

The First Defier

(A.K.A. JE BRINK)

DRAGON

DEFIANCE

OF THE

FALL

BOOK SEVEN

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DEFIANCE OF THE FALL 7

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NEXT STEP

Zac gazed up at the false sky illuminated by the enormous lunar lights. The vaulted dome was crisscrossed with Memorysteel beams that connected to the huge wall next to them. The sky looked so peaceful, it was hard to believe that eldritch horrors waited just beyond the edge of the Mystic Realm.

Part of him only wanted to leave this place far behind after barely surviving his encounter with the Collector and its horrifying tentacles, but Zac knew he couldn't back down now. It was just not a matter of the System and its punishing quest chain either, even if it didn't leave him much choice but to delve deeper into the bellows of this space-twisted world.

Everything was on the line now. Earth's future hung in the balance. Void's Disciple and Inevitability were somewhere in the depths of this realm, looking for the Dimensional Seed. Finding them and cutting the last Karmic Threads to Earth was far more important than some quest rewards or the possibility of treasures left in the heart of this Technocrat base.

But there was still so much he didn't know. They were still in the outer band of the research base, yet he had almost gotten himself killed a few times over. And according to his reluctant guide, the inner regions were even more dangerous.

"When is the next time the base will enter maintenance mode or whatever?" Zac asked after some thought, even if he didn't hold out much hope for such an easy solution.

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

Zac nodded. The Lunar Tribe’s lupine appearances belied a surprising technological know-how and planning. From the looks of it, they had accomplished things that eclipsed the other trapped factions, like Leviaala’s Clan Cartava. Thanks to that, they had managed to find all kinds of pathways in this steel trap. Hidden pathways that were now in his possession now that he had their mapper.

Zac made his decision, causing one of the two quest prompts in front of him to disappear. Left was the path he’d chosen – the path leading toward ‘Lab 16.’

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

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

There was no timer for this quest, so Zac opted to stay and rest with the others for a while longer. Before heading into the depths of the Mystic Realm, he first planned on taking his people back to the glasshouse. They were in a wretched state after first getting kidnapped by the Lunar Tribe and then hunted down by the Collector. It would be suicide to send them home by themselves, with the Lunar Wolves running around. Besides, he needed to recuperate as well, and there were some matters that needed to be dealt with before he set off toward the inner region of the research base.

The group rested for another two hours, and even Leviaala could walk by herself by that point. They didn’t enter the forest out of fear of running into a wolf pack. They didn’t walk along the wall either, as the walls sometimes malfunctioned,

according to Leviala. They could suddenly launch an attack out of nowhere.

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

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

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

“Exactly.” Jonas nodded.

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

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

“Yeah.” Zac nodded as he stowed away the herbs. “They’re pretty tough; they only relented after I killed their alphas.”

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

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

“Do you know why the werewolves kidnapped you?” Zac asked.

“They took us because they wanted intelligence on how to get out of this place. Apparently, they had visited our biospheres multiple times before, but there were no spatial anomalies back then. They thought we had some sort of tool or

technology to open a passage,” Jonas added. “I think their plan was to steal that machine and then take it to their town. They didn’t believe us when we said that was impossible.”

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

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

Zac estimated it would take up to a day before they would reach the glasshouse since his flying treasure wouldn’t work inside Mystic Realms. This wasn’t a failing of his leaf, but rather how E-grade flying treasures were created. They generally were dependent on the energy in the ground, which was why Zac’s could fly no higher than a few hundred meters into the air.

These methods rarely worked in Mystic Realms because they didn’t have World Cores to rely on, and only D-grade flying treasures that were completely powered by themselves or the user could fly freely. There were apparently specially made E-grade flying treasures that would work in Mystic Realms as well, but that wasn’t something Zac had access to right now.

Moving through an empty forest at least allowed him to learn more about the research base, so he walked next to Leviala most of the time, exchanging information about Earth or the latest situation in the Zecia Sector for intelligence on the Mystic Realm. He quickly gained a better understanding of the factions and their locations, and he found that the Cartava Clan was surprisingly close to his own entrance.

However, their domiciles were on the other side of the Outer Band, making it almost impossible to travel between their bases. The natives split the base into four sectors, each

formed like a ring around the core of the base. First was the outer rim where Zac's people appeared, and the next ring was called the Living Layer.

All the factions lived in this layer since the energy density there was better than the outer rim, while simultaneously not being actively controlled by the Administrator. These settlements sprawled out over biospheres like those Zac had set up his base in, and in laboratories and emptied warehouses.

Next was the inner layer, where a lot of the core structures of the research base were located, including the lab that Zac needed to reach for his quest. This layer was only accessible during the specific windows Leviala had mentioned before. Finally, there was the core. Leviala wasn't actually sure what went on there, though she might have been holding back.

She said that most natives believed the core to be the residential areas of the Builders, and perhaps where the computers housing the Administrator's consciousness were located. There were also rumors of peak resources being kept there for the most precious experiments, resources that not even the Tsarun Clan had managed to get their hands on. Of course, now it was also the home of the Dimensional Seed.

The newfound knowledge made Zac a bit hesitant about whether he had done the right thing in not passing through the Wasteland. In the opposite direction of the Wasteland was the True Sky Faction and the New World Government, with the government's starting position being very similar to his own.

Zac guessed that either the Dominators or the Church of Everlasting Dao should be somewhere close to the Lunar Tribe, with the other faction being close to the Gemlings. Such a spread definitely didn't feel random, but rather something the System had orchestrated when integrating this Mystic Realm. Perhaps that was even the reason Leandra's clan had abandoned this place; it had been discovered by the System, and continuing to perform experiments would bring that terrifying lightning down on their heads.

He also started to get a better understanding of the Tsarun Clan's goals. They had captured Leviala's clan for their

ancestor's ability to harness Time. The Tsarun patriarch still hadn't reached the end of his life span, from what Zac had heard, but he wasn't exactly young either. If he could extract time out of the Cartava Clan's eyes, he might be able to increase his life span a few times over, allowing him to keep making breakthroughs.

The Gemlings on the opposite sides were probably brought in for their ability to make money. They were a weird golemlike clan from Leviala's explanations, and their bloodline was pretty odd. They were able to cut off parts of their souls and imbue them into gems they grew on their bodies, and then use those gems as cores for Spirit Tools.

This practice almost guaranteed that the Spirit Tool would have a great spirituality, which increased their value more than tenfold. The only issue was the bloodline among these Gemlings was extremely weak, and they needed a lot of assistance to activate their Heritage. But as long as the Tsarun Clan managed to purify their bloodlines, then they would be able to essentially farm those precious crystals and make a fortune.

The Titans were probably brought for their prowess, and cultivating warriors with that bloodline would bolster their armies. As for the Lunar Tribe, he wasn't as sure, but perhaps it was because of their lunar ability. Their leader, Cervantes, was almost immortal, according to Leviala, and he could freely swap back and forth between moonlight and flesh. Not even imbuing attacks with Dao had helped bring him down during the wars over the past two thousand years, and he was generally considered the most powerful warrior in the Mystic Realm.

As for the True Sky Faction, it wasn't actually a unique Race at all. The Tsarun Clan had apparently captured thousands of people with various bloodlines, probably in search of something valuable. These people banded together after the Cataclysm, led by a few cultivators who all carried unique powerful bloodlines.

But the fact that the faction had so many different backgrounds had resulted in the dilution of any inherent

bloodlines. On the flip side, that had resulted in them having by far the most Datamancers of the four factions, and they were usually the ones who hosted the various trade meetings when the barriers were lifted.

That was partly because they were the most populous faction. Thanks to the large number of Datamancers, they had managed to secure and take control of dozens of habitable sections in the second layer, essentially turning one side of the base into a small kingdom with a capital and multiple towns.

Even some people from the other three clans had decided to join the True Sky Faction over the years, though generally, these people were outcasts of their factions for one reason or another.

The hours passed in this manner until Leviala suddenly stopped. Zac looked around in confusion, first thinking that some lunar wolves had appeared. However, Leviala rather walked toward the wall. The section looked the same as the sections that they had passed until now, but Zac understood that there probably was a hidden gate in this area.

“Is this the path to your clan?” Zac asked.

“One of them,” Leviala said. “I mentioned it before, but a bit further, there is a proper gate, not a hidden service entrance like the ones we have used. That gate leads straight toward the inner sector, but our clan can be found within a few hours’ travel. This place is a hidden gate that we haven’t managed to unlock yet, but you seem to be able to walk unhindered in this base. I thought it was better to take an unknown route back in case more werewolves are lurking around.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Zac said as he started placing disks where Leviala indicated.

He had been struggling a bit about what to do with Leviala, but he eventually decided to send her back to allow her people to start preparations. There was a small risk that she would bring home intelligence on him that would be used to betray Port Atwood, but Zac felt that to be a slim risk. She had seen firsthand how he had dealt with the werewolves and the

Collector, and how freely his people could move through the base.

The Cartava Clan didn't stand to gain anything by going against him, but they could benefit greatly by allying themselves with Port Atwood. And if they really chose to go against Port Atwood, Zac was confident in his ability to crush their leaders and replace them with someone more agreeable.

"What's your next step?" Leviala finally asked as Zac's preparations were nearing completion.

"I'm heading to the Inner Circle, following one of the maps I got," Zac eventually said. "I need to find a way to the core."

"You would need a guide even if you have a map. The inner section presents its own challenges," Leviala slowly said.

"What do you have in mind?" Zac asked with a small smile.

"How about we set a time and place to meet up? Perhaps at the edge of the Living Layer. The way there shouldn't be too dangerous, but after that, things might get complicated, depending on what security measures we encounter," Leviala said.

Zac thought about it for a few seconds, but he eventually agreed. He was already planning on bringing Kenzie since his instincts told him he would need Jeeves' assistance to get to the core, but bringing a native would bring a lot of knowledge to the table. They decided on a location to meet, and the time would be in two days. That would give Zac enough time to deal with everything back at the base and return.

"Be careful on your return. You never told me exactly how you got captured, but it seems a bit odd to me. Can you be sure that no one in your clan is working against you?" Zac said as he connected his tablet to the disks on the wall. "If things get out of hand, you can always come to our side. We're always happy to welcome new talent to our ranks."

“No clan members would do something like working with the Lunar Tribe at such an integral time,” Leviala muttered, though it sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as she was Zac.

“Step back,” Zac said as he turned to the scouts and took out his axe.

“What are you—” Leviala said with confusion, but she quickly realized what was going on.

Zac only shrugged in response before he activated the tablet. His axe might be useless in case the wall came alive, but it would work just fine in case there was an army of hostile combatants on the other side, no matter if it was Cartava Clan members or werewolves. Thankfully, only empty halls met his eyes as the gates slid open.

“I’ll see you in a few days, then,” Leviala said. “I’ll bring a talented Datamancer to help out as well. Don’t worry, it’s my first-degree uncle, and he’s our family’s chief technician.”

Zac nodded in understanding. When she talked about family in this case, she wasn’t talking about the whole Cartava Clan, which was comprised of almost forty thousand members. It was instead her actual family in the same sense that he would use the word. Having someone like her uncle there would no doubt help a lot, and the Datamancers seemed more akin to a crafting class than a combat class, so Zac wasn’t worried, even if he was E-grade.

Leviala entered the next moment, her steps still a bit unsteady. However, Zac had gifted her a set of various pills, partly to help her get home in one piece, and partly as some sort of display of the good things that he could provide in return for the natives’ cooperation.

There was no point in dawdling around, and the six remaining people of the group set out as the gate merged into the wall behind them.

They were almost halfway to the glasshouse by this point, but only one hour passed before Zac sensed something. Zac moved in front of his group as [Verun’s Bite] appeared in his

hands, but he relaxed when he saw Thea stepping out from behind a tree a hundred meters away. She turned into a gust, and the next moment she appeared right in front of them.

“Cousin!” Jonas shouted with excitement, but Thea only gave him a small nod of acknowledgment before she turned to Zac.

“You’ve been busy, it looks like,” she said with a smile.

“Well, one thing led to another.” Zac sighed. “Are you here alone?”

“No, I went ahead of the group when one of your demonkin geomancers sensed some vibrations in the ground,” she explained. “We thought it was a wolf pack that had strayed from the center of the forest.”

“Well, let’s go back. I have made some discoveries,” Zac said.

“We still haven’t mapped out the whole area. We have found a gate, but it actually attacked us the moment we got close,” Thea said.

Zac frowned when he heard that the gate was actively attacking people. Didn’t Leviala know about it, or did she hide it?

“That’s okay. I’ve found everything we need for the next step of the plan,” Zac said.

“Just like that?” Thea asked before she looked him up and down with a wry smile. “It really seems that the demon is right about one thing. Let you run off for just one day and you’ll come back with massive gains.”

“I’d be more than happy to be the one staying behind next time,” Zac said with a shudder, thinking back to just how close it had been for him to be turned into a part of a Void Beast’s bodysuit.

They started walking in the direction of the glasshouse, and Zac helped catch Thea up to speed. She was shocked to learn about the Collector and the other creatures attracted by

the Dimensional Seed, but she didn't shy away. Instead, a resolute gleam shimmered in her eyes.

“So we're going to those labs next?” Thea asked.

“I'm thinking that's the move.” Zac nodded. “We might find useful things there, and it's close to the Core Sector where the treasure is. If the barriers really disappear when the Dimensional Seed matures, we'll be in a good starting position.”

“We'll need to make some preparations, then,” Thea mused before she added with a low voice, “By the way, I met with your demon friend. Something seems to be wrong with him. He didn't come with us to this place; he's holed up in your compound. He hid his face in a big robe as well.”

Zac frowned at that, and the image of shadows repairing the hole in Ogras' chest resurged. The demon had seemed fine until now, but were there complications from his familiar fusing with him after all?

CROWDFUNDING

Zac wasn't particularly worried if the demon's fusion had somehow altered his constitution. Danger was always present on the road of cultivation, and being fused with a shadow creature couldn't be as bad as getting stuck with two Remnants in his head. But the demon's reaction was a cause for concern and something that he needed to investigate.

"I need to go back anyway to prepare a few things," Zac said after some thought. "I'll check on him. If everything goes according to plan, we'll depart from the glasshouse in a day or so."

