him perk up. Such a thing would obviously go to himself since he was the one who fought. Who knew? It might turn out to be something valuable.

And if not, perhaps it could be crushed and thrown into one of his vats. He had never drunk liquor infused with ancestral spirits; should be quite the experience.

But now was not the time to think of such matters. He had gained a lot lately, and it was time to put it to the test. This was not only a battle against the tower or some dumb barbarian, it was a battle against himself. Against the version of himself who had cowered in the distance and who had only been able to look at a battle of this caliber with jealousy.

The ground suddenly rumbled, and Ogras looked over with a frown to see a large tiger rush over, each leap taking it over twenty meters forward. Had that goddamn barbarian actually tricked him? That posturing with slamming his blades was actually to call his mount?

Shadowspears immediately rose out of the ground to skewer the animal while a few also shot toward the barbarian's eyes in an effort to distract him. The appearance of some prehistoric beast was an unwelcome addition to an already tense situation, and Ogras wanted to deal with it as quickly as possible.

The reflexes of the beast were nothing to scoff at, though, and a few frenzied swipes destroyed most of the spears, with only a few managing to create shallow wounds in its flank. Ogras tsked in annoyance when he saw the tiger successfully join the barbarian, who jumped onto its back.

“The treachery of a stonewalker, as expected,” the barbarian roared, a line of green blood running down his face from a wound to his left cheek.

Ogras didn't bother answering, as he immediately infused Cosmic Energy into the large fractal covering his shoulder blades. There was no point in holding back against his enemy, and he decided to activate **[Grey World Arbiter]** immediately.

It would be a bit embarrassing if he fought a long and arduous battle on the third floor after talking big and wide. It would make him look like a wastrel that ran his mouth based on someone else's strength. The two large wings grew out from the fractals, and he felt power entering his body as he rose to the sky, and he immediately launched a barrage of shadows at his land-bound foe.

“Coward!” the barbarian roared when he saw Ogras move outside the reach of his beast.

Ogras snickered as he infused his spear with shadows to launch a **[Shadowlance]**, but he barely had time to start the infusion before a storm of wind blades rippled toward him as

the chieftain frenziedly swung his two scimitars in front of him.

The blades were a bit reminiscent of Zac's axe blades, but they were extremely thin and had a pale yellow hue that resembled the long dried stalks of grass covering the plains they stood on. The blades flew toward him with pretty annoying speed, and worse yet was that the attacks acted just like blades of grass in a storm, swaying back and forth in an unpredictable manner.

But Ogras had no problems playing that game. Darkness swallowed him as he activated **[Darkside]** to enter the Grey World, allowing him to move with a speed that almost seemed like teleportation to outsiders. He flashed back and forth, but he felt his connection with the Grey World weakening.

It seemed that the vast plains' connection to the Grey World was pretty weak, which wasn't surprising with the lack of permanent shadows due to the even terrain. But it was enough for him to move behind the chieftain, and he immediately launched a strike toward the nape of the man's neck.

Hitting the head increased the likelihood of a lethal strike, as it was a larger target, but a head could be swung away with a wider arc than the neck itself. But the panther's muscles rippled the moment Ogras appeared, and the two moved away with shocking speed, barely avoiding the lance of condensed shadows that ripped through the air.

"Ancestors!" the chieftain roared as he looked at Ogras with some fear in his eyes for the first time, and the air above him shuddered.

A massive, but hazy, projection of a warrior wielding a spear condensed above him, and it emanated a pressure that even superseded the warrior himself. Ogras groaned in annoyance as he watched the huge man turn his spear toward him.

Cultivators relying on ancestral protection were pretty annoying, as they had the ability to call on their long-dead ancestors. As more old goats died over the years, the ancestral

spirits only got stronger, making the current chieftains harder and harder to deal with.

Luckily, such classes were pretty rare in the Multiverse, as there were hefty downsides to this system. Venerating your ancestors to this degree put mental blocks in your mind, making them gods and yourself a mortal. Surpassing them became almost impossible, which created gradually declining bloodlines.

Besides, such cultivation systems had other weaknesses as well. Ogras' mouth widened in a bloodthirsty smile as the straps holding his cast together snapped open and the metallic container fell to the ground.

A massive sea of shadows spread across the grassy fields, washing out the colors in the area. But Ogras didn't instruct the shadows to head toward the massive guardian in the sky, but rather created a gray tsunami that rippled toward the small village to the side.

"You!" the chieftain roared in anger, and the whole area shook as the fury of the ancestor ignited.

Screams from children could be heard from the village as weak shields were erected by warriors who had stood by to witness the battle of their chief and spiritual pillar. But the expressions in their eyes indicated they didn't hold much confidence in rebuffing the storm of shadows that threatened to consume the whole village.

The huge projection in the air suddenly exploded in a flash of yellow light, and a massive shield sprang up around the village that easily rebuffed the wave of shadows. It was like the sea of shadows tried to swallow a sun, but the blinding light quickly drained the shadows of their strength, destroying most and forcing the rest to flee.

The ancestral guardian had sacrificed his form to keep his descendants safe, while the air around the chieftain distorted as he seemed to charge up a massive attack directed at Ogras, who sneered at him from a safe distance.

A pitch-black arm suddenly emerged from the chest of the chieftain, holding a still-beating heart in its hand. The Ogras who hovered in the air slowly faded as the true Ogras rose out of the chieftain's shadows. The mount roared in anger when it sensed the fate of its master on its back, but a massive explosion from the shadows beneath blasted open the panther's belly, spreading its innards all over the ground.

The Seed of Mirage and some misdirection had allowed him to launch a quick strike to end it all, and the massive collision of energies had distracted the sharp senses of the panther long enough to move himself and his explosive array close enough to strike.

"Relying... on... despicable tactics... heartless," the man coughed out as his mouth filled with blood.

"Perhaps, but I am alive, and you are dead." Ogras smiled as he crushed the heart and released a burst of shadows that rampaged inside the body of the dying warrior, instantly killing him.

"If the Heavens are heartless, why shouldn't I be the same?"

WAR

Zac witnessed the battle with a small frown, and the screams and cries of the villagers in the distance felt extremely discordant in his ears. His eyes followed Ogras as he looted the fallen warrior and even put the mangled remains of his mount in his Cosmos Sack before he returned.

“Why did you have to do it like that?” Zac asked as the demon walked up to them. “You could have won in a head-on fight as well.”

“But the risk to my well-being would increase,” Ogras answered with a refreshing smile as he refastened his metal casing around the congealed shadows. “Besides, I knew he would choose to protect the village rather than attack me. Those kinds of bloodline warriors have extremely close-knit communities.”

“Still.” Zac sighed but didn’t press the matter further.

It wasn’t his business how Ogras fought, and he knew that the demon had simply been using smoke and mirrors with his shadow-wave rather than actually trying to kill the children in the village. The demon knew as well as the others that killing innocents would likely cause a real mess.

It still gave Zac a bad taste in his mouth, as it reminded him of the Flame Golems’ attempt to kill his army back in the underworld with the wave of lava. It was an “anything goes” attitude to battle that was unnecessary in a place like this. Ogras didn’t even push himself to his fullest, and even if he failed, Zac could step in to defeat the chieftain.

“That weak heart of yours will be the death of you one day,” Ogras snorted as he looked over the whisk he had looted from the body of his enemy.

“Let’s just go,” Zac said as he turned toward the array, engraving the hateful stares of the villagers in his heart.

“Remember, please hurry,” Galau said as he followed Zac.

“We know.” Zac nodded. “Though I think you’ll do just fine on your own in a pinch. Your skill with the sword is pretty impressive.”

“Remember, the agreement said 32nd level, not the fourth floor,” Galau entreated. “And I have the option of buying further levels if needed.”

“What’s the point of that?” Zac asked curiously. “We can’t take you past the fourth floor anyway.”

This was something he and Ogras had already decided. They wouldn’t risk their climb by adding Galau to the penalty of the fifth floor and beyond. They would take him to the floor before the floor guardian at the highest and continue alone from there on out.

“He doesn’t want to stay on a bad level for months,” Ogras explained. “Remember the 24th level?”

Understanding dawned on Zac’s face as he recalled that wretched level. The 24th level took place inside a swamp teeming with all kinds of disgusting bugs, huge ferocious eels, and pockets of poisonous gases. Their objective had been to find a flower, and Galau had pulled out one treasure after another in order to escape that cursed place as quickly as possible.

“That’s fine,” Zac agreed. “We’ll hurry.”

The fourth floor was like the third, but worse. There was no longer any point in color-coding the flares, as they would almost always be thrown into the thick of it according to the merchant. That was why the merchant wanted to remind them to not dally around wherever they started.

“About the price...” Galau ventured.

“We’ll discuss it when we get there.” The demon smiled.

Zac nodded in agreement, as that felt like a matter that should be discussed when they got there. What if the 32nd level was the same as the 24th? They’d be able to make a killing if that was the case. The three stepped onto the platform as they had so many times before, and Zac once again found himself in the black space.

[Third Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]

[Choose Reward: Longevity Medicine, Race Medicine, Energy Medicine]

Zac didn’t immediately make his choice and instead opened his status screen. He had already learned that the black space had an even more dilated time-space. He could spend a few minutes inside with less than a minute passing outside, allowing him to go over the gains before entering whatever mess the fourth floor would bring.

So Zac ignored the prompt with the quest reward and instead opened his status screen.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 75

Class: [F-Rare] Hatchetman

Race: [E] Human

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord

Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven’s Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt – 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity – 3rd Floor

Limited Titles: Frontrunner

Dao: Fragment of the Axe – Early, Fragment of the Coffin – Early, Seed of Trees – Peak, Seed of Sanctuary – Peak

Core: [F] Duplicity

Strength: 861 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 147%]

Dexterity: 429 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Endurance: 1,244 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 147%]

Vitality: 649 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 140%]

Intelligence: 232 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Wisdom: 335 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

Luck: 198 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]

Free Points: 0

Nexus Coins: [F] 2,966,111,618

[Tower of Eternity – 3rd Floor: Reach the 28th level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All Attributes +10]

He had already known what the title would reward after discussing it with the other two, but he still felt the title was simply amazing. They had just passed the third floor, and the title already gave as large a flat boost as any other title he had accumulated. His other titles giving a similar amount of attributes had required far greater accomplishments than beating three pretty easy floors.