"If you're going back, you might want to speak with the Anointed as well," Thea said. "They're getting impatient, and they are already planning to force their way through the base. I tried to stop them, but they don't listen to me."

Zac grimaced at the idea of thousands of war-crazy Zhix attacking the gates and walls of the Mystic Realm. He had already seen how the base reacted to small-scale infractions, and he also knew that it had far more deadly methods available after seeing how the Administrator dealt with the Collector. The Zhix might bring a calamity down on their heads if he didn't stop them.

"I'll talk with them," Zac said. "Can you help prepare this place for the arrival of a proper army?"

"What about the wolves?" Thea asked.

"Let's hope they're smart enough to stay away from the Zhix," Zac muttered. "Otherwise, I think they'll be used as

therapeutic punching bags.”

Zac’s group soon rejoined Thea’s squad of vanguard scouts, who all seemed extremely surprised to see the group emerge from the forest. Zac moved forward alone from there on out since there were others who could help the rescued scouts get back. He just took one last look at the group with a sense of accomplishment before he disappeared among the trees.

He knew that he couldn’t save everyone and that there would inevitably be losses. But it still felt great to actually succeed in saving his people. So it was with newfound vigor he started to cover as much distance as he could with the help of **[Loamwalker]**. The quest told him to enter the inner laboratory before the Dimensional Seed matured, which was around four days from now. He didn’t want to cut it too close either, so there was no time to waste.

Zac arrived at the hidden glasshouse and only briefly greeted the researchers there before moving on. Having been given some reassurance from his travels with Leviala, he no longer felt the need to go slow in the stable section of the Outer Ring, and he kept a rapid pace as he flashed forward over and over with the help of his movement skill.

That way, it only took him two hours before he stood in front of the gate leading into the inner section. This time, there was actually a group waiting on the other side when he opened it, standing behind two nasty-looking cannons that could only have come from the Ishiate Tinkerers. Even Zac felt some pressure staring into the two half-meter-wide barrels that were no doubt loaded with some energy-dense concoction.

Most of the guards clearly recognized him and quickly moved to push the cannons out of the way, but one of them stepped forward with his sword at the ready.

“Eat this,” the guard gruffly said as he threw over a small package, drawing shocked glances from his colleagues.

“What?” Zac asked with confusion as he looked down at the bag.

“It’s policy, stupid,” the guard said as the other guards slowly started to inch away from him. “Don’t want any of those lizard bastards to sneak inside.”

“Keep up the good work,” Zac said with a small smile as he ate the minty root.

Zac looked at the other guards next as he stepped past the cannons, and left some short parting words before he disappeared.

“Learn from this guy. No one is exempt, not even me.”

A shudder in Zac’s soul reminded him of a pressing issue, but he still hurried over to Biosphere 4 instead of his own compound. It was the place where most of the Zhix stayed, including the Zhix War Council. His arrival was met with bubbling excitement, as the Zhix had long associated him with war. He was led to a gathering hall, and one Anointed after another hurried inside.

Zac saw the eagerness in their eyes, and he didn’t waste any time with small talk when everyone was gathered.

“I think I finally have an idea where the Dominators are,” Zac said as he took out a crude map of the research base.

He quickly started adding details to the mostly blank map, such as the Living Layer, the Inner Ring, and the core. He then added the Wasteland cutting through half of the base and the four major forces, completing the map.

“We are situated close to Clan Cartava, and we’re the only natives they have encountered. To the east is the Wasteland, and no one can live there for weeks, let alone months. Beyond that is the Lunar Tribe, beastkin warriors who have been responsible for ambushing our people. The True Sky Faction is to the northwest of Clan Cartava, and they have been in contact with the human government.

“That leaves this place,” Zac continued and pointed at the spot on the opposite side of the base compared with their own. “There is a golem race living here. This should be the most likely location of the Dominators and their armies, considering the werewolves have had time to send scouting parties all the

way here. If they're not there, they are somewhere close to the Lunar Tribe.”

“How do we get to this side, Warmaster?” Rhubat rumbled with a frown. “This place is confusing. It looks like a hive at first glance, but it is built following a completely different logic and philosophy. Our instincts have been proven wrong time and time again.”

“There are two paths,” Zac said. “Either passing the Wasteland and making your way through the outer rim. But I'll tell you right now, if a hundred set out, only five will make it to the other side. I only reached the edge of that place when I rescued our missing scouts, and I almost got killed many times over.”

“The Zhix are not afraid of death, but we cannot take such losses. We would be too weakened to complete the crusade,” another Anointed said with a shake of their head.

“The other option is to cut straight through the base,” Zac said. “That's currently impossible, but we might get our opportunity in four days. There will still be dangers, though.”

“We are ready. What can we do now?” Rhubat said.

“You should have heard about us discovering the large forest half a day from here, right?” Zac said. “That place is our entrance to the inner sectors. From there, we can take our armies past the domestic zone and enter the inner base.

“I think the core will be too dangerous for the general armies to enter because of the spatial rifts, but if we go along the inner band, we can essentially walk a full circle around the base, visiting each faction, starting with the True Sky Faction and ending with the Lunar Tribe. That way, we'll find the Dominators sooner or later.”

“What if these natives bar our path?” Rhubat rumbled.

“Nothing is more important than taking down the Dominators,” Zac said without hesitation. “I've already told the Cartava Clan of the threat the Dominators represent. If these natives can help us against our common enemy, then great. If they move against us, we'll take them down.”

“So the Final Crusade starts in four days,” Rhubat said as they closed their eyes, and a dense aura of bloodthirst spread across the hall.

“Will you walk with us, Warmaster?” Vanexis asked next.

“No, not immediately at least,” Zac said. “I think Void’s Disciple will head for the treasure in the core, and I can’t let him snatch it. He’s already proven he’s talented with the Dao of Space. Who knows how powerful he will become if he gets his hands on that thing? I’ve seen the destruction the Dimensional Seed has wrought on this base; no one can withstand it.”

Worry flashed in Rhubat’s eyes, and the Anointed quickly nodded in agreement.

“I’m thinking that a small elite unit will head for the Core Sector as soon as we find a way to get inside there, and we’ll meet up on the other side of the base after the army has made its way around. I’m heading out tomorrow in hopes of finding out more,” Zac said.

“Do you need our assistance?” Rhubat asked.

“It’s impossible, I’m afraid,” Zac said. “I managed to get my hands on a map to the inner laboratories, but the path goes through pipes and air ducts. You guys are too big to squeeze inside.”

The meeting went on for a bit longer, though making any exact plans was hard when so much was in the air. But the general plan was set. A large part of the army would start the transfer to the Lunar Forest, leaving just a smaller defensive squad in charge of this outer sector. They would be in charge of stopping any attempts of the natives to force their way outside. And if need be, trigger the destabilizers that Kenzie had installed.

He left after twenty minutes, heading for Biosphere 1. However, a familiar figure caught up to Zac just as he was about to leave the Zhix’s domiciles.

It was Ibtep, and the Zhix threw down an isolation array the moment they arrived next to Zac.

“I did it,” Ibtep said as soon as the array activated. “I have gathered 8 billion Nexus Coins. Does the offer still stand?”

“What? EIGHT BILLION?” Zac sputtered, shocked to hear that the Zhix liaison somehow had become even wealthier than himself. “How is that possible?”

“Almost no Zhix has used that currency so far, and they hold it in no regard. Cosmic Energy might not be seen as corruption any longer, but it still isn’t something that the Zhix can embrace in a year or two. When Zhix warriors heard I had a shot at helping the Anointed, they donated everything they had accumulated without any further questions, and most Zhix have gathered over a million coins after fighting the unliving and the traitors,” Ibtep explained.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds, but he eventually produced the Teleportation Token along with the Clan Zethaya VIP Token.

“This token will let you meet the Alchemist. Remember, be careful. I don’t know what world this token will take you to, but there will definitely be D-grade beings and perhaps even stronger cultivators. Keep your head down; don’t offend anyone,” Zac said, and he added something after some thought. “You can tell the Zethaya Clan that I’m sorry I couldn’t come in person. I am busy stabilizing my foundation after breaking through.”

Zac hoped that small addition would decrease the chance of Ibtep getting double-crossed. There was no such thing as benevolent forces, and the only thing that kept young elites somewhat safe was the risk of future retaliation. However, those who walked the path of the elite were even more likely than normal cultivators to get stuck in bottlenecks.

That was why so many factions had had the guts to go after the Eveningtide Asura even after he had proven his strength in the Tower of Eternity. They figured that someone who had such a heavy foundation might not even make it to D-grade, considering he was a rogue cultivator without any support system. Their bet obviously proved to be a huge loss, but most such gambles ended up okay.

But if Zac could spread the fact that he had already evolved to E-grade, he might plant the seeds of hesitation in the minds of those who were considering going after his secrets or Earth.

“Only the mission matters. I will go straight to the pill store and then return.” Ibtep nodded.

“One more thing,” Zac added after some thought. “See if you can find out what’s going on in the sector, if there is any news about me or the Great Redeemer. Our planet needs to know what to expect. But your safety comes first.”

“Understood,” Ibtep said, though he was almost stamping in place out of impatience. “I have to go now before the gate closes.”

“Good luck.” Zac smiled. “We’ll deal with the things on this end.”

Ibtep scurried toward Biosphere 1 the next moment, no doubt heading straight for the tunnel leading to the outer world. Zac arrived just a few moments later, instead heading for his cordoned-off sector. The reason he needed to go back from the glasshouse was simple; he really needed a round in his Soul Strengthening Array.

Utilizing the energy of the Remnants always came at a cost, and the weird cracks hidden in his body were only part of it. His soul was unsettled, and he needed to stabilize it before setting course for the inner sectors. After all, there was a good chance that his next outing would lead him straight from the inner lab to the core, and he needed to be in peak condition for whatever waited there.

However, he only took a step inside his courtyard before he stopped, immediately sensing a familiar presence.

“Where did you run off to?” a dour voice said from a secluded corner of his courtyard. “People were starting to freak out.”

“Okay, what’s going on with you?” Zac said with a frown, ignoring the question. “Do we need to be worried?”

His question wasn't without merit, as the demon had undergone an almost shocking transformation since they'd met just a few days ago.

MONOCHROME

Leviala made her way through the pathways, her mind still in turmoil from the events of the past two days. Of course, the constant pain emanating from her right eye didn't help. She knew there would be a price to meddle with the past, but she hadn't expected it to be that great. There were accounts of her ancestor doing even greater things multiple times over without being afflicted with the same curse.

But not only had she been blinded, but she could even feel how her affinities had worsened. It felt like her future had turned bleaker, and she wasn't even sure if her actions were worth it. The abyssal eyes of Zachary Atwood in his secret form had put such pressure on her that she'd acted hastily, when "being captured" by him likely wouldn't have been the worst of fates.

Seeing how he not only cared for her safety but even risked his life for his people was all that she needed to know about his character. He might be a ruthless pragmatist, but he was definitely good at heart. But such was the problem with her ability. She had a short window of connecting her mind to the past. If she had waited any longer, the backlash would have killed her, and she had needed to make a decision.

Then again, knowledge was power. Her knowing his secret might not hold any value right now, but that would definitely change if she managed to lead her clan out of this place. She could set up a series of safeguards for herself and her people, guaranteeing security in return for her silence. It was a shady course of action, but their clan was currently like a weak

candle in the wind; any small shock could be what toppled them.

Now the question was what she should do next.

Her grandfather might have some ideas on how to lessen the backlash, but that wasn't the only problem she was facing. The fact that Zachary Atwood wouldn't let them out would definitely be seen as an act of war by some, which would set her clan down a deadly path. Her instincts told her that letting the second elder and Yvian assault Port Atwood would result in massive casualties and most likely end in defeat.

She had seen Zachary's strength all too clearly, and what she hadn't witnessed weighed even heavier on her mind. Try as she might, but she absolutely couldn't remember what he'd done against the Collector. Just the thought of trying to peer back at the events with her gaze made her break out in a cold sweat, and all her instincts told her that doing so would cause the collapse of her soul.

The thought of Yvian was also a cause for concern, making her frown as she rounded another corner. The parting words of Zac repeated over and over in her head, and she had to admit they rang true. The beastmen were crafty; her family wasn't made up of fools. The Lunar Tribe might have realized they could use the vents as points of ingress, but Clan Cartava had done that for weeks already. The paths Hevastes had taken should have triggered newly installed alarms, yet they'd reached her private gardens without issue.

Not only that, the guard response was a lot slower than what should be expected, allowing the werewolves to leave just like they came. If it weren't for the traps and automatic defenses her family had set up, then they would have finished the job unscathed.

So it wasn't elation that gripped her heart when she encountered a group of clansmen, but rather suspicion and fear. Because it only took one glance to see that the squad of eight all belonged to the faction of the second elder.

"Young miss!" the middle-aged man in the lead exclaimed as he took a step forward. "You made it back safely. But your

eye!”

“Velar, how come you’re here?” Leviala smiled, but she wasn’t as calm as she let on.

“Looking for you, of course.” Velar sighed. “We’ve turned the whole place upside down in search of you. Those bastards from the Lunar Tribe are truly audacious to do something like this when we’re at the cusp of freedom.”

“It was actually the foreigners who saved me in the end,” Leviala said. “They—”

“You shouldn’t trust those people,” Velar said with a frown. “We have it on good authority that the foreigners are working with the Lunar Tribe to pilfer this place before they escape together. We were about to force open a path to them in hopes of rescuing you, but it looks like that won’t be necessary. Come, let’s hurry back. Your fiancé will be elated to hear you are okay.”

“My what?”

“I don’t know exactly what’s going on either.” Ogras sighed as he touched his horns.

The two horns on his head hadn’t changed shape since they met last, but they no longer looked like liquid fire like the rest of the Torrid Demons. They had turned monochrome and now reminded Zac of dancing shadows. His skin had lost some of its red tint as well, and the scale-like markings almost looked like they were covered in ash.

It looked like the demon was really in the process of turning into a shadow creature.

“Can’t you stop the transformation?” Zac asked with some wariness in his eyes.

“I’m slowly losing ground to Asshole,” Ogras muttered, and Zac realized that the demon had renamed his contracted beast once more. “It attacked my mind while I learned the new

skills. That's why I've been holed up here for a while, to shore up my defenses and stabilize the situation, so to speak."