Just take the Eastern Trigram Hunt, for example. He had been pushed to and beyond his limits multiple times, yet that title was only marginally better than the one for the Tower of Eternity. The other one, **[Progenitor Noblesse]**, had been given to him for becoming the first Lord on Earth, which only came about after defeating the three hordes.

Even the attribute points given for just defeating the second floor had been pretty generous in Zac's opinion. It had changed the +5 in three specific attributes to +5 to all attributes.

The ten flat attributes didn't do much for Zac, apart from the boost to his Luck, which was notoriously hard to improve, but the boost should be huge for most people who came to the tower. He knew that the average warrior only had between 20 and 40 Luck all combined, so buying a carry to the third floor could essentially increase your Luck by up to 50%.

Just the boost to Luck was worth almost any price in Zac's opinion. Better yet, as they progressed, they would move on to percentage-based boosts while still keeping the flat bonuses. As long as Zac conquered the sixth floor, the title would be the best one he had, perhaps with the exception of [**Luck of the Draw**], which provided a huge amount of Luck.

Apart from the improved title, there was nothing worth noting in the status screen. His Nexus Coins had increased by a couple of million since he'd entered the tower, but that was about it. He felt he was closing in on the limits of what he could gain while remaining in F-grade. The only thing that remained was the final improvements to his Dao and getting as good a title as possible.

He needed to at least complete his life-attuned Fragment, and he felt he had a good chance of doing that through forming a projection the moment he left the Tower of Eternity. According to Galau, the effect of forming a projection was even superior to witnessing it from up close, and if he could form a Fragment by witnessing Reoluv's apparition, then he would no doubt be able to form another Fragment by creating one.

He closed down the screen and refocused on the available rewards since the title was dealt with.

None of the three medicines would help him in the short run but were rather geared toward providing boosts after evolving. There were no names attached to the pills, unfortunately, not that there was a large chance for him to recognize the items even if the System provided them.

He immediately discarded the longevity medicine, and his eyes hovered between Race and Energy for a few seconds before he eventually picked Energy. He already had enough

Race-related pills and treasures to improve his constitution considerably, which would also push his attribute limit far enough for it to not become a problem before he completed the transition.

Bursting open another node would provide a direct boost to his strength after evolving, and perhaps the pills that the System provided had a lower amount of pill toxicity compared to the norm. Though he might just throw the pill into the Merit Exchange by this point. He had already accumulated a decent number of such pills, but there were only so many he could eat before even his sturdy body wouldn't be able to take it anymore.

He was no good to Earth if he ate so many pills that he became bedridden from the backlash of overindulging on energy pills.

The scenery around him quickly changed after he had made his choice, but Zac didn't even have time to look down at the vial in his hand, as the surroundings rapidly darkened while his danger sense activated. Zac looked up to see that a massive boulder was descending upon him. His eyes widened in alarm, and he flashed out of the way in the nick of time.

“Wake up, soldier!” a gruff roar echoed from behind. “This is no time to daydream! Forward!”

Zac quickly oriented himself, only to realize he was in the middle of a massive battlefield. An allied army of various humanoid races fought what seemed to be an army consisting of devils. They were vaguely humanoid, but they couldn't be put into the same category as the demonkin, as Zac saw it. They felt more like an intelligent beast horde, as they came in all shapes and sizes, though uniting them all was the nasty sets of horns on their heads and the thick scales for protection.

Perhaps they were fallen dragonkin, Zac noted, but he knew too little about the races of the Multiverse to be sure. But they wielded various weapons, and some also wore armor on top of the scales, so they were likely categorized like cultivators rather than beasts. The large boulder that had almost turned him into paste was actually the head of a

tyrannical war hammer that was wielded by an enormous twenty-meter monstrosity.

Similar titans could be seen all over the battlefield, and the ground rumbled as they slammed their weapons into the ground or the erected shields of the humanoid armies. What was even more worrying was that these huge devils were clearly out of his league. The auras they emitted were extremely heavy, and Zac guessed they were almost Peak E-grade. It seemed to Zac that the power was almost at the level that the Cyborg had emitted toward the end before it shut down.

How the hell could he fight against something like that?

But he quickly realized that he wasn't alone in this fight, and the burden of fighting these things didn't fall on his shoulders. A young woman wielding a thin sword that was almost two meters long rose into the sky, and she unleashed a massive swing that seemed determined to cut the sky in two.

A meter-deep gash appeared on the chest of the devil, who stumbled a few dozen meters back while roaring in pain. Similar scenes took place all over the battlefield, with Peak E-grade warriors or mighty War Arrays rising to meet the onslaught of the titans.

Meanwhile, thousands of warriors filled the gaps between the peak warriors, creating a chaotic battle that stretched for kilometers in all directions. It was a lot less cramped compared to the chaotic fight for the Fruit of Ascension, though, as all the combatants were a lot more powerful here. The weakest were Peak F-grade, and all the attacks caused shockwaves that rippled out for dozens of meters.

“Don't gawk at the Sword Saintess, brat! Do your job!” the voice from earlier echoed behind him, this time a lot closer.

Zac looked around to see a burly middle-aged dwarf, who held two spiked hammers in his hands. He was obviously well into E-grade as well, and judging by the number of insignias on his chest, he was likely someone of a decent stature in this army.

“I’m sorry, I’m going now,” Zac said and hurried away in no particular direction.

Was this how it felt to fight in an army with warriors far stronger than himself? He had seen such scenes in his visions, but it was a completely different thing to experience it personally. Some fear crept into his heart that he would be swept into the battle of one of the peak warriors, or that one of them would even earnestly try to kill him.

But more than that, he felt a rush of excitement. Things were finally heating up in the until now somewhat tame tower.

VOIDFIRE

The gargantuan devil from earlier hadn't seriously tried to kill Zac, judging by the massive attacks they unleashed in their battle against the peak warrior from the allied army. It had only swung its weapon down without imbuing it with the Dao or any skill. Perhaps it had only considered him a bug to be squashed, and if it failed, it didn't really matter.

It was pretty disconcerting to get thrown into a mess like this, but he had a mission to fulfill. His eyes turned back and forth until he spotted a red flare in the distance. He immediately changed course and found Galau desperately fighting a group of the smallest devils that weren't even as tall as a man.

Zac flashed over and made short work of the group with the help of a Dao-infused [**Chop**], and none of the other cannon-fodder seemed willing to avenge their brethren for the time being.

"Have you seen Ogras?" Zac asked as he looked around.

"I'm right here. What took you so long?" A lackadaisical voice drifted out of Galau's shadow as the demon appeared.

"You!" Galau stammered. "I could have died!"

"I was ready to help out if things turned bloody. You want to be a traveling merchant, right? I was helping you gain some experience. What if you meet highwaymen in the future? After fighting these guys, it would be a breeze, no?" The demon laughed.

Galau spluttered for a bit, but a prompt cut short any chance of a rebuttal.

[Aid the war efforts against the tide of the Verakh. Stop the activation of a *[Voidfire Array]*, or deactivate an activated array.]

The three barely had time to read the whole prompt before battle lust overcame the fear among the devils close by, and a squad charged the three as they screeched at the top of their lungs.

“Who is the floor guardian in a scenario like this?” Zac asked as he cut a frenzied dragon beast in two. “There’s no way we can defeat the leader of this devil army.”

“The quest is to stop an array from being planted. So I guess that there is some Array Master within our power level we can kill. It’s not always completely clear in the beginning from here on out, from what I’ve gathered, so I could be wrong.” The demon shrugged. “I suggest we try for the quest. It seems somewhat doable, and we’ll also find clues of the guardian. Better yet, it might net us a nasty array.”

“Agreed.” Zac nodded.

The issue was how to find their target in a chaotic battlefield like this.

“The array is called a **[Voidfire Array]**. Can you see anything that fits the description on the battlefield?” Zac asked as he looked around.

“It sounds like an offensive array. Arrays like that are usually placed close to the front lines to maximize power, but not at the very front so as to avoid sabotage,” Galau chimed in.

The trouble was that there was no clear divide indicating where the front line was. The battlefield could almost be seen as hundreds of individual skirmishes between squads or powerhouses, with weaker combatants strewn in between.

There were individuals of both camps almost all over to the point it was even difficult to discern which side each army came from. Perhaps it was a measure to avoid either side unleashing massive arrays that could decimate a large chunk

of the army. Luckily, there was a group of titans standing in a clump far in the distance, which meant that the enemy commanders were likely stationed there.

Similarly, there was a middle-aged man standing on a massive floating sword some ways behind them, overlooking the battlefield with a stern expression. It was probably the leader of the army they had been conscripted into, and he emanated a towering aura that could be sensed all the way over to where they stood.

“Don’t look,” Ogras said as he slapped Zac’s shoulder with his spear. “We don’t want any attention from the big bosses.”

“I can’t see anything that looks like Voidfire,” Zac said. “Let’s make our way toward the enemy camp.”

The three formed a small squad where Zac took the front and Ogras the flanks as they steamrolled deeper into the army. Galau helped out by making sure they didn’t get too close to any of the elites, which forced them to take a somewhat circuitous pathing.

After they had pushed forward for roughly fifteen minutes, Zac was forced to slow down, as he realized there were only a scant few humanoids around them now. They had clearly entered the side of the enemies, and he was starting to get mobbed by the devil foot soldiers.

He hadn’t utilized any of his stronger skills, though, as he had a feeling that doing so might draw the ire of too strong enemies. So he simply kept cutting down enemies one by one while keeping a fractal blade from **[Chop]** attached to his axe, while the independent blade protected their rear.

“Over there!” Galau suddenly exclaimed, making Zac look over to their left.

There was a beast carrying a massive purple pillar on its back, and a group of hooded beings walked along its side. Judging from their direction, it seemed they were heading toward a titan rampaging in the distance. Was the **[Voidfire Array]** perhaps a support array? Or did they simply want to strike a surprise attack at whoever arrived to combat the titan?

“That looks like an Array Core,” Ogras agreed. “Let’s steal it.”

“Isn’t it easier just to break it?” Zac interjected. “I can probably do it from here.”

“And leave such a nice thing in this world?” Ogras disagreed. “Better it comes with us.”

“If we can even use it. What if it explodes in our faces?” Zac said.

“One step at a time.” Ogras smiled as he flashed away.

Zac could only sigh and follow as he grabbed Galau’s shoulder. He activated **[Loamwalker]** and moved straight through the battlefield, each step bringing him over fifty meters away. Ogras was even quicker, and a pond of shadows spread out when he arrived in front of the group.

The fractal edge on Zac’s blade grew as he decapitated the warbeast carrying the Array Core in one massive swing, making hundreds of liters of blood fall like a waterfall, drenching him in a second.

“Huerk,” Galau hurled from behind, still squeamish about these kinds of gory scenes.

Zac only shook his head to get the blood out of his eyes and jumped over to the carcass of the beast. One yank was enough to rip apart the chains that kept the large crystal fastened, but Zac swore when he realized that he couldn’t put it in his Cosmos Sack.

This had happened a few times before during the climb, generally when the quest called for delivering or protecting an item. Perhaps it was a method for the System to disallow the climbers from completely circumventing the trials by stashing away the quest items.

“Just carry it with you,” Ogras said, but he looked a bit pressured.

“What’s wrong?” Zac asked as he fastened the massive crystal like a backpack.

“The quest still isn’t complete,” the demon answered with a sour face, making Zac’s brows rise in realization.

“Is this the wrong item?” Zac asked.

This was the problem with the quests on the higher floors. Things weren’t as clear-cut as before, and it often took some trial and error before they could figure out what needed to be done. The fact that they needed to do so in the middle of an epic battlefield this time increased the pressure to another tier though.

“It might be only a piece of the puzzle,” Galau mused, his face deathly pale.

“Look around for any—” the demon said, but was interrupted by a massive roar as one of the enormous devils looked straight at them.

It was the titan that the squad of Array Masters was heading toward. Did it want revenge because they’d stolen its array?

A humanoid squad hurried over, and they summoned a massive warrior in the sky with the help of a War Array, and the projection released a terrifying beam of energy that slammed into the chest of the titan.

But the air around the titan suddenly cracked as the devil shuddered, creating a shockwave that blew all the weaker warriors in the area far away. It also made a few of the soldiers managing the array lose their footing, which interrupted the War Array long enough for the titan to swing its massive hammer at them. The soldiers only managed to hastily erect a shield at the last second, saving themselves from being annihilated.

“Shit, those guys won’t be able to defend for long,” Ogras muttered.

“Hooded guys fleeing over there!” Zac said as he pointed in the distance in another direction.

It was a group that resembled the Array Masters they had killed just now, except they had no warbeast accompanying

them. One of them was instead carrying a massive backpack, and six large spikes protruded out of it.

“It might be them,” the demon muttered. “It’s only...”

Zac understood what he was getting at. The group of Array Masters was running straight toward the rear lines of the devil army. If they pursued, then they would put themselves even deeper in enemy lines. There might not be another squad available to run interference in case they got targeted again.

“It’s okay.” Zac shrugged. “If worse comes to worst, and it’s the wrong target, we’ll simply have to fight our way back to our side. There’s no way we’ll be expected to fight those big things for more than a second or two.”

“Fair enough.” The demon nodded. “It’s still only the 28th level, after all. It shouldn’t be too convoluted. We have the core crystal, and those are the array flags. We’ll snatch them and teleport out.”

“Let’s go,” Zac said after looking back at the furious titan, who was still being held back by the War Array.

The golden projection of the warrior was already starting to dim, meaning that the squad would probably only be able to keep the titan at bay for another thirty seconds or so. But that was enough for Zac, and he grabbed Galau again, and the three created a straight line of carnage in their all-out pursuit.

One fractal blade after another carved a path through the devils as Zac kept swinging his axe. Ogras had already taken off his cast, and a twenty-meter-long arm crushed any devil who came too close. Zac noted that the demons Ogras killed oddly enough looked a bit paler after they got killed, like the hand was made out of bleach rather than shadows.

The Array Masters who carried the six flags soon noticed their approach, and they screeched as they quickly slammed the six spikes down into the ground and started to infuse energy into them. A group of devils also came forward to buy some time, each of them recently evolved, judging by their auras.

But that wasn't enough to noticeably impede the trio, and they fell in droves as Zac unleashed a barrage of fractal blades. Soon enough they were upon the Array Masters, only to be met with a wave of illusory flames the devils had managed to bring forth even without the Array Core.

Zac frowned and activated [**Nature's Barrier**] and infused it with the Dao of Sanctuary, creating a canopy to protect the three. But the flames passed straight through the leaves and fell onto their bodies.

"Netherblasted voidflames," Ogras growled as a condensed lance of shadows completely obliterated the torso of one of the array devils. "That hurt, you scum."

Zac growled from the pain as well, but his soul was strong enough to handle something like that after being assaulted by the splinter for months. He immediately spread the Seed of Trees through his body as well to help douse the soul-eating flames, and he felt a soothing warmth almost immediately.

Since they didn't possess the Array Core, the power of the flames was no doubt extremely weakened, and with one step with [**Loamwalker**], Zac was upon them with murder in his eyes. Space split apart as the remaining devils fell apart into neat chunks of flesh as [**Verun's Bite**] roared with glee, and Zac started ripping the array flags out of the ground before the dead Array Masters even had time to fall apart.

Forcibly taking the flags out like that released another burst of voidflames straight into Zac's face, but he withstood the pain as he snatched them one by one.

"It's here," Ogras muttered, pointing to an array forming in blood from the fallen devils. "And just in time."

"Am I supposed to carry around these huge things?" Zac muttered, as he had his arms full with the huge spikes.

"They are bound to someone here," Galau said. "But the connection will break when we leave this world, which will allow you to stow them away. And I think we should hurry."

Zac looked back and saw that the massive titan was running toward them with surprising speed going by its bulky

frame. A few warriors tried to intercept, but the massive hammer in its hands swung back and forth like a pendulum, turning devils and men alike into goop in its fury.

“Let’s hope not all the floors are like this,” Zac said as they stepped onto the teleportation array.

“Don’t jinx it.” Ogras sighed just as they were teleported away.

CONCORDAT

Cosmic Energy streamed through MacKenzie's body at unprecedented speeds, and her mental energy was rapidly being drained as her mind formed thin strands of her Daos and ingeniously wove them into her Cosmic Energy to create a facsimile of true skill.

Jeeves used roughly 30% fire, 10% wind, and 60% water to cause a reflective mist that formed an amazingly real illusion of herself and Ilvere falling while covering their real bodies in a thick mist. Her arm reached out to grab Ilvere's shoulder as a rapid succession of bursts of Cosmic Energy mixed with the Seed of Gust unpredictably moved them until they landed some distance away.

Balls of acrid sludge shot through the mist like bullets, but Kenzie's body floated around like an unbound pixie with the help of Jeeves, effortlessly avoiding all the projectiles. They finally reached the ground, which silently opened up to swallow the demon inside.

"Stay here," Kenzie whispered with a monotonous voice as she flitted away.

A dozen emergency drones emerged from her Cosmos Sack and instantly fired at four specific spots that made no sense to Kenzie, but it caused an enraged screech to echo across the area. The newly erected pillar had been destroyed as well, and a scorch-marked woman emerged from the smoke where it had once stood.

It was some sort of the corporeal undead, and no doubt also the source of the attacks earlier, as it looked like she stood in a pool of oil that bubbled and churned. She was slim and had long gray hair that fell down to her shoulders, and she wore a well-fitting dress that looked suited for a summer stroll. The woman would have been quite beautiful in an austere way if it wasn't for her enraged and scarred face or the grisly half-meter talons she had instead of normal fingers.

Unfortunately, it looked like Jeeves' illusions had failed, as the woman looked straight at them through the mist. Kenzie could only see the undead leader's shape through the haze thanks to Jeeves, so the woman must have some sort of skill to do the same.

[Target level 85 – Low-Medium talent. Chance of victory through traditional battle <5%. Permission to activate “Pretty Pretty Mecha Kenzie” protocol?]

Granted.

“Get ready to flee,” Kenzie whispered, taking control of her voice. “I'll unleash something my brother left for me in case things became desperate.”

“Just run, lass,” Ilvere said with a shake of his head. “I might be able to hold her for a bit at least.”

“Don't worry,” Kenzie said. “I won't risk my life against some E-grade powerhouse.”

The next moment, a massive robot appeared in front of her, reaching over ten meters in the air. It radiated danger as its various weapons systems went online one after another due to Jeeves' instructions.

“Wha—” Ilvere said, but Kenzie indicated for him to be silent as they were once again shrouded by an altered illusion technique that hopefully would be able to trick the undead general.

The robot shot a wild array of thin laser beams toward the woman, forcing her to start dodging to avoid getting scorched again. This was what Jeeves aimed for, and the AI helped Kenzie silently sink underground with Ilvere in tow.

Simultaneously, a fake Kenzie rose into the cockpit of the stationary robot, and the cockpit closed behind her.

The mecha generally required a direct neural connection to control due to its high complexity, but Jeeves had circumvented that somehow, allowing it to be controlled just like the drones. However, even Jeeves' abilities were limited, and such a thing would only be possible in close proximity.

But the undead woman was not ready to simply eat the beams without fighting back, and Jeeves continuously reported new sources of damage to her precious machine. Only thirty seconds of intense battle passed before Jeeves warned Kenzie that systems were critical.

Blow her up, Kenzie instructed with some heartache as she soundlessly moved through the earth while the shockwaves of battle became more and more muted.

[Affirmative.]

A few seconds later, a massive explosion rocked the very foundations of the area, making it feel like they were swept up in an earthquake.

[Self-destruct initiated within ten meters of the target, connection cut. Likelihood survival: <15%]

Unfortunately, there was no surge of Cosmic Energy to tell her whether the sacrifice was successful or not, as not even Jeeves was able to circumvent the ironclad rule that kills by technology wouldn't award levels.