"It's attacking your mind?" Zac repeated with a frown.

"Yes, but I think I have found a solution," Ogras said. "I realized it lost some of its control after I ate Race-boosting pills. I need to evolve my Race within a month. Strengthening my soul would be for the best as well, but your array doesn't seem to work on me for some reason."

"You tried out the array?" Zac said with some anger. "You didn't break anything, did you?"

"How can I break something by sitting down on a mat?" Ogras spat. "It wouldn't even start up."

"Well, that's fine, then." Zac sighed. "I think it only works if you have some connection to life and death. In either case, I might have a method to help you improve quickly."

"Really?" Ogras asked, his eyes lighting up. "Or wait, are you talking about pills? I've eaten all the pills I had over the past few days. I've built up immunity by now."

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "It should be something else. I met someone while exploring the forest."

He then briefly recounted his experiences over the past days.

"I leave for a few days and all kinds of exciting things happen. You saved the granddaughter of some clan elder?" Ogras muttered, and Zac's mouth curved slightly upward when he saw the signature jealousy. "You keep encountering powerful beauties at every turn, yet you keep your hands to yourself. What a waste. So you're saying that Clan Cartava has access to these greenhouses full of Race-boosting natural treasures?"

"You're lucky we're close to the faction that has control over the Race-boosting stuff." Zac nodded.

"I guess your luck is finally starting to rub off, huh?" Ogras muttered. "Well then, let's go."

“Wait,” Zac said. “I got a quest to reach the inner labs. I’m thinking we should hit that first. If you don’t find anything useful there, we can go to the Cartava Clan. I don’t want to waste time with them unless absolutely necessary.”

“What’s in the inner labs?” Ogras asked hesitantly.

“Apparently the good stuff of this place, but it changes every time,” Zac said.

“Okay, new plan. I come with you to mooch off your latest windfall. I’m not going to be stuck in some Technocrat greenhouse while you’re visiting the treasure vault of this netherblasted place,” Ogras said. “I can fight off Asshole a while longer if it will line my pockets.”

“Well, at least your intentions are pure,” Zac snorted. “I need to use the array here before we go, though.”

“Fine.” Ogras sighed. “I’ll stay here for now. Need to get used to the new skills anyway.”

Zac couldn’t help but worry as he walked out of his courtyard. The demon seemed to be fighting a losing battle at the moment. If this plan to evolve his Race didn’t pan out, then Zac would have to make some difficult decisions. That shadow creature was pretty sinister from what they had gathered, making Ogras a ticking time bomb.

The demon was the second most powerful person of his faction, and Zac couldn’t have him running around putting people’s lives at risk if he suddenly turned into a murderous beast. The only relief was that they weren’t exactly fighting against the clock with this new issue. They had time to look for treasures in both the inner labs and at Clan Cartava. So Zac threw the issue to the back of his mind as he reached the building housing his Life-Death Array.

The building was almost as large as a soccer field, with no windows to show what was going on inside. The interiors were surprisingly similar to his cultivation cave back home, with three circular chambers. The energy density inside was obviously worse, though, as the place was powered by Miasma Crystals and Divine Crystals rather than the natural energies of

his Nexus Vein and the weird array he had taken from the undead incursion.

Still, his temporary arrangement for his Soul Strengthening Array was probably better than the cultivation environment of almost anyone on Earth.

Zac sat down on his prayer mat, but he didn't activate the array. He rather stabilized his mind for a while as he went over the events of the past days. His first takeaway was that the Mystic Realm was a lot more dangerous than he had anticipated. He had only considered the leaders of the respective factions and the two remaining Dominators as threats going in, but dangers were lurking around every corner.

He hadn't even encountered a single one of his targets, but he had already wasted so many of his hidden aces. **[Fate's Obduracy]** had been used up on the Lunar Wolves, and his arduously accumulated energy from the Splinter of Oblivion had been expended to deal with the Collector's ghastly appendage.

The latter, in particular, was a huge blow to his plans. The bronze flashes of before had changed since his pathways were rewritten, and he couldn't use them as freely as he did in the Tower any longer. In return, he had gained a semblance of control and a huge boost in destructive power, but he probably wouldn't have time to recharge another blast before the showdown at the core of the Mystic Realm.

The Annihilation Sphere was the ultimate card he had set aside to kill Void's Disciple in one go, where the chaotic powers of Oblivion hopefully rendered the Dominator's odd ability of resurrection unusable.

There was still a decent chunk of Creation energy that had accumulated in his body by now, but he had only used the "pink flash" once, when tainting the energy source of *Little Bean*. He still had no idea what effect it would have when used on a cultivator. It might even heal his enemy, for all Zac knew.

But as one door closed, another door opened. He had lost some things, but he had created new opportunities. Evolving his Fragment of the Axe was a huge and unexpected boost, but

it wasn't enough to give him full confidence in the upcoming battles. Because if he could improve, then so could Void's Disciple. The next opportunity would hopefully appear in the inner lab, but until then, he had other things to work on.

He walked over to the death-attuned side next and activated the Life-Death Array after making sure everything was in order. The familiar suction appeared, and his Mental Energy steadily started to enter the intricate circuitry that made up half the array.

Zac would normally relax or focus on other things while the array did its thing, but this time was different, and Zac kept a constant vigil on his soul. This was the first time he'd used the array since gaining the three apparitions in the center of his mind, and he had to make sure that there wasn't a clash.

It only took a minute before Zac noticed a very important difference. The deathly energies seeping out from the coffin suddenly split off, with only a thin strand continuing toward his avatar in the middle. The rest joined his Mental Energy as it entered the array. Zac had no way to tell if this change was good or detrimental, but he decided to keep going for the time being.

The array was going to turn his Mental Energy death-attuned before returning it in either case, so adding the energy from the Fragment of the Coffin shouldn't be a bad thing. Actually, incorporating his Daos into the array was one of the first things he had tried to increase the efficiency of the arrays, but until now it had proven impossible.

There was nothing to "imbue" with his Dao when using the array, which had made it impossible for Zac to do anything except passively let the array do its thing. One thing was for certain though; adding his Dao to the procedure had increased the difficulty manifold, and Zac started to feel a strain as the minutes passed.

ANCHOR

Completing a cycle was normally just time-consuming rather than exhausting, but adding his Dao had completely changed the pressure he felt. His brows furrowed in concentration, and his hands were even shaking a bit by the time the siphoning of the first cycle finished. The added difficulty was thankfully rewarded when his Mental Energy came surging back. The Mental Energy was steeped in death, far beyond what a normal cycle usually accomplished. It was almost like he had completed three of the nine cycles in one go.

That wasn't the only thing either, as his avatar also received a surge of death-attuned energies that burrowed into his **[Spiritual Void]**. The amount was more than twice what Zac would naturally supply during the same duration, and Zac realized the implication. He could actually use the array to charge his Hidden Node, allowing him to use the node to an even greater degree during battles.

Zac couldn't wait to see the effect of completing a whole session with his Dao, so it was with great gusto he started the second cycle. However, sweat was already streaming down his face by the point he had reached the end of the cycle, and it was just barely he managed to complete the rotation without falling unconscious.

The gain was similar to the first round, though, but Zac had to actively stop any more of his Dao from escaping the coffin as he started the third of the nine revolutions. There was no way he would be able to complete a third Dao-Empowered

rotation, and he needed to finish all nine cycles to gain any benefit from the session.

He tried to understand what caused the additional strain to alleviate it, but he couldn't discern anything. Zac could just chalk it up to there being some mental strain from using "attuned" Mental Energy compared to just empty energy like normal. The next cycles were very much the same as normal, allowing Zac to revert to his autopilot cultivation while focusing on other things.

The most important point was fixing his pathways after bursting open the node before setting out toward the core of the Mystic Realm.

He had continuously worked on the pathways both while traveling and harvesting plants, but also during every break while waiting for his wounds to heal. But the fight against the werewolves, the Collector, and the subsequent escape had caused his patchwork repairs to worsen a bit, and he couldn't keep it like that if he wanted to go all out in the future.

Zac's progress was slow as he mended his pathways, especially after having exhausted his mind more than usual when infusing the array with his Dao. The exhaustion resulted in mistake after mistake, forcing him to redraw the same fractals over and over before they were correct. **[Primal Polyglot]** did help a bit, giving him an instinctual sense of how fractals should look to work.

A sudden spark of inspiration made him think of another skill that he hadn't found a reason to use just yet, one of the E-grade ancillary skills he had learned in the Dao Repository. It was called **[Spiritual Anchor]**, and it could tentatively be considered a defensive skill.

The skill didn't actually protect against attacks, but it instead allowed you to create an anchor point for yourself. The anchor was pretty much a backup point that made an image of your body, your soul, your skill fractals, and pathways. The main use of the skill was to discover if you had been marked, possessed, or otherwise tampered with in some unknown way.

For example, the brands that his lava bath exposed had most likely been hidden as nondescript fractals attached somewhere on his body, and it was hard to spot something like that among the millions of fractals that constituted his pathways. With [**Spiritual Anchor**], he could create an anchor point every time before going off-world in the future, making sure he wasn't inadvertently bringing trouble back home to Earth.

Zac had unhesitatingly learned the skill when he saw its use, eager to gain some protection after having seen six different marks getting expelled from his body just minutes earlier. Of course, he had proceeded to make his first anchor point the moment his body was back in good condition, creating a baseline before he started exploring the Mystic Realm.

The skill had a weakness, though; if Zac already carried hidden threats when making the anchor point, then he would never notice it since it would be part of the stored image in his mind. Still, it was an extremely valuable tool for someone like Zac, who didn't have elders who could scan him with their superior mental acuity.

The current situation with his broken pathways made him think of another use for the skill; it was a proper reference map for his whole pathway system. His pathways were branded in his mind already, which was what allowed him to redraw them after breaking open a node, but [**Spiritual Anchor**] would perhaps make things even easier for him.

Zac activated the skill, and his eyes lit up when he saw the result. It worked just as he hoped, with the anchor superimposing itself over his pathways, including the broken parts. His progress suddenly sped up significantly as he started redrawing the pathways, and the number of mistakes lessened drastically as well.

Using his new skill significantly decreased the difficulty of his work. It was like he was tracing a series of lines rather than drawing something from memory. He wasn't improving his understanding of fractals when doing things this way, but this wasn't the time to worry about that; he had bigger fish to fry.

The following hours passed without anything else surprising taking place, with one cycle after another being completed as Zac made rapid progress on his pathways. Zac stopped working on the pathways during the ninth cycle, instead turning his sight to his mind to see the result of the first half of his improved soul cultivation method.

There were no two ways about it; the result was far superior. The deathly energies in his mind were extremely dense, and if he quantified it, the result was somewhere between 40 to 50% greater compared to before, all thanks to the first two rotations being infused with the Fragment of the Coffin.

Zac's mind was still throbbing even hours later. He could only bear with it, knowing he had to do the same thing on his life-attuned side. He would have to empower two revolutions again to bring his soul back to equilibrium. So he quickly swapped over to his Draugr side and started the process once more, preparing himself to push through the first two revolutions by hook or crook.

He could quickly confirm that the shimmering golden energies from the bodhi tree joined the mental stream, but the enormous strain he had anticipated never arrived. Certainly, the difficulty was much harder than normal, but it wasn't any worse compared to the first cycle on the death-attuned side.

Was this a limitation of his Dao Apparitions, perhaps? Each apparition was limited in the amount of energy it could exude, causing the strain to steadily increase as the drain continued. However, swapping to a different Dao would reset the difficulty since the other apparition was still full of vigor.

This was great news to Zac, since it meant that he would be able to go all out with both the arrays in the future without worrying that he would overextend himself during the first half. A great surge returned half an hour later, causing a series of frantic collisions as life fought with death in his mind.

Zac felt his vision double for a second from the shocks to his soul, but he breathed out in relief after confirming that the increased intensity was still manageable. The second cycle

started up a few seconds later, and Zac let the shimmering golden haze join in that time as well. An even greater series of clashes followed when the cycle ended, causing small cracks to spread across his soul.

Blood started running down Zac's nose, and his eyes were completely bloodshot, but he ate a soul-mending pill as he kept going, this time stopping any more Dao from entering. He was only able to resume work on his pathways on the fifth revolution because of nausea from the collisions.

The session finally ended after roughly ten hours, confirming that Dao infusion improved the gains of the array, but not how quickly it ran. Still, the results were impressive, especially considering he had only infused two out of the nine revolutions. He felt that a lot more impurities had been expelled from the Life-Death explosions in his mind than normal, almost exactly matching the additional attunement he had measured.

That meant the efficiency of his Soul Strengthening Array had increased almost 40% simply from forming his Dao Apparitions.

Better yet, Zac was almost certain this wasn't the limits of his gains. For example, what if his Dao Fragments evolved to the next stage? The power of the Dao that entered the array would become greater, which in turn should result in a bigger boost. And his soul would keep getting stronger over time, which would hopefully increase the number of revolutions that he could empower.

As long as he kept working on it, the improvements would be huge, potentially saving him centuries of cultivation down the road. After all, soul cultivation was powerful for a variety of reasons, but people still didn't do it because of the huge time investment. But it felt like Zac had found the key to staying ahead of the Remnants locked in his mind this time around.

Just like the progress on his soul was great, so was the work on his pathways thanks to **[Spiritual Anchor]**. He couldn't help but curse himself for not thinking of it sooner. To

be fair, nothing like this had been mentioned in the information missive on the skill, perhaps since Brazla hadn't expected his E-grade descendants to be mortals.

His pathways were almost completely fixed thanks to the improved speed. Just a few more hours of dedicated redrawing and he would be back to normal. Part of Zac just wanted to stay in this place and swap between sleeping and cultivating, but he knew that was simply impossible.

So he went over his provisions and talismans before he stood up and walked out toward where he'd left the demon. Ogras was still sitting in the same spot as before, for once in meditation rather than drinking and carousing.

"You're ready to go?" Ogras asked as he opened his eyes.

"Let's go." Zac nodded. "We just need to fetch Kenzie."

"What? Why?" Ogras said with a scrunched-up face.