But even if that crazed banshee had survived the blast, she would no doubt be taken out of commission for a prolonged duration, which would hopefully help her brother when he returned. As far as she knew, there were only a few undead generals still around. She guessed that trading her prized mecha for one of them was a worthy exchange.

Thirty minutes later, it became clear that they had evaded pursuit, and the two quickly made their way toward the closest teleportation array. It was time to return to Port Atwood. Her mission had been a success, but who knew what

countermeasures the undead would have at the next infusion pillar now that even one of their generals had fallen.

With her mecha destroyed and drones exhausted, she was unable to keep destroying the pillars in either case.

She could use a rest.

“Wake up, sailor!” Sap Trang grunted as he kicked the sailor who was supposed to keep a lookout. “This is no time to daydream!”

“I’m sorry!” the young man said with a start, forcefully dragged out of his daydreams. “But, Captain, is there really any need for us to patrol these waters? We haven’t seen a single boat for months, and no beasts that Lord Bau can’t handle.”

“Would you rather head to the front lines, changing the open seas for a sea of Zombies?” Sap said with a glare.

“No! Please don’t make me fight the undead! I’ll keep watch!”

“Good,” Sap Trang said with a nod as his eyes scanned the endless ocean. “Remember, we sail with the flag of Lord Atwood, the champion of Earth. If there is one place that the invaders would want to hit, wouldn’t it be our kingdom? Our soldiers are fighting tooth and nail to protect our world, the least we can do is keep watch over our waters to keep their families safe from ambush.”

Seeing that the young man took his task more seriously after the lecture, Sap nodded in satisfaction as he kept making rounds. He didn’t know why, but he had found it hard to stay calm all day, and he needed to keep himself busy.

Perhaps it was because he would soon be back home, which would allow him to meet his grandson again. Who would have known that little Bao was as charming as his grandpa was back in the day, and had already found a little lass for himself?

Even more shocking, the lass was with child! He would be a great-grandfather. It was an amazing source of joy in these bleak times, and it was reason enough for him to exhaust his old bones to make sure that the waters were safe.

There was only so much to inspect on these Cosmic Energy Ships that their navy employed though, and most of it went over his head. He would be able to take apart a two-stroke engine and put it back together without breaking a sweat, but these squiggly lines that pushed the boats forward were far beyond his understanding.

The only thing he could do was make sure that no one damaged the lines, and that everything else was kept clean and tidy.

He finally returned to his captain's quarters and observed the sea charts again to confirm that they hadn't veered off course, and that the nagging feeling wasn't his subconscious trying to warn him of that. But a sharp stab in his mind suddenly made him stand up in shock and look toward the south. The pain came from his connection to Little Bau. Was his friend wounded?

They were too far away, though, and he only got a few indistinct impressions through the connection, the foremost being danger. But Sap unhesitatingly ran toward the youngster in control of the arrays on the vessel. Anything that could wound Little Bau in these waters could be a threat to Port Atwood as well.

"Change course immediately," Sap said with a frown.

"Where to?" the helmsman asked with confusion.

Soon enough, the vessel, along with its two sister ships, had changed course and was once again heading toward Pangea. Little Bau was an hour or so away in that direction, but a mist on the water blocked any sight of what it might be that had wounded him.

Worry gnawed at Sap as he stood at the fore, trying to glean any signs about what was going on. The bad feeling in his chest was only getting worse as they approached the vast

shroud. The mist itself was a cause for concern, as the sky was clear as day, meaning there was no reason for such a haze to form in the middle of the ocean.

There was a distinct possibility that this was a smokescreen to hide whatever lurked inside, but Sap still ordered his crew to maintain the course. If the mist was man-made, then all the more reason for them to see what was going on. The two facts that there was both an unnatural cover hours away from Port Atwood and Little Bau being wounded pointed to one grim reality.

Invaders.

Sap shuddered as his vessel cut into the mist, and it immediately felt like the temperatures had dropped to almost freezing.

“This is Miasma!” one of the demon warriors stationed on the ship exclaimed.

The warrior wasn’t talking out of turn either, since he had actually been part of the army that heroically fought their way out of the Dead Zone, running and fighting without rest for two weeks.

“All to your stations; keep communication at a minimum,” Sap immediately ordered, and the sailors wordlessly took their positions with worry in their eyes.

The same order was transferred to the other ships as well, along with an order to stay extremely close. They could barely see fifty meters through the Miasmatic clouds, and Sap didn’t want them to get picked off one by one.

The minutes passed without anything happening, but Sap’s nerves only got more and more frayed as they approached Little Bau’s location. A massive red wall suddenly appeared just in front of them, reaching over twenty meters into the air. If it weren’t for the fact that Sap spotted worked wood, he would have thought it was a cliff wall, but he realized it was actually a massive ship they had encountered.

“Hard left!” Sap roared, no longer caring about subterfuge, and the helmsman immediately complied.

A sharp tug almost threw Sap off his feet as the three vessels turned and sped away with agility that would be completely impossible without the help of magic. With the help of a burst of Cosmic Energy, they opened up a distance of hundreds of meters in an instant. But that also meant that they lost sight of whatever that massive thing was.

“Fire the array!” Sap ordered. “Blast away this damn mist!”

Sap didn't worry about whether there were allied forces on the other side. The fact that the mist had been created with Miasma was all Sap needed to know.

The array lit up, and a massive ray of light ripped through the mists, aimed straight at whatever ship they had just encountered. Sap had to close his eyes from the radiant light, and it sounded like the air itself was burning. The laser beam had pushed aside all the Miasmatic mist in the area, creating a wide tunnel that ran across the water until the attack slammed into a golden array on the other side.

The ocean frothed and churned from the clash, but the enemies' array held steady until the beam winked out of existence. But the attack did at least allow Sap to see what they were dealing with.

Only part of the massive ship could be seen, but judging from the displayed section, the whole vessel would have to be well over a hundred meters. It was a massive monstrosity wrought with a reddish wood and inlaid with what appeared to be gold. It was a beautiful creation, but Sap couldn't feel any appreciation for the craftsmanship involved, as his eyes were drawn to the massive ball hanging down from the bowsprit.

The ball did at least have a diameter of five or six meters, and it was completely made from gold. But it didn't seem to be either an anchor or a wrecking ball, as it was made with extremely fine details. It actually looked like a sun, and as Sap looked at the thing, it started to burn with golden flames, pushing all the Miasma in the area even further away.

“It's those lunatics again!”

“Where did the native heathens get this kind of technology? Almost ripped straight through our shield,” Bishop Kyhv-Elerad swore while his eyes moved back and forth through the waters for any sign of the massive beast that had almost managed to sink one of their holy vessels a while earlier.

“Still looking for that cephalopod?” a raspy voice snickered from the side.

Fury ignited in Kyhv-Elerad’s chest when he heard the voice of the cursed being, and he wasn’t alone in his disdain either. The crusaders in the vicinity were either looking at the newly arrived vessels as they pointedly ignored the group of hooded undead, or others blatantly glared at their mortal enemies with bloodshot eyes and burgeoning killing intent.

There was nothing that the bishop would like to do more than order a thorough cleanse of their deck, unleashing a storm of steel and fire, but he knew he couldn’t. He could only tighten the grip on his consecrated mace in impotence as his eyes turned back to the ocean. The hooded beings clearly noticed his struggle, but they only snickered in disdain.

Kyhv-Elerad had never heard of the Holy Church co-operating with the Undead Empire before, but it was impossible that the writ the high vicar had received a week ago was fake. It had clearly told them to temporarily co-operate with their eternal enemies until this world’s native heathens were firmly under control.

Of course, he understood the reason. Almost twenty incursions annihilated without a trace in less than a month’s time. Reports of sightings of the terrifying contraptions from the cursed Technocrat heretics.

Things had turned extremely precarious, and they needed to deal with this human Lord so that they could focus on the Mystic Realm. The fact that doing so would allow him to avenge Brother Orsiccas and the third battalion made it all the better.

So he would endure standing next to these accursed clones. He would endure being surrounded by the tainted mists that existed in defiance of the Boundless Heavens. He would endure the vermin staying below deck.

For sooner or later, the fire of the Boundless Heavens would cleanse all impurities.

ILL-GOTTEN GAINS

A brief bout of darkness shrouded Zac's vision until he was thrown into the next world. However, the System seemed intent on making the entrances rough ones going forward, and he barely had time to see a moonlit sky and a couple of candles before he fell into a pool of steaming water headfirst.

Zac sputtered as he tried to orient himself in the water, and he soon realized that he had luckily only fallen into a heated pool or hot spring that was a meter or so deep. He had first been afraid that he had been dropped into a pot of soup of some giant or something, but even if he was safe from that fate, he still immediately got to his feet and looked around for any looming threats.

"You! Who are you!" A shriek echoed with enough force to make Zac's eardrums vibrate. "AND WHAT ARE YOU HOLDING?!"

Similar shrieks echoed in the vicinity, meaning that the others had likely encountered similar fates. As for the source of the voice, it was an extremely alluring woman with a pair of pointed ears. She wasn't a Tal-Eladar, though, but more closely resembled the traditional elves in the stories on earth.

Apart from the more generous curves, that is.

The elf stood in the water as well just a few meters away, completely exposed except for a thin layer of lather. It seemed that Zac had been dropped into her courtyard mid-bath, effectively creating an instant grudge. She was a cultivator as well, since Cosmic Energy was already churning around her,

though his instincts told him there was no way she was the guardian of the level due to the lacking density of her aura.

Zac froze in shock for a second as he took in the amazing scenery until he realized that he should probably try to explain himself. But he didn't even have time to open his mouth before shouts from soldiers could be heard approaching, and massive drums started beating in the distance. It was no doubt a response to the shrieks that had echoed to the high heavens just now.

[Escape with your ill-gotten gains. Note: Hiding your loot will count as forfeiting the quest.]

What freaking gains? Zac inwardly groaned as he looked down at his hands.

His already scrambled head got even more confused when he realized that the massive array flags he was carrying had been replaced by a piece of white frilly fabric. Wasn't that...?