"She's the best when it comes to Technocrat technology. I don't want to completely rely on that Cartava Clan member." Zac shrugged. "Besides, there are sometimes opportunities you can't take away in the labs. I don't want her to miss out. Billy and Thea are coming as well."

Ogras grumbled a bit as he got to his feet, and he donned a hooded robe to mask his changing complexion. The two walked over to the buildings that Kenzie controlled, a mix of workshops and warehouses to store everything from gathered Memorysteel to inactive drone swarms.

"I'll wait outside," Ogras said, and Zac shrugged with some confusion before walking inside by himself.

"You're back!" Kenzie exclaimed with relief before her smile turned into a scowl. "What's the matter with you men? I had to find out you slunk away by yourself from Thea? And that you had returned in one piece, *half a day ago*, from the guards? Do none of you have communication crystals?!"

"Uh," Zac only said, but his sister was obviously not done.

"Also! You told Thea that I couldn't go visit that forest, and now I'm essentially on house arrest! You need to be

careful with what you say.”

“Well, I guess that’s my bad?” Zac grimaced.

“Well, fine,” Kenzie muttered. “Have you seen Ogras? I can’t contact him either.”

“He’s right outside; we’re ready to set out again,” Zac said and hurriedly added when he saw her scowl deepening, “I’m here to see if you are free to go with us to the inner parts of the base. We could use your skill set.”

“You mean you need Jeeves?” Kenzie muttered, but her mood had clearly turned for the better as she started packing things.

The two updated each other on what had happened lately while she prepared, but not much had changed on Kenzie’s side. She had tried all sorts of things to interface with the base, but the systems were highly modular, according to Jeeves. Connecting to one terminal only provided access to that area and nothing else, which meant that she wouldn’t be able to assist him remotely.

Zac really didn’t want to bring his sister into the depths of the Mystic Realm, especially after seeing just how dangerous the base could be. But he also knew that he couldn’t rely on himself pressing random boxes on the Datamancer tablet either. Neither did he feel comfortable with relying too much on Leviala or her clan.

He could only pray that the dangers of his Man Versus Machine quest weren’t as lethal as what he had encountered thus far.

MISSIVE

Bringing Kenzie to the heart of the base filled Zac with trepidation, but she quickly proved her value as she narrated what she had done while Zac was out exploring. She had managed to get quite a few things done even with the high security of the base, mainly increasing the protection of the gates leading to their bases.

Most notably, she had constructed a series of defensive lines leading all the way from the biospheres to the fortified door leading to the outer rim, where one press of a button would trigger the base to attack everything within hundreds of meters. It was the same sort of arrangement the werewolf Datamancer had activated as a last resort against him, though Kenzie's method could be used remotely.

Also, she had finished booby-trapping the spatial tunnel, making sure that it would close up if anyone without Port Atwood credentials tried to enter it, making it impassable. It would remain closed even after the spatial turbulence abated until Kenzie fixed it again.

Of course, this trap would be possible to trigger remotely as well.

It was a weight off Zac's shoulders. Having all the elites of his alliance enter the depths of the Mystic Realm would expose not only their temporary bases but even Earth. This way, there would be no risk of either the Cartava Clan or the werewolves sneaking outside while Zac was busy dealing with the Dimensional Seed.

The other exits were still an issue that Zac couldn't affect, but his remote archipelago should be relatively safe even if some of the natives managed to sneak out while he was occupied.

She, or rather Jeeves, had even figured out a way to add certain modules to the base. Most notably, they had finished a prototype communications relay that could be connected to door terminals. The whole base was under some sort of interference that limited the range of cultivator-based communication crystals, and they could barely reach from one side of the base to another.

But what Kenzie had created would allow Port Atwood's people to use their Earth-based technology to communicate throughout the base, as long as there wasn't too large a distance between the relays that Kenzie would install. It wouldn't even be a problem to communicate with the glasshouse all the way from their base.

This functionality already existed inside the base, according to Leviala, but they didn't have time to hack into that system. This seemed like a quick and easy fix that would allow them to set up a private network within the base, further increasing security. Zac also updated Kenzie about what he had encountered while exploring the base, though he downplayed just how close he got to dying.

"It's good that you managed to take our people back. But it looks like those werewolves will be a problem." Kenzie sighed.

"They're pretty damn strong." Zac nodded. "I think only a few of our people and the strongest Anointed can deal with their elite soldiers on a one-on-one. Hopefully, we'll get some help from Clan Cartava after I saved their young miss."

"Oh, that reminds me. I got something for you from Calrin," Kenzie said. "Why did you spend so much money to look up a force full of nuns? Because of Leyara Lioress? The report says she's quite a beauty."

"Oh, it's here?" Zac asked with excitement, ignoring the jab at the end.

He had completely forgotten about his order with the Sky Gnome due to the recent events, but this was perfect. Anything that could help him increase his understanding of his bloodline would be helpful as he set course for the inner lab.

“I read it; there’s not too much information,” Kenzie said as she handed over a crystal. “They seldom invite outsiders, and they don’t leave their monasteries very often. However, their Strength is pretty amazing. The current Void Priestess is a real monster. She singlehandedly fought off six Monarchs of similar rank two hundred thousand years ago. Since then, she has probably only grown stronger.”

Zac’s brows rose in shock when he learned about the strength of Leyara’s master. It was no wonder Leyara could stand next to Pretty Peak and the other elite scions right at the center of the Base Town.

Defeating six people of the same rank wasn’t anything special for him, but it was a completely different story at the C-grade. Out of trillions of people, only one C-grade warrior might appear. And who among these elites didn’t have their own slew of unique encounters and hidden aces? Everyone was a monster who punched way above their weight class by that point. Regular elites had long been weeded out before they could even dream of Monarchy.

Zac quickly scanned the contents of the crystal, but there was not much else apart from what he had already learned. The only significant clue was that there were rumors of some sort of connection between that reclusive force and the Limitless Empire.

Both the Void Priestess and many of her followers had often been seen trying to acquire remnants of that long-fallen empire, sometimes spending obscene amounts of money on seemingly useless relics. The information suddenly made him remember something he had almost forgotten. Back during the first auction of the Base Town, an urn had been sold for an extremely exaggerated price.

The buyer, wasn’t it actually Leyara? He had only caught a glimpse of her face when she entered the bidding war on top

of the floating platform, but the more he thought about it, the more certain he became. He simply hadn't made the connection back when they actually met, as his mind was still occupied with his conversation with Catheya.

The huge battle between the Void Priestess and the other C-grade Monarchs that had caused waves in the whole Zecia Sector two hundred thousand years ago was apparently over a high-grade Mystic Realm said to contain remnants of the Limitless Empire as well.

That didn't say too much, though, as there were quite a few collectors and enthusiasts when it came to the Limitless Empire. It was once the most powerful force in the Multiverse, and Emperor Limitless was generally considered the most powerful being in history. Some simply found it interesting, while others hoped to strike it rich by finding a supreme treasure among the ancient rubble.

But it was also possible that the Void Gate had some actual relation to that ancient faction. Did that have some implications for his Void Emperor Bloodline? He couldn't stop his mind from wandering, and one possibility made his heart beat like a drum.

What if his mother had implanted him with the bloodline of Emperor Limitless?

"If you want to reach that lab, we should get going. We only have a bit over three days," Kenzie reminded him. "It will take almost two days even if we keep a high pace based on the maps you gave me, and that's provided we don't run into any issues on the way."

"Do you think you will be able to use these tablets like the native Datamancers?" Zac asked.

"Probably, at least with the help of my clearance. Jeeves might be able to force open some things, but he isn't really built for these kinds of tasks. So if we encounter someplace where neither of our credentials work, there might be trouble," Kenzie said after some thought.

“That’s good enough. Better than completely relying on outsiders.” Zac nodded, knowing that Jeeves was mainly a cultivation tool aimed to make Kenzie stronger. “Do you have an exact estimate of when the Dimensional Seed will mature?”

“Hard to say,” Kenzie said hesitantly. “Our estimates are based on when the spatial turbulence reaches a critical level and the portal naturally closes. But the Dimensional Seed might mature sooner or later as well. But it should be close. It’s like the treasure is gathering spatial energies to make a final push.”

“Well, better safe than sorry. I want to reach the lab with one day to spare. Let’s go.” Zac nodded.

The idea of him having such a vaunted bloodline felt extremely alluring, but he knew it was a long shot. He couldn’t be certain, but he didn’t believe that the man in his visions was Emperor Limitless at least. The man soaring through the cosmos on a meteor was extremely powerful, but he wasn’t anywhere near the godlike being that crushed the Heart of Oblivion or the Spark of Creation. Zac wasn’t even sure if he was at the same level as the ancient protector who was the source of his Draugr’s Dao Vision.

But that didn’t mean there wasn’t a connection. Perhaps the Void Bloodline came from some other powerful person from the Limitless Empire. After all, the Limitless Emperor didn’t create the System alone. He had the assistance of millions of unbelievably powerful warriors, some of them probably even at the A-grade.

Perhaps the remnants of one of these supreme existences were located in the Zecia Sector, which was both the source of his bloodline and the Heritage that the Void Gate was built upon.

No matter what the truth was, it was worth looking into. The Void Gate was hard to visit, according to the missive, but it wasn’t impossible. As a powerful faction, they controlled thousands of worlds, and some of them were popular trade hubs the monastery used to gather cultivation resources. If he

went there, he would probably be able to contact Leyara one way or another.

Kenzie had soon prepared everything she needed, which was apparently half a workshop, including a series of Technocrat 3D printers she had cobbled together. The demon was still waiting outside, giving Kenzie a sunny smile as they exited her house.

“So you are in the Mystic Realm after all? I guess your communication crystal broke,” Kenzie said coolly.

“Enough.” Zac sighed, knowing that Ogras had been lying low due to his condition. “No time to lose.”

Zac maintained a rapid pace this trip on his way out of the base, but neither his sister nor Ogras had any problems keeping up. Ogras had his shadows, and Kenzie utilized some sort of wind-based movement skill to run, each step making her look like she was weightless.

They arrived at the glasshouse just a few hours later, having only been half an hour delayed by Kenzie installing her new communications modules. Kenzie opened the gate this time to confirm that their different clearance titles didn't mean different access. Zac wasn't very interested in the interior, but Ogras curiously glanced toward the stalls.

“What is this place?” Ogras muttered as he looked around.

“I think it's for them,” Zac said as he pointed to the caged Lunar Wolves. “Thea said it might be a field lab to study the Lunar Wolves, and I'm inclined to agree. To take a bloodline of a beast and infuse it into a cultivator. Have you heard of anything like it?”

“Anything's possible.” Ogras shrugged. “Some beasts can even gain a humanoid form at certain stages, allowing them to essentially become cultivators themselves. The humanoid descendants of such cultivators would carry their bloodline. Of course, this seems to be something else, like a shortcut.”

“We'll find out what's going on here sooner or later,” Zac said as he started walking, but he stopped when he noticed that his sister hadn't followed them inside. “What are you doing?”

He saw that Kenzie was still standing by the terminal, but she had connected the tablet to it. The screen was rapidly flashing with the language of the base, and Kenzie was seemingly trying to take it all in.

“I’m just checking this thing out,” Kenzie said without moving her eyes away from the screen. “I want to see how these main gates work, if you can change the clearance levels required to pass through. I mean, if the natives don’t have any clearance levels, then we might be able to lower the clearance to level 1 or something.”

“Don’t fiddle with that door, though,” Zac quickly said. “The walls will try to kill us if you trigger the security protocols, and this one has already been triggered once.”

“Don’t worry, I’m just reading,” Kenzie smiled. “Give me a few minutes. There’s so much information to go through. This one has ten times the number of protocols compared to the normal doors.”

“Fine, I need to talk with Thea anyway. But be careful with that thing,” Zac said as he walked out through the barn door.

He had already spotted Thea standing outside, overseeing the transformation in the area. Two large walls had appeared in the short while Zac had been cultivating, with massive brass cannons mounted at regular intervals. Hundreds of Zhix warriors scurried back and forth, working on the defensive perimeter, and groups of human cultivators seemed to be readying themselves for war as well.

Thick barriers rose toward the sky as well, blocking any potential attacks coming from the forest, and Zac could even spot squads of Tal-Eladar roving outside, maintaining an outer perimeter. Zac hadn’t given any explicit orders on how to deal with moving the armies forward, but it seemed like they had everything in hand.

He had been worried about leaving these people alone as they traveled toward the inner reaches of the Mystic Realm, but seeing the strength and ingenuity of the elites of Earth filled him with confidence, allowing him to solely focus on his own mission.

INNER LAYER

“You’re back,” Thea said as she spotted Zac walking over. “You’re looking better.”

“Finally had some time to rest up a bit.” Zac smiled. “Have there been any problems with the wolves?”

“Not really; a few of them appeared in the distance, but a bunch of Anointed scared them away. I think the Zhix were actually a bit disappointed,” Thea said with a shake of her head.

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” Zac snorted. “Are you ready?”

“I’m good to go, but Billy will be sitting this one out,” Thea said.

“Oh, why?” Zac asked with confusion. “Is he hurt?”

He had already asked about Emily and Joanna from Kenzie, and while neither of them was in critical condition, they weren’t ready to join the mission either. Emily was still unconscious after overdrafting her Cosmic Energy, but she was being continuously fed healing pills and nurtured by healers. Not having those two available to join the army was already a big loss, and losing an elite like Billy would definitely weaken his squad.

It was a shame for Billy as well, considering where they were. If anyone could find a suitable opportunity in this place, it would probably be Billy, considering he was a descendant of one of the races brought here.

“No, nothing like that. He suddenly fell asleep, and a lot of energy is entering his body. I think he had some sort of epiphany,” Thea said as he nodded over at a tent. “I had some people drag him over there.”

“Oh, guess he found an opportunity of his own. Well, he can catch up with the real armies later,” Zac said.

The two headed over to a command tent where the Anointed had already gathered, and they shored up their plans over the next twenty minutes. It wasn't really anything too complicated. The Zhix would set out the moment the treasure matured no matter whether Zac had come back by that point or not, heading for the inner area.