Zac's eyes widened slightly, and he looked up at the infuriated elf, who had somehow covered herself with what looked like thunderclouds. Their eyes met, and the air started crackling with lightning as the woman's eyes started to light up with some unknown power.

The common-sense thing would have been to give back the underwear, but Zac obviously couldn't do that. The System had for some insane reason sent him on a panty raid, and if he threw away the "treasure," he would probably fail the trial.

So he could only stifle his complaints as he took out **[Verun's Bite]** again, but instead of targeting the elf, he cut a massive hole in the wall. Luckily, the outdoor bathhouse didn't seem fortified from the inside, making it easy to escape.

Better yet, the girl seemed to prioritize getting dressed over killing him, and she interrupted whatever attack she had been charging up to instead flash toward a dress hanging across a rack right next to the pool. It allowed Zac to slip away with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but he only used the skill a couple of times before he stopped and took stock of what was going on.

Zac realized he was halfway up a mountain, and he guessed he either was inside a sect or some sort of town. Bamboo stalks and trees ran along the mountainside, while small lamps emitting a warm light were studded along the path created with large slabs of stones. There were stronger lights among the trees when Zac gazed both up and down the mountain, and he guessed it was courtyards nestled into nature.

It was truthfully one of the most beautiful sceneries he had seen, and he wanted to take in everything as quickly as possible. It would be perfect if he could turn the mountains on his islands into a tranquil paradise like this after the invaders were dealt with. The money he could make from renting out properties like this would be amazing.

But Zac only got a few seconds to drink in the beauty before the sound of rapid steps took him out of his reverie.

“Halt!” A voice could be heard from behind him, but Zac ignored it as he gazed into the sky for any flares.

“Now this is more like it!” another voice hollered, and Zac looked over to see that at least one of his companions was fine.

It was Ogras, who ran toward him as his shadows knocked out a couple of guards who were hot in pursuit. He was also soaking wet, but it looked like his mission was a bit different from his own, as his arms were gripping a veritable mountain of clothes.

“You were given that many to steal?” Zac exclaimed with surprise.

“Well, no. I only got the one pair. But since we’ve already stolen the eggs, we might as well steal the hen, you know?” The demon laughed, his eyes glistening with excitement. “They will make nice gifts if we can keep them. These are high-quality items.”

“Well, that’s just great,” Zac said as he knocked out a guard who tried to intercept their escape. “Have you seen any flare?”

“Nope,” Ogras said, but he nodded toward a courtyard beneath them. “I heard screams in that direction as well, though.”

Zac nodded and started running, and after some thought, he took the pair of panties and tried to tie it around his wrist like a bandana. But the flimsy material turned out to be surprisingly slippery, and after failing multiple times, he could only resort to a second option with some defeat.

He put them on his head like a cap.

“Not bad.” The demon nodded in appreciation. “Heavy taste. Just like when we met the first time.”

“Just freeing up my hands.” Zac sighed. “Hiding them in a bag will probably fail the quest.”

“Whatever you say,” the demon snorted.

This whole floor felt like a sick joke. Was the System messing with him? Or was there perhaps some bored Stargazer in charge of operations who decided to play around a bit and create weird scenarios?

A wail from just ahead told them that they had found their target, flare or no flare. A quick [**Chop**] broke through a wall, and they found themselves in a similar spa as the one Zac had started in. It seemed like the mountain had dozens of private hot springs along the mountainside, each with its own accompanying mansion. Perhaps it was a hotel rather than a sect?

They immediately found Galau curled into a ball while four scantily clad women were brutally beating him with sticks and fists as he desperately clung to a few pieces of fabric. But it was clear that the assailants weren't that strong, and the wounds weren't lethal.

“Lucky guy.” Ogras whistled. “I just got the one.”

Zac snorted before he unleashed his accumulated killing intent as he rushed over with his axe waving in the air. The elven ladies immediately retreated with fear when they sensed his strength, but Zac obviously wasn't there to kill them.

He rather grabbed the balled-up Galau and flashed back to the demon's side in an instant, and Zac couldn't help rolling his eyes when he noticed that the demon's laundry pile had noticeably increased in size.

"What's the matter with you?" Ogras spat as he kicked the butt of the still curled-up youth. "Act like a man. Would you let yourself get castrated and killed if we didn't drop by?"

"I'm sorry," Galau stammered. "I did not expect the tower to conjure such a – *what are you two doing?*"

Galau's eyes went back and forth between Ogras with his huge pile of women's garments and Zac, who stoically wore a pair of panties like a hat. His face was going through a tumultuous change of emotions, and it looked like he was seeing his two travel companions for the first time. Zac only grunted and indicated for Galau to start running down the mountain.

"Look at you," Ogras said with some disdain as they fled. "Calling yourself a merchant, yet you lack a nose for opportunity. Look at Zac wearing his ill-gotten gains with such gusto. Where in the outside world can you live large like that without being captured and strung up in the city square?"

Annoyance surged as Zac fought off the incoming guards, who seemed hell-bent on preventing them from descending the mountain. But he knew he wouldn't win a verbal spar with the wily demon, so he could only keep pushing forward while keeping the complaints in his heart. A few of the guards were some ways into the E-grade, but they were quickly and ruthlessly swept aside by a Zac fueled by anger and embarrassment.

The description of the quest wasn't clear, but it felt to Zac that this whole mountain belonged to some force, and to escape meant to leave the mountain. He wasn't sure if they also needed to throw off the pursuit, but one step at a time.

A horde of irate cultivators was hot on their heels, but Zac breathed in relief when he sensed that there were no people in the angry mob who could be considered real threats to their lives. He still didn't want to fight them though, as he felt like

these people weren't meant to be killed, like civilians on regular levels.

Killing a few of them might result in some old monster on the summit descending as well, and then they would truly be in deep shit. Zac instead chose to rely on the small mountain of projectiles in his Cosmos Sack, and one piece of rock after another appeared in his hand before they shot out with pinpoint precision.

He even chose to use normal stones instead of his specially prepared cannonballs, as the targets were around Peak F-grade and might actually die if he threw the clumps of metal. But the stones only created an impact that threw the guards away without creating any mortal wounds.

Luckily, they had acted extremely quickly, and most of the people were behind them rather than in front. Zac had been out of the bath he started in within twenty seconds, and they had brought Galau away in under a minute. The quick escape had allowed them to gain a decent head start, making their lives a lot easier.

Between Ogras' shadow teleportations and Zac's **[Loamwalker]**, they had no problem keeping the lead, and they smashed one hastily erected defensive line after another. The real trial only arrived at the foot of the mountain, as a massive array lit up that covered the whole area.

"Won't be too strong from the inside," Ogras muttered. "At the same time?"

Zac nodded, and a massive fractal edge immediately took shape along the blade of **[Verun's Bite]**. Since it was just an array they targeted, rather than some innocent guard, Zac had no problem infusing the axe with the Fragment of the Axe. The fractal blade turned a deep gray as new fractals appeared along the edge, and its aura quickly became a lot denser.

It was a small change that the Dao Fragment imparted upon the skill, and Zac found it not only made the skill deadlier, but it also seemed more durable. Ogras followed suit and prepared a strike, though he couldn't use his hands, as they were still occupied with his "treasures."

Instead, the shadows all around them started to shudder as they slithered toward the demon like he was some sort of shadow magnet, and in just a second, it looked like the ground around Ogras was pitch-black.

“Go,” Zac muttered when they were a hundred meters away from the shield, and he launched the fractal blade in one fluid motion.

The blade ripped through the air and slammed into the sect-protecting shield in an instant. Huge cracks spread all along the green barrier, but before it had a chance to regenerate, a thick beam of shadows completely crushed it, which created a large enough passage for them to easily slip through.

The area outside the mountain was completely barren, and there was nowhere to hide for kilometers in any direction. Zac figured that was probably intentional, and any vegetation would get culled so that the guards would have a clean line of sight in case any hostile forces approached.

“Do you have anything to shroud the area?” Ogras asked as he looked back at the mob, who still hadn’t given up and streamed out from the shield with murder in their eyes.

“I – yes!” Galau said as he produced a glass ball full of a purple haze. “This one will spread a harmless mist across a pretty massive area. But enough force will blow it away in a minute or two.”

“That’s good enough.” Ogras nodded. “Use it.”

Galau nodded and infused the ball with Cosmic Energy, which made a huge billowing cloud spread out in all directions. The purple haze reminded Zac of the time he’d poisoned half the demon army and himself with the massive cauldron, and he couldn’t help but shudder at the memory.

Luckily, the irate mob also got a bit hesitant after seeing the massive mist, and many stopped in their tracks or even fled to avoid getting swallowed inside.

“Let’s go,” Ogras said when they were completely covered, and a transparent tentacle landed on Zac’s shoulder.

Just a few moments later, they were long gone, and Ogras panted a bit with exertion. He had taken them a shocking distance in a quick succession of teleports, something that Zac's current attainments of [Loamwalker] would be unable to do.

Galau reacted quickly the moment Ogras stopped moving the three, and he sprinkled some white dust over himself and the other two.

“Anti-tracking dust,” the merchant explained. “Just in case.”

Zac nodded in understanding as he looked around.

“What now?”

“Let's keep moving.” Ogras shrugged. “The Ruthless Heavens should indicate when it considers us having gotten away.”

His words were proven right twenty minutes and a huge distance later, as they stumbled upon a teleporter as they crossed a small river in an alien forest.

Zac sighed as he stowed away his only loot from the floor before he got ready for another fresh hell to welcome them.

HIDDEN RULES

Things were pretty hectic in the next world as well, where they were thrown into a canyon full of rabid beasts. But one piece of good news was that the **[Voidfire Array]** wasn't actually gone or replaced with underwear. The System had been kind enough to place the core and array flags into Zac's Spatial Ring during the transfer.

The mission of the 30th level was to find and save a young master who was being pursued by some rival faction. The target was unfortunately extremely paranoid, and it ended up with the three of them having to find, corner, and kidnap him to complete the mission.

They did stay on for a bit longer than necessary, though, as the canyon was filled with E-grade monster boars that had particularly tasty meat. They spent a few hours stocking up for the climb, as it had turned out that Galau was a pretty decent chef. Only when they had made Galau cook enough food for almost a year did they proceed to the next level.

The new world they found themselves in was an endless desert under a yellow sky with four suns. The monochromatic tone of the surroundings made everything blur together into one big canvas of beige, and the blistering heat didn't help with the discomfort.

And just like in the previous levels, they found themselves in the thick of it the moment they arrived. A group of desert warriors was assaulting a merchant's caravan, and it looked like they had taken the role of the last survivors. Bodies and

mounts littered the area; most of them seemed to be on the side of the merchants.

Zac immediately went to work, as this felt refreshingly straightforward. One bandit after another got bisected by his fractal blades or skewered by snaking shadow spears. The remaining bandits quickly realized that they had met a tough opponent and started to flee, using sand-attuned skills to meld into the endless dunes.

“Shit, where are the bodies?” Ogras suddenly growled as he looked around. “Or at least their Cosmos Sacks.”

Zac looked around to see what the demon meant, and he was shocked to discover that the dozens of corpses that had littered the area were gone, not even leaving a drop of blood as evidence that anything had ever been there.

“Was it a mirage?” Zac muttered, but even he didn’t believe his own words.

The demon immediately started to kick away the sand where some of the merchants had fallen, but he found nothing even after digging a few meters down into the sand.

“I think the bandits brought the bodies with them as they fled,” Galau guessed. “They had sand-attuned classes; they can probably move about underground as freely as walking on top of it.”

“What good are you, looking on while they stole my loot,” Ogras muttered as he glared at Galau.

“I’m sorry, I only realized it too late. I thought the shifting of the sand simply covered the corpses,” the youth sheepishly said.

“It’s fine.” Zac shrugged. “Let’s get moving.”

They hadn’t immediately gotten a prompt upon arriving, so they ascended one of the larger dunes in the area to get a better vantage of the situation. A screen appeared as soon as they reached the peak, and Zac carefully read the instructions.

[Gain employment with the Desert Eye Caravan and secure the Transportation Route out of the Heart of Sand.]

“Desert Eye Caravan?” Zac mumbled as he read the quest. “It’s not the guys who just died, right?”

“We can probably find the answers over there, no?” Ogras said and pointed in the distance.

Zac looked in the direction Ogras indicated, and he could vaguely make out some sort of settlement between the dunes. The three immediately set out and found that the place Ogras spotted was a small town set on the bank of a beautiful oasis.

The town itself wasn’t anything special, and it could house a couple of thousand people at best. Security also seemed to be a bit lax, as there were no walls and no guards that intercepted them when they entered the town. Only a few of the locals, who looked a bit like a mix of a gnome and armadillos, looked up when they entered the city.

It was also clear that it wasn’t a permanent settlement for the majority of those walking the streets, but rather a waystation for people traversing the desert. Almost half the buildings were either hotels, bars, or other places for travelers to spend their money, and a large section of the town was meant to house the various mounts people used to travel.

If Cosmos Sacks didn’t exist, then there would also no doubt be dozens, if not hundreds, of wagons parked somewhere, filled with goods. But all the goods were likely secured inside a string of Cosmos Sacks on the merchants, or on their strongest bodyguards.

“Hold on to your Sacks,” Ogras muttered. “Places like this are breeding grounds for pickpockets.”

Zac nodded in agreement and made sure that none of his spatial tools were easily snatched. What the demon said was extremely true. Successfully snatching a small purse might essentially set you up for life in a place like this, provided that you managed to abscond with the wealth.

A Cosmos Sack was generally bound to an owner as long as he was alive, but there were no absolutes in this world. Anything from contracts to item bindings could no doubt be broken if the party was strong and motivated enough.

Trades were also taking place all over, and the loud clamor of heated bargaining could be heard from almost every corner. Almost all of the trade seemed to take place between traveling merchants as well, while the locals simply ran the town establishments. The traders likely came from different countries, and it was easier to trade their wares in the middle in a place like this rather than crossing the entire desert to trade at the opposite side.

The profit margins might become thinner in a place like this, but they also saved a lot on time and provisions, not to mention reducing the risk of getting killed on the road.

“Can you do me a favor?” Galau suddenly said as they inspected the town.

“What’s that?” Zac asked.

“Kill the bandits for me rather than escort the caravan,” the youth said.

“Why?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

Completing the quest generally resulted in more ample rewards, and it wasn’t like the aspiring merchant to say no to free money.

“Are you planning on staying here?” Ogras asked.

“Yes,” Galau succinctly said as he looked around.

“We did promise to take you to the 32nd level, you know,” Zac reminded him. “We’re still one level short.”

“This level is fine,” Galau said. “It’s a merchant-related floor. Caravans from various distant locations will come to this small oasis town to resupply. It is a good opportunity for me to work on my business acumen.”

“There are also no vixens trying to string you up in the rafters.” The demon grinned.

“That too.” Galau coughed. “Finding a place like this on the fourth floor is my good fortune. It might backfire if we keep going.”

“That’s fine,” Zac agreed, as killing some bandit lord seemed a lot easier and quicker than leading some slow caravan out from the desert anyway.

From there on out, things proceeded quite smoothly. It only took Ogras three hours to sniff out one of the lookouts from the bandits skulking around in the town, and with some “enhanced interrogation tactics,” they soon found out where the bandits hid.

The bandits had found some mysterious ruins long ago, hidden in a natural cave system far beneath the sandy surface. The bandits had not only gained a decent incomplete Heritage related to the desert there, but also a great hidden base.

Many of the natives actually knew about this all along, but they never bothered to do anything about it, as the bandits only targeted the caravans and then sold the stolen goods to the locals at a discount. It was a thriving ecosystem of a both black and white economy.

Even some merchants knew of this, but there wasn’t much they could do, as this area was truly a no-man’s-land. Would they spend their money on an expensive excursion where they hired a mercenary squad to come all the way into the desert and fight the bandits?

It was cheaper to bear the risk of getting robbed and losing your money than being guaranteed to lose all your money on such an expensive endeavor.

They also found the Desert Eye Caravan, and they learned that they would be leaving the town within the day, and completing the quest would likely take around three days. That was unacceptable to both Zac and Ogras, so the three immediately headed to the hidden passageway that the captured bandit used to head back to their base unnoticed.

What ensued was a messy battle between over a hundred bandits and Zac. Ogras assisted by assassinating one target after another, whereas Zac went for widespread destruction. It was a pretty annoying battle, as the enemies had an obvious home-field advantage.

The bandits kept blending into the sands in the area, making it almost impossible to pinpoint the targets. Zac eventually got tired of the guesswork and unleashed [**Nature's Punishment**] to drown the whole area in a massive deluge. Running around inside the sand suddenly became a lot harder when it turned to dense mud, and they finally managed to catch and execute the Bandit Leader and most of the remaining bandits.

Ogras immediately went on a looting spree, while Zac sat down to go over the battle. He felt that his skill was somewhat restricted in the desert, something he hadn't really encountered before. He could only guess that it was because there was so little water in the area. However, that possibly meant that the skill didn't bring stuff from other dimensions, but rather took them from the area.

Did that mean that [**Nature's Punishment**] would be useless if he fought in space?

Ogras returned with a sour face half an hour later. It looked like the System didn't want to provide a bunch of loot when they skipped the mission, and it looked like the bandits didn't keep any wealth on their persons. Most of it was converted to Nexus Coins in the town, which the System kept for itself when they died.

A teleporter had appeared inside the ruins the moment the Bandit Lord died, and the three gathered in front of it after everything was dealt with.

“Good luck, you two. I hope you each can conquer the fourth-floor guardian,” Galau said with some wistfulness as he transferred the agreed-upon fees to Ogras and Zac.

“Thank you. Wait, what?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Well, you no doubt know that you cannot travel together beyond this floor?” Galau said, looking confused.

Zac's brain froze for a second before he looked over at Ogras, who looked like he had just eaten a pile of shit.

“What?” was all the demon managed to spit out through gritted teeth.

“The System won’t allow any carries beyond the fourth floor. After all, breaking through the fourth floor is the watermark of an elite. It doesn’t only give you a percentage-based boost, but it also conjures an apparition.”

“So we can’t even fight the floor guardian together?” Zac confirmed.

“You can, but only the one the System thinks deserves the most credit will get the title and reward. It’s based on contribution and potential, I’ve gathered,” Galau explained. “And splitting up later doesn’t help either.”

“So if I enter the final level of this floor with this monstrosity, I’m shit out of luck?” Ogras shouted as he waved his spear at Zac.

“Well... Lord Piker is a one-in-a-millennium genius. I am afraid the odds of the apparition and titles going to you would be slim.” Galau coughed, looking a bit embarrassed.

“We won’t even be able to travel together either for the normal levels?” Zac asked.

“Well, you can, but it is practically unheard of. The restrictions for traveling in groups get even worse from here on out, and only one person gets the benefits. Who would travel in groups in such an environment?” Galau said.

The three stood in a suffocating silence for almost a minute until Ogras finally spoke up.

“Just give me the beacon arrays and a couple of defensive treasures!” the demon spat.

“Wha-?” Galau sputtered, but he still took out the beacon array he had used since the third floor.

“This is on you for not telling your employees! You screwed me over royally here by adding difficulty for my tower trial. The least you can do is provide some compensation,” Ogras said as he snatched the array.

“But... the three billion...” Galau weakly countered.

“Never mind that,” Ogras growled. “Defensive treasure!”

“I guess this might be my oversight? This is a [**Radiant Intervention**] talisman from Talovor Trappings,” Galau said with a pained expression as he took out a small box containing a golden talisman. “It would normally block a single strike, but it might not be able to completely counter the floor guardian. It will also release a blinding light upon impact, which might allow you to turn the tides.”

“Good,” Ogras said as he quickly snatched the treasure, his facial expression making a 180 turn. “With this, we can barely be considered even.”

“Stay safe,” Zac added to Galau. “And remember, try to stay for the full duration. You might also want to prepare to run the moment we exit. I will do my best to shoulder the fallout, but I have no idea what the situation is like outside.”

“I am sure that you will create a grand feat that will turn enmities into friendships,” Galau said, though his smile was somewhat hollow. “Before I forget, I want you to have this.”