They could technically depart earlier than that, but there were simply too many barriers and security checks in the way right now. They were severely lacking in understanding this place compared to the natives, and Kenzie couldn't be everywhere putting out fires. However, a C-grade treasure maturing had huge ramifications, according to what he had learned, to the point that it could transform whole planets.

This was a risk, but also their chance. Everything pointed to the Dimensional Seed being somehow integrated with the base itself, and the terrifying outburst of power should knock out most security systems. It would both remove the advantage of the natives while simultaneously giving them free passage toward the inner layer.

Hopefully, Zac's group would be able to meet up with them there, but if not, then a small group of elite Anointed would enter the core while the rest would start looking for the Dominators' armies. They would be assisted by all the different factions of the Atwood Alliance, but the goal was for them to only deal with the followers of the Dominators, with Zac's group dealing with Inevitability and Void's Disciple themselves.

It was a risk for their army to travel without any real powerhouses to shore up their ranks, but both Zac and Rhubat saw no choice. They had to take the gamble that Void's Disciple wouldn't waste his time in the outer reaches, and

instead rush for the Dimensional Seed. It was most likely the same with all factions that chose to head for the riches in the core, like the cultists and the Lunar Tribe.

That left the natives, but Zac felt that the Anointed with their War Arrays and great ferocity would be able to protect themselves. The natives should be smarter than to enter an all-out war against their armies considering their main goal should be escaping.

For now, the army would finish setting up this defensive perimeter before creating a final one at the main gate leading toward the inner reaches. It was the gate that the Cartava Clan wanted them to open, making Zac a bit reluctant to use it, but there were no alternatives. It was the only path leading inside that they had found except the Lunar Tribe's maps. But those backdoor pathways were simply too narrow for both an army and the hulking Anointed.

The two returned to Ogras and Kenzie, who had finished her readings, and the four of them departed. They weren't alone this time, but rather accompanied by a squad of a hundred elites who would set up the initial perimeter by the gate. These warriors were the cream of the crop, and they had no problem keeping up with Zac's small group even when he exerted some effort.

Their breakneck pace allowed them to reach the inner gate in just six hours, and even the group of Anointed were panting a bit by that point. The larger Anointed were fine, though, as were Ogras and Thea.

"This is the place." Zac said as he nodded at the gate. "We will keep going for a bit longer."

"How about you let me try modifying this door?" Kenzie interjected. "We don't actually know what will happen when the treasure wakes up. What if the door stays the same? Isn't Tier 4 clearance required to enter? Only we have that."

Zac looked up at the towering wall with hesitation for a few seconds until he eventually nodded in agreement.

“You guys stay here,” Zac said to the scout. “I’ll protect her if the wall goes crazy.”

The two walked up to the gate, but neither tried to open it. He felt he had reached an accord with Leviala by this point, but he still didn’t want to bet that there wasn’t a trap waiting on the other side. Kenzie infused a bit more Base Power into the tablet as she hooked it up to the gate itself rather than the terminal that was a few meters up in the air. Zac looked at his sister inquisitively, wondering if she really knew what she was doing.

“The frame is directly connected to the terminal.” Kenzie shrugged. “It’s all the same to Jeeves whether he gains access to the gate or the terminal itself.”

“Is... Jeeves actually entering these things, or is it just telling you what to do?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“It’s connected to them like this tablet is connected to the wall. He doesn’t actually enter the wall or whatever. Why? What’s wrong?” Kenzie asked with a slightly distracted voice, as most of her focus was reserved for the screen.

“The Administrator,” Zac said. “It might be a problem if the Base AI consider Jeeves a threat. Jeeves is probably higher-quality tech, but it’s still just F-grade. Meanwhile, I saw the Administrator fight with what I think was a C-grade monstrosity on even footing.”

“I considered that, but these gates are completely isolated, from the looks of it. Besides, Jeeves is essentially masquerading as the tablet itself; we shouldn’t be exposed even if that AI was directly looking at what we are doing,” Kenzie said.

“Fine.” Zac slowly nodded. “But you can’t do things like this in the core. The Administrator is actively controlling those parts, according to Leviala. No point in risking it unless absolutely necessary.”

“Leviala?” Kenzie said with an impish smile. “First-name basis?”

“Just focus,” Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

“It’s already done.” Kenzie giggled as she retrieved the tablet, leaving one of her communication dongles behind. “This gate will only require Class 3 clearance to open now, while still having the same security protocols as before. Jeeves even activated a dormant anti-tampering protocol to make hacking harder. If the Cartava Clan couldn’t get through before, they definitely shouldn’t be able to now.”

“Good job.” Zac nodded. “I think you might be our biggest ace in this place.”

“It’s good that you finally understand,” Kenzie said with a wink. “Not everything can be solved with an axe.”

“Well, not everything; more than one would expect.” Zac smiled.

Zac’s group left the scouts behind after confirming no wolves were lurking nearby, heading straight for their next target, a nondescript grate almost twenty meters into the air, barely visible on the wall from the ground. It took them almost two hours to get there, even after increasing their pace. The grate was a “swarm pipe,” according to Leviala, a small outlet that released swarms of microscopic machines whose job was to kill any unwanted flora and pollinate the wanted species.

However, these gardener machines had either stopped working or they had been blocked by structural damage further inside the base, as those machines hadn’t been seen for centuries. And now, with the spatial expansion, the pipe was wide enough to allow people to squeeze through, albeit barely.

“Is it really necessary to take this circuitous path?” Kenzie asked as she looked down on the mapper with some hesitation. “I’m sure we could find a path without squeezing through claustrophobic pipes and runoff grates.”

“Might as well; it should only add a few hours’ travel time compared to a more direct route. And the path doesn’t only take into account these kinds of hidden paths, but also spatial anomalies. There should be some reason as to why the werewolves chose these paths rather than the normal corridors,” Zac said. “I want to avoid any spatial tears for as

long as we can. I don't know if that thing in the Void is still angry.”

“Fine.” Kenzie shrugged.

Zac quickly took out a series of daggers with flat handles and quickly infused each of them with a smidgeon of Base Power before he threw them into the wall. As expected, the knives embedded themselves into the Memorysteel without issue, forming a set of steps all the way up to the gate.

Kenzie was about to jump up to open it, but she was stopped by Zac, who went up himself with his tablet. His sister seemed to be confident in Jeeves' abilities, but he wasn't so certain. Leandra had warned him of the Mystic Realm in their short talk after he evolved, and Zac was worried that his mother's warning was based on her desire to keep Jeeves rather than her children safe.

Perhaps there were things in this place that could harm Jeeves and, in doing so, harm Kenzie as well. He had witnessed the power this base still possessed after all these years, and connecting Jeeves to the wrong terminal might cause the AI to overload.

However, Zac quickly realized that opening the lid to a grate was very different from opening a hidden gate with the help of Leviala. A series of weird boxes appeared, but none of them looked like the one he had pressed before. Touching the token against the tablet didn't help either, so Zac could only jump down in defeat and let his sister deal with it.

The following hours passed without any surprises as they followed the detailed map left behind by the werewolf scouts. They quickly realized just how much larger the Living Layer was compared to the Outer Ring. They weren't able to move very quickly due to moving through uncharted pathways, but they had still walked a depth that was twice that of the Outer Ring with most of the map still remaining.

It wasn't solely due to how the base was constructed either. Part of it definitely came from the spatial expansion, which only seemed to be increasing in severity on their way in. When they entered the pipe, they were forced to walk hunched over,

but after a few hours, the pipes were wide enough for them to walk upright without issue.

The pipe took a circuitous path on its way to the inner layer, and with the lack of natural lighting, it quickly became extremely claustrophobic. Ogras repeatedly muttered about blasting a hole in the wall and walking through the normal corridors, and Thea stopped reprimanding him after an hour.

“That’s enough whining,” Kenzie eventually said, the tablet in her hands illuminating her face. “We’ll be exiting this pipe soon. It seems the werewolves created an exit that leads to a warehouse. From there, we will take the normal paths for a while.”

Kenzie was the only one whose mood hadn’t been dampened by the pitch-black and cramped tunnels, probably since she had spent most of her time holed up in her workshops lately. She was also constantly using the tablet in her hands, and one box after another flashed in an endless stream of indecipherable data. They had stopped now and then as well, allowing Kenzie to keep installing her communication modules in the walls.

They finally reached the marked spot Kenzie had mentioned, and found clear signs of outside interference. What had once been a small vent had been expanded into a proper grate with hinges and everything. Zac opened it up and peered inside and found that the warehouse was even bigger than the place where the Lunar Tribe had set up their relay station.

The room was almost impossibly large, and their point of ingress was almost fifty meters in the air. This place was different from what they were used to for another reason as well; there were thousands of metallic boxes neatly arranged along the wall and in aisles across the room. The boxes were each almost thirty meters tall, though that likely meant they had been about two meters before the spatial expansion took place.

Zac’s eyes lit up with excitement, and he jumped down after getting a go-ahead from his sister. Ogras was right on his heels, and he looked at the massive crates with greed. Thea

and Kenzie quickly made their way down as well, and they all walked over to the closest box.

“Do you think they contain those big controllable automatons?” Ogras asked before he looked at Kenzie askance. “*Someone* destroyed the ones we had.”

“Well, *someone* had to keep the undead at bay while you were off having fun in the Tower of Eternity,” Kenzie shot right back.

Zac didn't mind their bickering as he looked down the aisle that was so long that it almost looked like an illusion. He didn't care if the boxes contained mechas or raw materials. As long as they contained anything of even a little bit of value on the outside, then they had just struck a motherlode.

UNMARKED BOXES

“I wouldn’t say the Tower of Eternity was all fun and games,” Zac eventually said as his eyes turned back to the box in front of him. “Would complex machines like mechas and drones grow from the spatial expansion?”

“I am not sure, but I don’t think so?” Kenzie said. “I have been keeping watch on my drones, and they are exactly the same as before. I think it’s because they have an active energy source and a steady current, and the energy is dense enough to inhibit whatever the Dimensional Seed is doing to this place.”

“So the Core Sector might actually be normal-sized?” Thea ventured. “I imagine that the core, if any place, would have a lot of this Base Power running through the walls.”

“Perhaps,” Kenzie said. “But it’s also possible that the spatial energies of the Dimensional Seed would just overpower everything around it in such close proximity. I guess we’ll find out as we get closer.”

“So, can we open these things?” Ogras asked with gleaming eyes. “Or is there a reason the beastmen left them behind?”

“I – don’t think there’s a problem,” Kenzie said, but she didn’t seem sure as she looked down at her tablet. “I can’t see anything out of the norm. It’s just a storage box with some environmental maintenance protocols. Is it really worth looting this place now, though? We have time, but...”

“Treasures are meant to be taken, girl. Your brother is a walking opportunity magnet; we need to make use of it.

Knowing his luck, these boxes might contain exactly what we need to deal with the insect bastards,” Ogras said as he turned to Zac. “Go ahead. Conjure something useful.”

“I’m not some magician,” Zac snorted, but he was tempted.

It felt like a waste to leave these boxes behind. Who knew what would happen in the future? The whole base might start falling apart after the Dimensional Seed was taken away, considering how integrated it seemed to be with the base. Anything left behind might be lost forever. Zac had over ten empty top-quality Cosmos Sacks on him, meant to be stuffed with everything from raw materials to spaceships, and now was as good a time as any to start looting.

So Zac jumped up to press the only button on the box, a small smile spreading across his face.

“Wait, stop!” Kenzie shouted with urgency, prompting Zac to immediately push away from the box without opening it, and he landed right behind the group.

“What? What’s going on?” Zac asked.

“There’s something weird going on. Everything is fine according to the readings, but I sensed some sort of energies in the air. I think—” she muttered, but she didn’t get any further as a series of previously hidden vents suddenly appeared on the closest boxes.

A dense cloud of some unknown gas blasted out the next moment, forcing the group to scramble out of the way. They quickly realized that it was just normal steam released to depressurize the containers, but the fact that they’d suddenly woken up without Zac touching them clearly wasn’t good news.

“Some luck. Forgot you’re a trouble magnet as well,” Ogras muttered as shadows swallowed their group, and they reappeared halfway across the vast storeroom a second later.

Zac rolled his eyes in response as they rushed for the only door in the warehouse, an exit on the side opposite where they came from. A barrier had already appeared to block their

escape, and Zac frowned when he saw how thick it was. It looked like a beefed-up version of the ones they had encountered before, or perhaps it was simply being fed a lot more Base Power compared to the shields in the Outer Ring.

Worse yet, more and more boxes were releasing steam, and the whole room echoed with clanking sounds as they opened by the hundreds.

The ground cracked beneath Zac's feet as he shot toward the red barrier while a halo appeared behind his back. Inside, it was the avatar of the axe-man's axe, and it caused Zac's aura to grow deeper as he slammed [**Verun's Bite**] into the shield.

Popping sounds echoed out across the area as the air exploded from the force generated by [**Conformation of Supremacy**]. A series of crashes quickly followed as both Ogras and Thea appeared to his left and right, each of them releasing an all-out strike at the barrier. But the shield was beyond sturdy. It didn't even shudder, even though the air itself had been ripped apart, forming a series of chaotic spatial tears that were quickly swallowed by the barrier itself.

"Watch out!" Kenzie screamed, but Zac was already moving by that point, as his Danger Sense had warned him of an impending attack.

Two bronze blades stabbed into the ground where he'd just stood a moment ago, both of them attached to thin mechanical arms that stretched over fifty meters into the haze. Zac looked toward the source, spotting a spherical object that was slowly emerging from the steam. It was about three meters across, making the massive container it came out of look almost comically oversized.

Zac's first guess was that Kenzie was right. The boxes had grown while the contents had not. That by itself felt like a huge lucky break, as the force contained in that stab just now had been a bit troubling, powerful enough to leave marks on the sturdy Memorysteel floor. But Kenzie's theory was quickly proven imperfect at best as more spherical objects came rolling out of the nearby crates, each of them a different size.

The smallest ones were just about Zac's height, with the largest ones being tower monstrosities reaching almost fifteen meters in the air. The steam quickly dissipated as well, giving the group a better look at what they were dealing with. Zac wasn't surprised to see that they were all some sort of landbound drones that looked like enormous brass balls.