The youth took out another box, and inside was a token that was reminiscent of the tower token. However, instead of the intricate fractals covering its surface, there was only the insignia of the Beroria family, the clan that Galau belonged to.

“This is...?” Zac asked, but his heart started to beat faster in excitement.

“A teleportation token to Nal Avadar City, the seat of my family. It’s in the Grand Dream Sector of the Allbright Empire.”

BERORIA GOODS AND TREASURES

Zac's eyes lit up as he accepted the token. He knew that he would have to leave Earth sooner or later if he wanted to keep improving, and the Allbright Empire was his first choice. First of all, he had multiple connections there, and there seemed to be all kinds of places where he could grind monsters to his heart's content.

He could even join the same army as Average, since it sounded like it was an army that was constantly in battle with the various threats at the border of the Red Zone.

"Wait, Nal Avadar? Not Beroria?" Zac suddenly asked with a start.

"Well, most of us aren't comfortable divulging our real heritage in the Base Town," Galau said with an apologetic smile.

"Ah, I understand," Zac said with a pang of guilt, as he'd done the same thing.

"However, you might not want to use the token depending on how things turn out after we exit," Galau added.

"Do you think your clan will be implicated by my actions here?" Zac asked with worry.

"Our family has fought for the Allbright Empire for over 800,000 years, and many of our ancestors have racked up great merit in the army. The empire wouldn't allow us to be exterminated over a feud among juniors, especially since I was not directly involved," Galau explained. "But some elder

might want to present you to the Tsarun for private benefits if they believe they can get away with it.”

“So you’re gifting him a death trap?” Ogras snorted.

“This token takes him to the city teleporter, not our family’s private one,” Galau explained. “He can simply identify himself as a wandering cultivator, no? Besides, if the Peak family speaks up for you, then no one in our family would dare to have any malicious ideas.”

Zac wasn’t too sure about the last statement. Greed could make people do all types of despicable things, and there was no doubt in his mind that some elders in Galau’s family wouldn’t hesitate to sell him out if given the opportunity.

However, what Galau said was true. He could simply go there using [**Thousand Faces**] and immediately leave for the Red Sector if things looked dicey with Galau’s family. Securing passage would likely be a bit cumbersome, but there was no way that there weren’t solutions in an established empire like that.

“Thank you,” Zac repeated. “We’ll see you in a couple of months. Have fun over here.”

With that, they left their companion of the last month to live it up among the armadillo people as they stepped onto the teleporter.

Galau watched his two companions disappear after stepping onto the teleporter, a surprising amount of wistfulness filling his heart.

“Such a bad actor,” Galau muttered with a small smile before he walked over to a particular pile of rubble in the cavern.

Well, subsidizing the demon a decent talisman in return for the goodwill of Zac Piker felt like an extremely worthy investment. As long as that man survived the aftermath of the Zethaya incident, then all would be fine. He had been a bit

despondent at the start, but after thinking it over, Galau quickly realized the opportunity that had presented itself before him.

The resources he had put into garnering trust and camaraderie would turn into a massive leg to hold on to in a millennium, or perhaps even in just a few centuries. Monstrous attributes that hadn't been seen since who knows when? Dual Fragments? And he was a progenitor with connections to the Peak family? Zac Piker even had a good chance of outperforming Prince Reoluv. What was a little talisman compared to that?

Besides, he had ample time to make up for the expenditure in the coming months.

The excitement of excavating unknown treasure filled Galau's heart as he pushed the rubble away, displaying a hole full of Cosmic Sacks. If you added the spatial tools he'd pilfered from the dead merchants when they'd arrived at the level, then this might be the most profitable one yet.

Galau quickly transferred all the loot from the bandit's Cosmos Sacks before he started walking back toward the town. He hadn't been idle while the demon had been busy hunting bandits, and he quickly moved toward a shop at the edge of the settlement. A human merchant ran it, and the store was empty as usual when Galau entered.

"Whad'ya want?" the old man muttered with disinterest, but his eyes widened in fear when Galau threw out a handful of array crystals without warning.

The whole store was locked down in an instant, allowing neither sound nor people to escape. The merchant hastily produced a talisman of his own, but how couldn't Galau be prepared?

The merchant lay prone on the floor snoring before he even had time to activate his defenses. Galau quickly dragged him to a corner in the basement and poured a black tincture down his throat. It would keep him in a coma for up to a year without a problem, which was more than enough.

The merchant wasn't well-liked, and he had no kin in the town. His disappearing and being replaced by a much more affable merchant shouldn't result in any waves, and the mystery of his appearance would deter would-be troublemakers.

With lodging secured, Galau could finally do what he had longed for the past weeks. One treasure after another started spilling out of his Cosmos Sacks, and he started to go over them one by one with an almost manic gleam in his eyes.

It hadn't been easy stashing away so much loot under the nose of that paranoid demon, but he still had managed to hide away a pretty impressive haul over thirty levels. After having mentioned his warrior Heritage and his goals of being a merchant, neither Zac nor Ogras had suspected him to have not one but four skills related to thievery, all of which he had used on the locals on each level any chance he got.

Now he only needed to turn this wealth into more wealth over the coming two months, and finally convert it all to Nexus Coins before he left.

After Galau rearranged the store to be more inviting and added his own wares, he went out and took out a large sign that he had already prepared. One swing with his massive zweihander was all that was needed to strike down the old one, and the scene would hopefully create enough buzz to spread the news of the new store.

As expected, it took less than ten minutes before the first patron arrived, and the little armadillo's eyes widened when he saw all the exotic wares on display. Galau adorned an affable but somewhat timid smile as he scurried toward the mark.

"Welcome, esteemed patron, to Beroria Goods and Treasures. I am sure you'll find something to your liking!"

Life was pretty good, all things considered.

After the brief intermission, Zac found himself standing on a craggy surface adorned with thick moss and a sparse number of trees here and there. It reminded him of the Scottish moorlands he had seen in movies, but he barely had time to orient himself, as a heavy shockwave almost made him lose his footing.

It felt like an earthquake, but it only lasted for an instant, making Zac more inclined to believe that there was a massive battle between two powerhouses somewhere close by. It might be a clue to this level if he could figure out the source, and there was clearly a link, as the quest prompt appeared immediately following the phenomenon.

[Redirect the Ancestral Avoli from its current path.]

Zac's eyes almost crossed in confusion as he read the mission. Redirect the what? And where?

Another shake almost made Zac fall over, and he looked around for the source of the abrupt earthquakes. But he couldn't see anything out of the norm.

A red flare rose into the sky far in the distance, and Zac put his questions aside as he immediately set out to find the demon.

As expected, the first attack took place within seconds. A disgusting critter as large as a wolf appeared from a hidden burrow and threw itself right at Zac, who bisected it without even thinking. Zac wasn't exactly sure whether it was a bug or a beast even after observing the corpse. It looked a bit like a naked mole rat, but it had eight legs and insectoid eyes, and pincers in its mouth rather than teeth.

The beast also wasn't alone, as more of them quickly appeared out of burrows all over, and Zac found himself in a protracted battle where he had to run and fight simultaneously. The critters were luckily not even as strong as the battleroaches, and the unceasing number of them only turned into more Nexus Coins for him.

Zac soon enough found the demon with hundreds of carcasses around him, and more animals joined their fallen

brethren every second as one spear after another skewered them from below.

“Oh, you’re here?” the demon noted. “Help me finish off these ugly things.”

The two went to work, and within five minutes, the area was strewn with thousands of the small beasts. The animals gave a decent clue about their mission as well, as they were called [**Avoli Parasites**], meaning they had some connection to their target.

“Did you know about those rules?” Zac asked when things had calmed down, referring to the limits to traveling together.

“Of course I knew,” Ogras snorted. “Since when was the Ruthless Heavens so generous that it would provide top-tier treasures and amazing titles to leeches? Allowing us to travel together for almost half the tower is benevolent enough. I simply wanted to squeeze out a bonus on top of the Nexus Coins.”

“Then why didn’t you split off from us on the third floor?” Zac asked.

“Well, I knew most of it.” Ogras coughed. “I honestly thought that it would be possible to get help all through the fourth floor. I would enter the teleporter to the fifth floor separately, and that way get the maximum benefits. I guess it backfired a bit, but it’s not the end of the world.”

“So what will you do?” Zac probed.

“I’ll sponge off for you for the levels of the fourth floor, but I will fight the floor guardian by myself,” the demon answered without hesitation.

“The guardian still has the boosted attributes of three people, though,” Zac reminded him.

“The fourth floor is breached a couple of times every week in our sector. The experiences on your planet have given me enough strength to match most scions. Why wouldn’t I be able to defeat it if I use my head?” the demon proudly said.

Zac was about to argue, but he realized that what Ogras said might be true. The demon had produced a Dao Fragment along with another Dao Seed that seemed to be related to illusions, judging by the fight with the barbarian chieftain. This alone put him in the top percentile of those who visited the tower.

Let alone the fourth floor, Ogras might actually have a decent chance at the fifth floor unless the difficulty took an unprecedented leap.

“I understand,” Zac said as his eyes started to turn pitch-black. “We can go over things properly on the 35th level.”

“Ugh, creepy,” Ogras said with a grimace as he witnessed Zac change into his Draugr form. “I’ll never get used to those eyes of yours. Couldn’t wait even a second after we ditched the dead weight?”

“I’ve been itching to try some things out for a while now,” Zac said with a smile that no doubt looked creepy rather than mirthful in his current shape. “Hopefully, we’ll find some targets that will do.”

“Well, there seems to be no lack of targets in this place at least,” the demon agreed.

“What do you think of the quest? Have you heard of Ancestral Avoli before?” Zac probed as he took out his new and almost unused shield.

“No, but I think we’re standing on him,” the demon said as he poked his spear into the ground a few times.

Realization immediately dawned in Zac’s eyes, but he still felt a bit skeptical as he looked around. There were massive vistas in all directions, so if they were actually standing on a beast, it would have to be as big as his island.

“There are beasts as large as planets swimming around the vast cosmos, so why not ones as large as mountains?” The demon shrugged with disinterest when he saw Zac’s face. “I’m more interested in how we redirect a big bastard like this.”