The bladed weapons from before were actually a part of the ball's surface, like hidden mantis scythes that were normally protected inside the ball itself. A dozen smaller such appendages suddenly split out from the bottom of the ball as well, creating a series of nimble appendages that allowed the closest machines to rush toward them.

"Can you control it? Or them?" Zac said as he looked across the warehouse with trepidation.

Did all these containers contain a killing machine like this?

The question quickly became apparent as more and more machines scurried out, quickly forming an army inside the warehouse. Thankfully, it looked like less than a third of the boxes actually conjured a spider ball. The rest still housed similar machines, but they failed to activate for some reason or another.

There were also quite a few machines that seemed to move about like they were drunk, perhaps lacking some integral parts due to lack of service over the past millennia. Zac quickly realized what was going on. The smaller machines seemed to work flawlessly as they arranged themselves before moving toward his group. The midsized ones had various problems affecting their mobility, and the largest balls didn't even seem able to activate.

The spatial expansion had worked on these machines, but to varying degrees. The more they had expanded, the worse condition they were left in. That wasn't surprising considering they no doubt contained extremely precise technology, like all kinds of chipsets that might have broken down from being forcibly expanded by the Dao of Space.

Still, the functional ones were more than enough to make Zac feel some pressure, and he was quickly beset by a flurry of

scythes coming at him from every direction. Each swing contained a fierce momentum, and the blades themselves were barely damaged after Zac blocked them with **[Chop]**. Whatever alloy they were made of was even sturdier than the Memorysteel in the walls.

The one saving grace was that some of the machines were so massive that they blocked out their smaller brethren, making it so they only needed to face a few dozen at a time. Still, Zac knew it would take a huge effort to take them all out, so he looked over at his sister, who was frantically typing away at her tablet.

“Nothing I do works!” she said with panic in her eyes. “I-I can’t...”

“Stay calm,” Zac said as his arms turned into a blur while keeping the continuous waves of attacks at bay. “If you can’t control the robots, work on the shield instead.”

“Right!” Kenzie exclaimed as she quickly found her bearings, and she hurried to the wall and directly connected it to her tablet with a cable.

Ogras threw out a series of array disks before he covered her in shadows, but it didn’t seem to work, as five of the robots targeted Kenzie’s position. Their attacks only made it halfway before a blue streak rippled through the air, though, and the mantis-like blades fell to the ground, cleanly cut off. It was Thea, who had targeted the thin arms of the robots rather than the blades themselves, and Zac noticed that scars appeared out of nowhere on a lot of the battlebots.

It was likely Thea’s invisible Spirit Tool, which Zac thought she had discarded in favor of the graceful blue sword in her hands. But it looked like Thea had rather added another weapon to her repertoire, with one focusing on large-scale battle and the other one on direct confrontation.

Ogras wasn’t to be outdone either, and he melded with the shadows on the ground before he appeared in the middle among the machines, causing chaos among their ranks. It was hard to tell what was real and what was shadows as he flitted around, but every time his new spear struck, a battlebot was

destroyed. He was using the machines' weaknesses against them: the openings created in their outer shell every time they extended their weapons.

Zac wanted to join in as well, but he found himself in a passive state where he was forced to stay close to Kenzie, blocking an endless series of attacks. It even felt like the machines understood what Kenzie was trying to do, and more and more of the battlebots seemed to be targeting his sister. This wasn't like when they assaulted the undead incursion either; there were no Valkyries to erect a defensive War Array around his sister, and Ogras' array disks were just illusion arrays to hide her.

Part of him wanted to just drop a mountain on these machines, but he was afraid that the commotion would create even more trouble. The further they went into the base, the higher the risk was that they would attract attention from the Administrator. Besides, using **[Nature's Punishment]** might actually cause the whole roof to blow off again, providing the Collector with another point of ingress.

"What should we do?" Ogras shouted as he dragged his spear out of a four-meter battlebot.

The machine tried to swing down one of its massive blades on the demon, but it suddenly shuddered before a storm of shadows emerged from every small crack in its plating. Everything inside was no doubt ripped apart from the demon's shadows.

"Keep destroying these things, but no attacks that might harm the base itself," Zac said as his eyes turned pitch-black. "I'll keep Kenzie safe while she works on the barrier."

A huge Miasmatic Bulwark emerged the next second, effortlessly blocking the barrage of strikes coming Kenzie's way. Zac positioned himself right between the machines, readying himself for a protracted defense. His body grew as he activated **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. He didn't believe that the skill's taunting effect would work on the machines, but his increased size gave him a better reach.

“How does it look?” Zac asked as he cut off a scythe that tried to pass around his bulwark to strike Kenzie.

“It’s working, but I need a few minutes,” Kenzie said while frantically tapping away at her tablet.

Zac only grunted in response as he kept blocking. The defensive capabilities of his undead class were far beyond what he could manage in his human form, but his Draugr class wasn’t all that effective in dealing with machines. **[Deathwish]** didn’t seem able to copy the battlebots, perhaps because of the lack of spirituality. Furthermore, both **[Fields of Despair]** and **[Winds of Decay]** would probably harm his own people more than they would the robots.

Thea and Ogras were thankfully doing the work of half an army by themselves. It looked like the two were competing with each other for kills, with the Marshall scion desperately trying to keep up with Ogras’ large-scale destruction. Unfortunately for her, Ogras had already evolved, and he had gained almost ten levels since doing so. That was the equivalent of over 80 F-grade levels in terms of attributes, and Thea simply couldn’t compete with that, try as she might.

Still, she showed amazing expertise as she moved back and forth between the machines. The smaller spider balls were extremely nimble, and they could send out up to five scythes at a time. They created whole spheres of death around them, with bronze streaks filling the air. If these machines were dropped into his army, they would have singlehandedly caused mass casualties before they were brought down.

But Thea somehow managed to walk right into those zones of death, quickly delivering a single strike with pinpoint precision, destroying the machine in one go. Zac himself had only turned into a glorified guardian, or more like a mobile fortress as he expanded **[Immutable Bulwark]** to its maximum proportions.

He was also being assisted by the small mountain of broken machines that created a half-circle around them, making it harder and harder for the larger machines to get close. The big ones barely worked, but their scythes were

simply humongous, and they carried a tremendous force that managed to stab some way into Zac's shield before he managed to shrug them off.

Zac wasn't really comfortable just staying on the passive, but he really had nothing to counter with at a time like this. It was one limitation of [**Love's Bond**]; it was unable to send out any chains while it was in its defensive form. That made it impossible for Zac to start destroying the battlebots with [**Blighted Cut**], even though he was pretty certain he would be able to puncture even these sturdy things with the help of the extremely potent corrosion.

"It's done!" Kenzie finally shouted, and the shield blocking the exit disappeared a second later. "Hurry, it will activate soon again!"

Zac quickly shrank his bulwark just enough for Thea and Ogras to slip past him, and he brought up the rear as the others fled through the door. Zac was about to deactivate his fractal shield and exit as well, but he changed his mind at the last second. His Danger Sense had suddenly woken up again. A huge explosion rocked the whole area the next moment, causing massive cracks in Zac's fractal bulwark before the force threw him out of the gate.

Ogras was the last to exit before Zac, and the demon yelped in surprise as he barely managed to avoid Zac's hulking form as he hurtled through the air. Zac slammed into the wall with enough force to cause a dent in the Memorysteel, but he just groaned as he got back on his feet, ready for another attack.

However, he was relieved to see that the gate had closed again.

"I just blocked the barrier for a few seconds; it's active again. Those robots shouldn't be able to get out," Kenzie said. "That last blast was the closest ones self-destructing."

"Okay, that might have been my bad. No more messing with unmarked boxes," Ogras muttered with a wry smile.

DIVINE GUIDANCE

“We never even touched the thing. I think it sensed us standing around and activated, causing a chain reaction,” Kenzie said as she sighed. “The werewolves must have known and simply ran straight through.”

“Well, at least they weren’t too powerful,” Zac said as he turned back to human. “But there might be more dangerous machines further in if these things were just left behind like this.”

“You’re full of surprises...” Thea muttered as she gave Zac an inscrutable look.

Zac could only shrug his shoulders in response, not really in the mood to explain exactly how things worked with his undead side. She already knew some parts of it from back during the Hunt, though, so him using two new skills shouldn’t come as too big a shock.

“We should go in case they can sense us through the wall,” Kenzie said as she took out her mapper, seemingly trying to help her brother change the subject. “Let them calm down by themselves. We are just an hour away from where we’re supposed to meet your new friend.”

“Right, let’s go.” Zac nodded as he shot one last look at the gate before he started walking again.

“I can’t believe you set a time and location,” Ogras muttered as he stowed away his spear. “It’s like you want to be ambushed.”

Thea didn't say anything, but she seemed to be in agreement with the demon's sentiment.

"We could really use their expertise. Kenzie can't be expected to find out every hidden danger in this place, and we might walk into a real deathtrap sooner or later if we keep going like this," Zac said. "Besides, they're a clan with an ocular bloodline. How strong can they be?"

"Famous last words," Thea said with a roll of her eyes, but she didn't offer any alternative course of action.

The group kept a high pace through the oversized corridors, and the map held true, keeping them out of the way of any barriers or spatial tears. They were forced to pass through a second warehouse, but they had learned their lesson already and relied on Ogras to teleport them through the enormous room with three rapid jumps.

They finally reached their destination eighty minutes later, a nondescript crossing looking like any other. Zac and Leviaia had chosen this place since Leviaia was certain that she'd be able to get here from Clan Cartava's headquarters. However, no one was there awaiting their arrival, and neither were there any clues left behind.

"Well, the labs are further down this way, though the map becomes incomplete at the end. The werewolves either ran out of time or encountered some difficulties," Kenzie said as she pointed down the path right ahead. "What do you want to do? Wait here, or keep going?"

"We're already a bit late, but she's still not here," Zac muttered as he looked around another time. "Something might have changed on their side."

"Well, we should be able to figure it out without her," Ogras said, clearly unwilling to give up on a chance at the treasure. "We have the map, right? We can just go to the end, and Kenzie should be able to gather clues from there, leading us to this inner lab. The Cartava Clan might have become greedy, heading there before us to loot the riches."

“Maybe we should go find those natives instead?” Thea hesitantly said. “Their base is only half a day from here, right? We can head over there and form an alliance, paving the way for our people. Then we can go to the inner labs after the seed has matured. Isn’t the whole plan that the defenses will be lowered then?”

“I can’t wait that long.” Zac sighed.

“What?” Thea asked with confusion. “Is there something you haven’t told us?”

Zac hesitated for a bit before he set up an isolation array, and both Ogras and Kenzie added their own methods to obscure the area even further.

“I have a quest telling me I have to get there before the Dimensional Seed matures. It might fail if we take a detour to Clan Cartava. I didn’t find a mapper on the werewolf squad responsible for heading there, so we don’t have any safe paths in that direction.”

“It specifically said you had to get there before the seed matures?” Ogras asked to confirm, a thoughtful look adorning his face. “What else did it say?”

Zac deliberated for a second before he shared the quest screen, including the note at the end.

“What the hell?” Thea muttered, her eyes wide in disbelief. “What kind of quest is this? You’ve already completed three quests, and there are six more? And there are punishments? Why are there punishments?”

“Just the System being an asshole again.” Zac shrugged. “The punishment was a lot worse in the beginning, but I still don’t want to risk losing one of my core skills.”

“Divine guidance... It has to be,” Ogras said with wide eyes.

“Divine guidance? What?” Kenzie said, looking at Ogras skeptically. “Isn’t it just a special quest Zac got because he’s strong?”

“All those things you described before, were they part of this quest chain?” Ogras asked.

“Yes, starting with rescuing Leviala Cartava.” Zac nodded, feeling the demon might be onto something.

After all, he only got this chain of quests after he got the **[Pathstrider]** title, marking him a candidate for training. Divine guidance sounded like something the demon might call a chain of training quests.

“So the reason we managed to reach this place was that the System led you to the only native carrying a set of maps?” Ogras asked to confirm.

“I... guess?” Zac asked hesitantly, his suspicions only growing when he saw Ogras’ reaction. “You think that the System is leading me to the core?”

“My grandfather once told me a story, a rumor he heard from his captain on the battlefield. About Lord Lucifer’s younger days,” Ogras said.

“Lucifer? The Devil?” Thea blurted.

“A C-grade Demon Monarch,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “In either case, my grandpa saved the life of his captain during a war. That’s how Grandpa gained an opportunity to reach D-grade. His captain turned out to be a distant descendant of Lord Lucifer himself, out to gain experience and battle merit as an unnamed soldier of the horde.”

“Larok, the captain, told Grandpa some stories about his ancestor after they became friends, tales of bravery and such. It turns out, Lord Lucifer was accidentally sucked into a newly emerged Peak D-grade Mystic Realm when he was a Peak E-grade warrior, a death sentence if there ever was one. But not only did he survive, but he even emerged with one of the core treasures of that place.”

“What was it?” Kenzie asked curiously.

“Some sort of natural treasure that helped him form a top-quality Cultivator’s Core. He used his newfound power to wage a thousand-year campaign, utterly stomping out various threats to the Azh’Kir’Khat Horde,” Ogras said. “The

contribution points he accumulated from that war set him up for life, and he's now standing tall as one of the supreme war chiefs of the horde."

"What's this got to do with us?" Thea asked with an exasperated tone.

"Patience, girl," Ogras snorted. "Apparently, Lord Lucifer was surrounded by terrifying beasts in that Mystic Realm, but he refused to give up. So he hid beneath the ground and cultivated, planning to form a Cultivation Core prematurely before making a mad dash to escape. But he was suddenly given a task by the Ruthless Heavens, and he saw a chance at survival even without breaking through with shaky foundations. One task followed another, unknowingly leading him to the treasure and then to a hidden exit of the realm."

"The System guided him through a chain of quests, not only to become stronger but also to help him achieve his goals. You think the same is happening here?" Zac muttered.

"Exactly. The Ruthless Heavens puts its fingers on the scales for its chosen few. We already know you are blessed with monstrous Luck, drawing the attention of the Ruthless Heavens over and over. It knows what you need, and the threats you face. If we don't kill the Dominators, the Great Redeemer will track you down and harvest your soul. It is creating a path of survival for you, a way to beat the odds," Ogras said.

"We can still do all that even without completing some quests," Thea countered.

"Can we? Can we guarantee it?" Ogras said with a sharp glance. "We believe the Dimensional Seed to be a C-grade treasure for it to attract the zealots and the Dominators to this extent. A treasure of that level has a spirituality, a sense of self-perseverance. It might knock out the security of this place, but it might also bolster it. What if our only way to reach the core or the other side is to reach the inner lab before it's too late? And if we stay outside, we'll be locked out forever?"

"Divine guidance," Zac muttered. "And you're not just saying all this because you want the treasures inside?"

“There are no conflicts of interest here.” Ogras smiled. “We all win if we head for the inner lab. This was our plan from the start. Why question it now?”

“Alright, let’s just go,” Zac agreed, and the group set out again.

However, they only kept going for another hour before they encountered a bloody sight; Leviala lying on the ground in a pool of dried blood, her face haggard and pale. Judging by the trail of blood on the walls, she had come here through an air duct, but she had stopped moving after falling down the fifty meters to the ground.

“I’m sorry,” Leviala weakly said as she looked up at Zac. “I meant to go to our meeting point, but I guess I dozed off.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Zac sighed as he threw a set of healing pills at the girl. “How do you keep ending up in a state like this?”

“Do you think I enjoy this?” Leviala said with a glare as she ate the healing pills. “You were right. Things are bad back home.”

“Bad how?” Zac said, but there was no time to hear an explanation, as he suddenly sensed people to his left.

He quickly swirled as his axe appeared in his hand, and the others quickly prepared themselves as well as over fifty people had appeared out of nowhere a hundred meters away. There was no way for so many people to sneak up on a group like theirs that easily, making Zac believe they had some high-tiered cloaking technology from this base.

They were definitely humans, but their appearance gave Zac some pause. They looked a lot like the Technocrats Zac had fought when closing the incursion, as they all carried various energy weapons while having shields formed from the same red barriers as the base.

There were also hundreds of flying machines that looked a bit like Kenzie’s drones, though their design was fundamentally different. They rather looked like small airplanes, with barrels attached to the wings. They definitely

were tools of war rather than scouting, judging by the attachments, and even Zac felt some pressure from being the target of that many weapons.

“Technocrats?” Ogras muttered with hesitation.

“Interesting designs,” Kenzie whispered as she looked at the drones with gleaming eyes, and Zac inwardly groaned when he realized that his sister’s drone swarm was about to grow in size once more.

Ogras only snickered, clearly having realized what was about to happen as well. The demon didn’t know about Jeeves, but he did know this base had been built by Zac and Kenzie’s ancestors, and their unique advantages had been put on ample display over the past weeks. Trying to use this base’s weaponry against them was foolhardy at best.

“Traitors of my family.” Leviala sighed, sadness written all over her face. “I’m sorry, I thought I shook them off.”

Zac was a bit surprised that the soldiers of the Cartava Clan had gone in this direction, but on further thought, it was perhaps to be expected. Technology had become an integrated part of their lives over the past millennia, and their bloodlines weren’t that useful for battle, from what Leviala had explained.

Meanwhile, there was the Lunar Tribe with their superior constitutions and the Gemlings, who could create powerful weapons and armor. The Cartava Clan was at a clear disadvantage there, and it looked like they had turned to technology to bridge that gap and secure their place in the Mystic Realm.

“This is proof. Leviala Cartava has betrayed her clan, consorting with outsiders to bring doom upon our clan,” a middle-aged man said. “Capture her and leave at least one of the outsiders alive. They know the composition of their armies and the means of escaping this wretched place.”

“Wait! Please don’t hurt them!” Leviala said, causing the man to sneer disdainfully. However, his face froze when he

heard her next sentence. “They’re still people from my clan. Please don’t kill them!”

“Attack!” the man shouted as he reached for his gun, clearly having understood that his numerical advantage was just for show.

The whole corridor lit up in red as the soldiers fired their weapons, but a storm of leaves appeared to block out the first barrage. Zac sighed and turned to his sister.

“Don’t ruin my new toys,” she only said, confirming Zac’s suspicions.

“Men make plans, and the Heavens laugh.” Ogras snickered to the side with a bloodthirsty gleam in his eyes. “I guess it’s war.”

CONFLICTING TRUTHS

The group in front of them didn't exactly cause Zac's Danger Sense to go haywire, but he still didn't want to risk his sister getting hurt. So he pushed aside any reluctance over this no-win situation as he stomped down on the ground, pushing himself forward with enough force to cause a dent in the Memorysteel on the ground.

The next moment, the whole shielded front line of the Cartava clansmen was sent flying as Zac crashed straight into their ranks while using [**Love's Bond**] as a wall breaker. The sturdy coffin easily deflected the beams shooting out from the handheld energy weapons, and its advance was unstoppable when wielded by someone with thousands of points of Strength. He had intentionally not used [**Loamwalker**] for that very purpose, to draw the enemies' attention toward himself.

A few projectiles still shot toward the others, but they were all capable of dealing with it. Only Leviala helplessly scrambled into a side corridor after realizing her attempts at reconciliation were futile. Kenzie had instead conjured what looked like a raincloud, and the beams actually dispersed as they entered it.

"Something's wrong with the swarm!" a man in the back of the Cartava platoon suddenly shouted.

"Fix it, NOW!" the middle-aged captain roared as he rushed to block Zac along with a group of cultivators.

The man was somewhere between Middle and High E-grade, judging by his aura, but Zac still wouldn't look down

on the enemy even if he didn't emit the aura of an elite like Void's Disciple. He'd just barely avoided the restraining tool of the werewolves in his first battle with the natives, and who knew what kind of hidden means the Cartava Clan possessed?

After all, Leviala had never given him any real details of the strength and means of her clan, to the point that he didn't even know they fought like Technocrats.

However, it was clear that not everyone in the clan leaned toward the Dao of Technology, as over half the squad emitted the condensed auras of traditional warriors. The captain and his squad of elites were definitely part of this group, and they rushed toward Zac with killing intent seeping out of their bodies.

A massive pressure enveloped Zac as he prepared to meet the incoming cultivators, and it felt like he was ensconced in quicksand. He glanced down at his body and noticed he was covered in blue fractals, their glow mirrored in the eyes of three of the cultivators. The eyes of a few more lit up next, and Zac felt the world turning upside down and bending and distorting.

He was initially worried that these cultivators were throwing him into another space-time or something with the help of their bloodlines, but he quickly realized that his warped surroundings were simply illusions. A few of the members of the Cartava elite squad were apparently the same sort of cultivators as Janos, mental support mages.

Those kinds of people were a bit troublesome, but it was a lot better than time cultivators, as far as Zac was concerned, and it somewhat confirmed what Leviala had said before. Only a select few had that ability in her clan, with the rest having a lower-quality version of the bloodline.

Zac's soul was thankfully a lot more powerful than the average Strength-based cultivator's thanks to the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** and his lucky encounters. Furthermore, while **[Mental Fortress]** was just an average mental defensive skill, it was enough to help him minimize the effect to the point that he could at least tell fake from real.

The first thing to welcome his escape from the illusions was two sets of shimmering gray eyes and the realization that some sort of stones had started to grow across his body. Two of the cultivators actually had Medusa eyes, and their gazes slowly petrified him.

Zac quickly understood what was going on; the Cartava Cultivators who didn't rely on Technology all seemed to have classes or at least skills that took advantage of their eyes. He guessed that most eye-related skills would have an increased effect for cultivators with an ocular bloodline, even if the actual usage of the bloodline might be related to something different.

The cultivators seemed to somewhat relax after seeing Zac getting entrapped in layer after layer of restrictions, but they still maintained their gazes on him as they stopped twenty meters away. Only the captain rushed forward, wielding an exquisite sword in his hands. It wasn't a Technocrat energy weapon, but Zac rather assumed it to be a Spirit Tool made from some reddish metal.

There was also a large red gem embedded in the hilt, making it easy for Zac to guess its origins: the Gemlings on the other side of the base. A sharp aura that was all too similar to Zac radiated from the sword as the captain suddenly disappeared. The captain possessed a Late-stage Seed of Sharpness. The swordsman appeared right next to Zac a moment later, the edge already ripping through the air on its way toward Zac's throat.

But the air around Zac suddenly started crackling as he unleashed his aura in full, further empowering it with his **[Spiritual Void]**. The stones on his body crumbled to dust, and the blue restraining fractals shattered as Zac finally fought back in earnest. His body turned into a blur next as a coffin lid appeared to intercept the sword strike.

A series of groans echoed out from the cultivator squad after Zac had forcibly broken their skills, and chaos erupted among the soldiers as Zac's immense aura slammed into them like a hammer. The captain's eyes widened in horror when he realized Zac had been going easy on them until now, and he

quickly tried to flash away the moment he realized his execution had failed.

But there was no way Zac would allow that, and [**Love's Bond**] rammed into the captain with the full force of someone with over five thousand effective Strength. A deep thud was followed by the sound of bones breaking. The leader of the Cartava Clan's platoon shot through his own ranks like a projectile, crashing into the Memorysteel wall with enough force to cause the whole corridor to vibrate.

The captain was still someone well into the E-grade, though, so Zac easily caught up to him with the help of [**Loamwalker**] and punched him in the side of his head the moment the captain ricocheted off the wall. He slammed down onto the ground, causing another shudder to spread out across the area, and a deafening silence spread among the Clan Cartava warriors as they looked at Zac with mute incomprehension.

Getting trapped earlier wasn't Zac simply being caught unaware. On the contrary, he could have easily broken the blue fractals covering his body just by using his superior attributes to force it, and one attack of [**Rapturous Divide**] would have killed the ocular cultivators along with half the platoon. However, he had ultimately decided against that, allowing the elite squad to keep going to learn more of what kind of classes and tactics they used.

He also held a small hope that things could be salvaged peacefully even after all this. That was why he didn't just cut the captain in two. Unfortunately, there was still a real risk that his own army would be embroiled in a large-scale battle with these people in a few days. Any intelligence he gathered right now could be sent back, which hopefully would save some lives.

The momentum of the Cartava Clan had been completely quashed by the combination of their drones failing them and Zac using their leader like a punching bag. A few warriors in the back reacted the quickest, immediately starting to run for their lives. However, they only got a few meters before the

whole area turned into a hazy gray, like a dense fog late at night.

It was Ogras, who had appeared out of nowhere and flooded the whole area with his shadows. The fleeing cultivators found themselves caught by an endless number of shadow tendrils, and they actually sank into the shadows like half their bodies had been sent to another dimension. The Cartava warriors reacted instantaneously as they took out energy knives that were able to cut straight through the shadows, and they desperately flailed about in an attempt to free themselves.

But shadows were intangible, and cutting them with a blade didn't really do much. They simply re-formed and bound the warriors again. A few of the more powerful warriors did manage to free themselves one way or another, but they didn't even get a taste of freedom before they found themselves gored by a black spear hiding among the shadows.

Zac looked at the display with gleaming eyes. It felt like the Cartava warriors were shipwrecked sailors on a sea of shadows, and Ogras was a shark in the depths, striking from the darkness before disappearing again. Zac felt that it was worth learning from the demon in this regard, especially for his second class. Fetters of Desolation was a class focusing on restraining and whittling down the enemy, just like Ogras was doing right now.

It wasn't too surprising that Ogras could so easily capture over a dozen people in an instant. Most of the warriors in the back of the platoon seemed to be responsible for the drones, and their "weapons" had just been tablets and some weird helmets. Then again, the front lines weren't doing any better even though they were manned by soldiers armed with proper energy weapons.

Thea had made her move as well, turning into a whirlwind that destroyed every piece of equipment in her path. The floor was already littered with broken components from everything from tablets to guns and even clothes. Everything that could be used as a weapon was either cut by the invisible blades or

Thea herself, and any resistance resulted in streaks turning into bleeding wounds.

Less than half a minute had passed, but the Cartava squadron was already utterly crushed. The drones, which had been silently hovering in the air until now, suddenly started moving, forming an orderly line as they flew toward Kenzie. She simply took out a Cosmos Sack with a wide grin, and the machines flew straight into it one by one while Leviala stared at her with a flabbergasted look.

“Lay down your weapons, or we’ll start killing,” Zac roared when he saw the battle was over, and the others quickly followed suit.

The soldiers were seated against the wall a minute later, unarmed and with a dozen of Kenzie’s own drones keeping watch. The others had already gathered again, with Leviala hesitantly standing between Zac’s group and her clan members. She already looked a lot better compared to before, and it seemed she had overextended herself, running out of Cosmic Energy in her escape.

“Girl, how is your faction still standing?” Ogras asked with bemusement as he glanced at Leviala. “You’d better pledge allegiance to this guy fast; otherwise, you’ll just get eradicated even if you get out of this realm alive.”

“These people are not our strongest warriors,” Leviala muttered, though she looked a bit shamefaced at the result, even if her clansmen were technically her enemies in this scenario. “We have a lot of powerhouses.”

“More importantly,” Zac said as he lifted the still-unconscious middle-aged man by his neck. “What’s up with the bullshit this guy was spewing? I told you we were looking for an alliance.”

Leviala sighed as she started explaining the situation back in her clan. It turned out that the werewolves hadn’t just kidnapped Leviala, but also destroyed a few key buildings along with the corridors leading toward the Lunar Forest. The chaos had allowed the werewolves to slink away. Clan Cartava wasn’t about to give up Leviala, and they decided to head for

the Wasteland. But just as the first groups were about to start the search, a damning video emerged.

It was without audio, but it clearly displayed two werewolves talking with an unknown human and two demonkin in an abandoned warehouse.

The clan had already learned of Ogras' appearance somehow, and they quickly put two and two together. They believed Port Atwood and the Lunar Tribe were working together, targeting Clan Cartava at this critical time.

"What, there's a video of our people conversing with werewolves?" Zac said with confusion all over his face, and he turned to Ogras.

"Impossible," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "No one would be that stupid."

"It's true," Leviala said, her eyes flickering. "I saw the video myself after I returned."

"There's one simple explanation of how that's possible, apart from betrayal," Thea interjected as she took an all-too-familiar root, holding it so the captives couldn't see it.

"Our people have been rigorously tested," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"I know, but theirs haven't," Thea said as she looked at the captives.