Zac’s scrambled for ideas as well, but there was only one doable solution he could think of.

“If we find the equivalent of this guy’s brain, we might be able to give him a shock great enough to turn,” Zac ventured.

“Sounds as good as any other plan,” the demon agreed. “We can just blast the brain into mush if it doesn’t work. I guess that this thing is the target as well.”

“Probably.” Zac nodded.

It might seem preposterous to kill something as large as an island, but it didn’t seem too hard to Zac. They had already done something similar with the Ayn Hivequeen. They were essentially ants to this thing and could freely make their way into its body to cause havoc. It wasn’t like this huge thing could stop them either, just like Zac couldn’t stop bacteria from running around inside his body.

It took the two some time to orient themselves, but they soon managed to confirm the hypothesis that they were standing on an enormous beast. The Ancestral Avoli had eight legs, each like a mountain of its own, and an oblong body. They were somewhere in the middle, and they figured its head was in the direction the Avoli moved, so they quickly set out.

They found nothing of value on the beast itself, just a bunch of beasts living off of the body of the titan. The bodies of the parasites were worthless as well, and they only served as target practice. But that was just fine with Zac, as he had been itching to fight in his Draugr form for a while.

His eyes were trained on the sea of parasites that came pouring out of their burrows and he calmly stepped forward as he activated his set of passive skills. A billowing cloud of miasma spread across the area and covered the ground, which elicited an annoyed grunt from Ogras, who started to move away in disgust.

Zac could only shrug apologetically, knowing that the skill in his current form affected his allies as well - or at least his living allies. The thousands of parasites didn’t seem to care about the miasma, though, and they rushed toward the two without hesitation.

A dense killing intent spread out from Zac's body as he stepped forward, superimposing with the miasmic haze, as massive amounts of energy surged in his body. Galau had been an interesting travel companion for the past weeks, but he was ultimately an outsider. He had been continuously forced to restrain himself as to not let any of his secrets leak out.

But going forward, there was nothing holding him back. He could fight to his heart's content, and the enemies provided by the System would get more and more challenging. It was at the latter half of the tower he would find the opportunity to truly hone himself, and where the real treasures waited to be found.

Now, the climb started in earnest.

THANK YOU FOR READING
DEFIANCE OF THE FALL,
BOOK FOUR.

We hope you enjoyed it as much as we enjoyed bringing it to you. We just wanted to take a moment to encourage you to review the book. Follow this link: [Defiance of the Fall 4](#) to be directed to the book's Amazon product page to leave your review.

Every review helps further the author's reach and, ultimately, helps them continue writing fantastic books for us all to enjoy.

DEFIANCE OF THE FALL

[BOOK ONE](#)

[BOOK TWO](#)

[BOOK THREE](#)

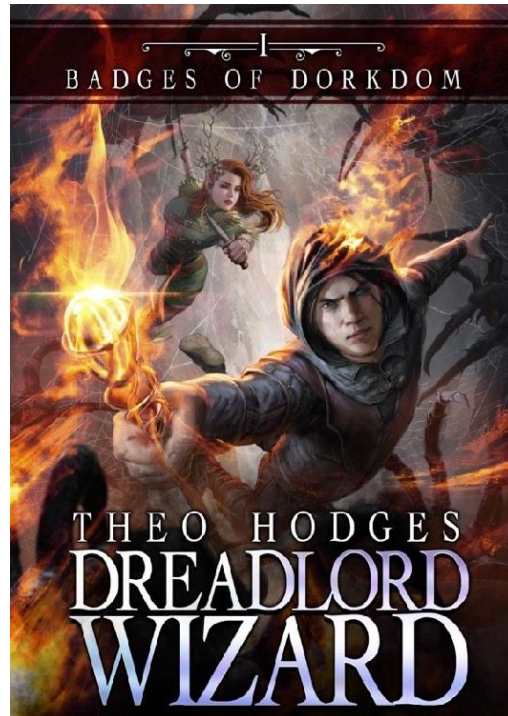
[BOOK FOUR](#)

Where to find Aethon Books:

[Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Website](#)

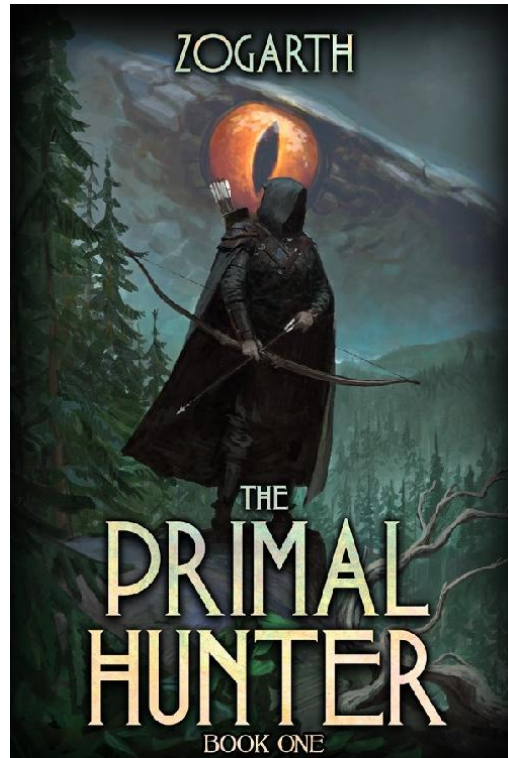
You can also join our non-spam mailing list by visiting www.subscribepage.com/AethonReadersGroup and never miss out on future releases. You'll also receive three full books completely Free as our thanks to you.

Looking for more great LitRPG?



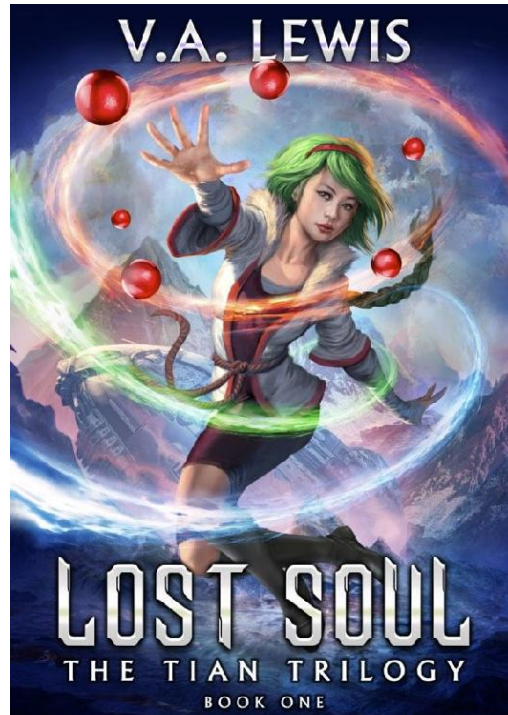
His first quest is to survive the day. Then, do the same tomorrow... *When Kenny is chosen for InterRealm, a real-life wargame where defenders are portaled in from their homeworld, he is forced to survive in a violent fantasy landscape. Build a powerful presence in InterRealm and his homeworld will likely remain safe. Fail, and the invaders will break through. If there's any consolation prize between Kenny getting to be a famous wizard, or building a Dread-fortress from the bones of his enemies, it may not be enough to make up for the fact that real live orcs are trying to kill him. To top it all off, the game master in his head couldn't be any less impressed with his assignment. Someone obviously botched their chances when they chose future-college-dropout, Kenny. His opportunity to prove everyone wrong starts now...*

[Get Dreadlord WizardNow!](#)



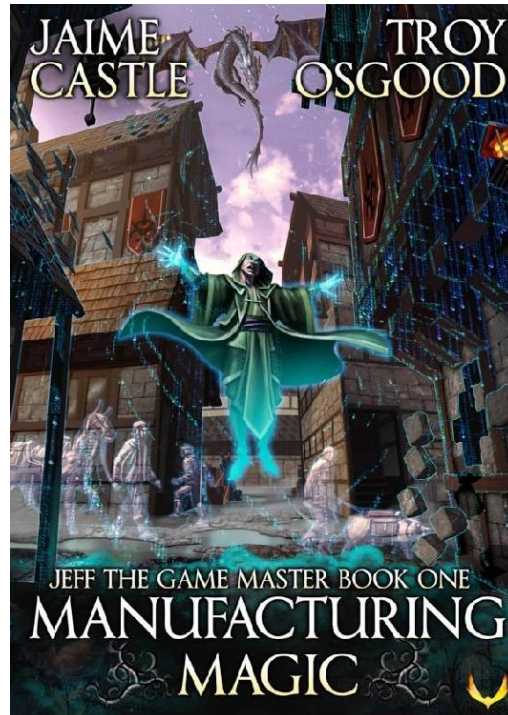
On just another average day, Jake finds himself in a forest filled with monsters, dangers, and opportunity... It was a day like any other when suddenly the world changed. The universe reached a threshold humanity didn't even know existed, and it was time to finally be integrated into the vast multiverse. A place where power is the only thing anyone can truly rely on. Jake, a seemingly average office worker, finds himself thrust into this new world. Into a tutorial filled with dangers and opportunities. His new reality should breed fear and concern. His fellow coworkers falter at every turn. Jake, however, finds himself thriving. Perhaps... This is the world Jake was meant to be born in.

[Get Primal Hunter by Zogarth Now!](#)



Death is a disease, and there is only one cure. Tian, a Cultivator at the precipice of ascension, is thwarted in her quest for immortality. Defeated, she escapes to another world with Levels, Classes, magic, and monsters. She becomes a Lost Soul. Her core begins to dwindle, but she does not abandon her goal. Working with a group of rebels in this new world, she opposes the unkillable tyrant Galgom to learn his secrets. Against his army of machines wielding laser guns and laser swords, she will cultivate her new powers, achieving Feats as she seeks her antidote: Immortality.

Get Lost Soul Now!



Jeff Driscoll becomes the only active Game Master for the VRMMORPG Infinite Worlds after a rogue patch turns the game into a buggy, dangerous mess. Can he fix it on his own and save the players?

Get Manufacturing Magic Now!

For all our LitRPG books, [visit our website.](#)