LOOMING THREAT

“What are you talking about?” Leviala asked with confusion.

“Nothing, continue. What happened next?” Zac said, not wanting to make any decisions before hearing the whole story.

Seeing the outsiders conspiring with their old enemies the Lunar Tribe had, unsurprisingly, agitated the people of Clan Cartava, especially after they had extended an olive branch through the plaque. It was at that moment in time a man named Yvian stepped out, saying that he and Leviala were betrothed, but had kept it secret so as not to distract from the more important matters at hand. He vowed to get his fiancée back, even if he had to battle both the “insidious outsiders” and the Lunar Tribe.

Apparently, Yvian was the heir of the second branch of the clan and the second-best candidate for future clan leader after Leviala herself. He and his faction quickly turned the clan against Zac’s people and rerouted the scouting parties to search in the direction of the Lunar Forest instead. The explosions together with the video made it look like the werewolves had kidnapped Leviala before escaping toward the outer world.

As for the fake engagement, it was a way to bridge the gap between the two main branches of the clan now that Leviala was gone. With Leviala gone and the Grand Elder being quite old, the Second Branch would eventually become the main branch. Of course, their plans had gone awry the moment Leviala was accidentally found by one of the scouting parties.

Leviala had returned to her clan with the second-branch scouts even if she had misgivings, but the news she brought back was mostly discarded. They called the news of the Dominators and the Great Redeemer a fabrication meant to trick the clan into staying behind while their enemies got themselves to safety.

Some even insinuated that Leviala had been brainwashed by the enemy.

Even her own grandfather seemed hesitant about what she said, so Leviala eventually saw no other option but to turn to Zac for help. There was no way that she would be able to convince her Datamancer uncle to come along in a situation like this, so she set out alone. She was quickly discovered, and she was forced to fight her way out of an encirclement.

The only reason she was still alive was that most of the clan members were in the dark about the coup, simply thinking that Leviala was under some sort of hypnosis or compulsion. So they were afraid to actually attack her too ruthlessly, which allowed her to “escape.” Of course, that escape might just have been a ploy, a gambit by the second branch to find a secret pathway to the Lunar Forest.

Frowns adorned Zac and his group as they digested the new information. They didn’t really care about the coup, even if Zac felt a bit bad for Leviala, but the implications were clear. Clan Cartava were gearing up for a war against Port Atwood at this very moment, both to get back at their old enemies and to seize a chance to escape.

The second branch already had wide support for the attack even before Leviala returned, and it sounded like that support had only increased when Leviala admitted that Zac wouldn’t let them out before the Dimensional Seed matured.

“Please come with me to Clan Cartava,” Leviala entreated. “I couldn’t convince the elders, but if you display your might, I’m sure they will understand that there is no point for you to play those games. We can avoid an unnecessary war and set our sights on our true enemies instead.”

Zac didn't immediately respond, but instead, he went over his options in his mind.

"One thing at a time," Zac eventually said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Leviala's idea. Instead, he threw out a large bag of Springroot on the ground. "Everyone. Eat a piece of this root. Anyone who does will be allowed to return to your clan. Everyone else..."

Hesitation and skepticism were written all over the faces of the Cartava soldiers, and many turned their eyes to Leviala, who somewhat had taken on the role of an intermediary.

"Please. It's not that I don't trust you, but can you explain what's going on? What's the effect of this Springroot?" Leviala hesitantly asked as she looked down at the bag.

"The outside world is full of dangers," Ogras said loudly enough so that all the captives could hear. "One of those dangers is a race of shape-shifters, cultivators who can make themselves look like any race, masquerading as either a friend or a foe. Those you saw in the videos were not our people. We are already at war with the Lunar Tribe, even having killed off all those scouting units who caused trouble for you."

Ogras gave Zac a look next, but Zac blankly looked back, not sure what the demon wanted him to do.

"Throw out some of the bodies," Ogras' voice whispered in his ear, projected by a small shadow.

Zac understood what the demon was looking for, and he threw out a handful of the werewolf corpses he had collected during his fights.

"That's Hevastes!" one of the ocular cultivators exclaimed, drawing a round of murmurs.

"These shape-shifters have caused a lot of trouble on the outside, and we know they entered this realm long before we did," Ogras said as he glanced at Leviala. "These roots are our weapon against them. For most people, including you humans, they are harmless. A tasty snack. For those damn shape-shifters, they are deadly poison."

Zac bent down and ate a root to prove Ogras' words before he turned to the soldiers. Leviala soon followed suit, though a sheen of nervous perspiration covered her face. She was obviously not taking Ogras' words at face value, but rather stepping forward for her clan members.

"Now, your turn. Come forward, one at a time," Zac said after confirming that Leviala wasn't a shape-shifter.

The soldiers looked at each other hesitantly, until one of the stronger warriors gritted his teeth and stepped forward. However, just as he was about to pick a root up, another one stood up with a fierce look.

"This is a trap!" he shouted. "We saw the young miss returning with all kinds of delusions. Fighting the Collector? The base actively protecting them? I bet the source is these poisonous roots!"

"Force-feed him," Zac said without hesitation, and a storm of shadows trapped the raging man.

He didn't even have a chance to take his life before Ogras appeared right in front of him, cramming a handful of roots down his throat. He struggled for a few seconds before the life left his eyes. His body started to transform a second later, turning into the all-too-familiar lizard-like humanoids. The soldiers around him scrambled out of the way, looking at the transformation with horror.

"Vatos!" one of the soldiers exclaimed with horror.

"Sorry, Vatos is long dead, most likely. Replaced by the shape-shifters. Now eat, or you can all join Vatos in the underworld," Ogras snorted as his and Zac's killing intent drenched the squad.

Soon enough everyone had eaten a piece of Springroot; even the unconscious soldiers had some stuffed down their throats. There weren't any more shape-shifters, which was a relief to Zac. It hopefully meant that Clan Cartava wasn't too infiltrated already. But it also meant that their gearing for war was an idea mostly of their own making, as Zac doubted the

cultists were strong enough to take out all the elders without causing a ruckus.

“Who are these aliens?” a soldier muttered as he looked down at the lizardman corpse.

“Members of the Church of Everlasting Dao. They’re an extremely powerful faction; their presence in the Zecia Sector is just a small branch. They are religious fanatics, purging planets of all life to appease the Heavens. Their goal was to do that to my home planet, but their goal changed when they learned about the dimensional treasure in this place,” Zac explained.

“We’ve really been infiltrated.” Leviala sighed. “You were right.”

“I’m afraid so.” Zac nodded. “You people have nothing to gain from fighting our faction, but our enemy is fanning the flames. After all, I have already agreed to let your clan out as soon as we’ve dealt with the threats to our world. The only thing that would happen if you attack us is our guards closing the spatial tunnel permanently, locking us both inside.”

“But how haven’t we noticed anything?” Leviala muttered. “We’re clansmen; we know each other. How can someone just blend in without arousing suspicion? And we haven’t seen any other outsiders apart from you. Our neighbors are dealing with humans as well.”

“The werewolves,” Ogras said without hesitation. “They must be infiltrated. Shape-shifters came with the scouting parties; some stayed behind to infiltrate you as well.”

Zac felt a headache coming on as he tried to figure out what to do. There were thousands of elite Zhix readying for war just outside the gate leading to Clan Cartava, and disaster was just around the corner if the Church of Everlasting Dao was manipulating things behind the scenes. This battle had almost been a joke, but the Zhix wouldn’t have his strength or Kenzie’s ability to disable their strongest offensive tools, the Technocrat weaponry.

There was a decent chance both sides would suffer massive casualties, and the only winners would be the Dominators and the cultists.

“I’ve already sent a warning back to our people,” Kenzie said, clearly understanding what was going through Zac’s head.

“What do you want to do?” Ogras asked.

Zac’s eyes flickered between Leviala and the soldiers, who all shied away from his gaze.

“You’ve proved that your words are true,” Leviala added from the side. “Let’s go back to the clan and bring the body. We have fifty clan members to testify the veracity of your claims, all of them of the second elder’s faction. So if we both have our factions take a step back, then we’ll—”

“Our people came to this place for an important mission,” Zac interjected. “Besides, you clearly don’t have the ability to make your clan take a step back. A few infiltrators shouldn’t be able to completely turn your clan against us in just a few days. There should already have been some plans for dealing with us, with the cultists simply silencing dissent and urging on the warmongers.”

“That’s—” Leviala muttered, looking down with shame. “Still, if we go back...”

“How much time is left?” Zac asked, turning to Kenzie.

“A bit over two days?” Kenzie said after some thought. “We should reach the inner lab in around five hours. We can’t return the same way we came, but we should be able to make it back to our people well over a day before the treasure matures. It depends on how long the Cartava Clan is willing to wait if they’re aiming to break out.”

Zac understood what Kenzie meant. Zac’s plans were based on waiting for the seed to mature, but the Cartava Clan was the opposite. They needed to escape before the time was up, and it took around between eight and twelve hours to get from the gate in the Lunar Forest to the spatial tunnel for an F-grade warrior who knew the path.

Add to that civilians and some extra time for safe measure, and Clan Cartava would probably not want to wait until the last minute if they really decided to attack. They might already be ready for battle as they were standing there. Kenzie's defensive measures at the gate could probably buy them some time, but there was no way that a native clan didn't have some last-ditch methods to force their way through the base.

The only consolation was that large-scale destruction seemed to attract the active attention of the defensive AI, and the Cartava Clan probably didn't want to use those last-ditch methods unless everything else had failed already.

“The inner lab? Are you still talking about that?” Leviala exclaimed incredulously as she stared at Kenzie. “Our people are about to be tricked into a war; who knows how many casualties that would result in? Let me be clear. This fight was lopsided, but our armies aren't any pushovers, especially not inside this Mystic Realm. We need to turn back right now.”

However, no one in Zac's group cared about Leviala's opinions, all instead turning toward Zac. He turned toward the subdued captain, who had already woken up by now with the help of a few zaps from Kenzie's drones. His eyes were a bit glazed over after Zac's punch, but he seemed to have been able to follow what was going on.

“You can all return to your clan. Take that body and these roots with you; it's the proof of what I've said is true. But tell your elders this: We didn't come to this godforsaken place for fun. We came here to save our planet, and we are willing to lay our lives on the line to do so. Force our hands, and we will walk over the ruins of your clan to get the job done,” Zac said, his killing intent almost dense enough to become corporeal. “I know the allure of the outside world is strong, but don't lose it all by acting hastily. I'm coming back to get our people soon enough.”

The soldiers looked extremely unwilling, but no one offered any rebuttal, instead looking down with their fists clenched. Zac could only pray that his threat would make the elders hesitate about their plans, slowing any plans to break out. He couldn't turn back now. His instincts told him to push

forward, and Ogras' words of warning about Divine guidance were the last push he needed to make his decision.

"We'll keep going," Zac said as he turned to his group.

"What... What about me?" Leviala hesitantly asked.

"You're coming with us," Zac said as he formed the same chair made out of chains as before. "I know that you're not happy with how things turned out. But the quicker you help us get where we need to go, the quicker we'll be able to return and prevent any bloodshed."

"Fine." Leviala sighed as she dragged herself onto the chair, the links quickly turning red from a few wounds reopening.

"Let's hurry," Zac said as he left the soldiers where they were, the other three silently following in tow. "We'll speed up. I'll deal with any spatial tears."

"Spatial tears are the least of our worries where we're going. If it were just that, we'd long have looted the inner layer. There are alarms, sentries, mechanized guards, traps, and who knows what else," Leviala warned.

"Good thing we brought you, then, girl." Ogras grinned.

"The last stretch is through a long stretch of tubing, according to the maps. Surely the base wouldn't have any alarms there," Kenzie added.

"You... How did you do that before? You simply took all our drones like they were yours," Leviala asked with a slightly fearful look.

"Well, they *are* mine now." Kenzie smiled, ignoring the question. "Spoils of war and all that."

LAB 16

The group kept a rapid pace on their way toward Inner Lab 16. They were making good time thanks to the complementary competencies of Kenzie and Leviala, but Zac was still filled with anxiety. The only thing giving him some peace of mind was Kenzie's ability to almost freely contact their forces back at the forest, allowing him to stay up to date on the situation.

The army had finished preparations for the outermost layer of defense around the base, but they doubled down on their preparations after hearing about a possible attack. They also increased the number of scouts keeping watch in all sectors under their control in case the Cartava Clan appeared somewhere other than through the gate.

An evacuation was already underway as well, with almost all nonessential personnel already having been transferred out of the Mystic Realm. Only some noncombat cultivators would stay inside the research base after the Dimensional Seed matured, with a skeleton crew to maintain the base while the rest set out to assist the Zhix on their crusade.

Eventually, Zac didn't have time to worry about his people, as just passing through the corridors on the way to the inner layer demanded all his attention. Just as Leviala had warned, the increasingly common spatial tears was just one of the problems facing them.

"Wait," Kenzie suddenly said, and the group hid against a wall as they activated a series of cloaking methods.

No one dared to so much as breathe loudly as they waited steeped in silence. Half a minute later, clattering sounds echoed out through the corridors as a patrol unit consisting of two spider balls and six drones moved past them. This was the sixth squad they'd had to hide from in just twenty minutes, a stark contrast to the abandoned outer reaches.

It wasn't that Zac didn't want to simply force his way through, and the small squads weren't a threat to his group. But being discovered or destroying the sentries would result in a lockdown, which would cause way more of a headache than it was worth.

"Okay, we're good." Kenzie eventually nodded, and the group pushed on.

"Just how are you discovering these sentries?" Leviala asked with a frown. "We have tried for centuries to discover their signals."

"I told you, we got our hands on some Technocrat technology on the outside. We didn't enter this place blindly," Zac snorted from ahead, getting a bit annoyed at Leviala's attempts to delve into his sister's secrets.

Of course, he knew that his go-to excuse was pretty weak, but Kenzie was forced to display her abilities if they wanted to get back in time. Thea was clearly also curious about what was going on, but she had never asked about it over the past weeks even after Kenzie displayed an uncharacteristic level of competence for a twenty-year-old without a science background.

They finally reached the spot the werewolves had marked after slowly and methodically making progress through the minefield of guards and traps. They were getting close to the inner layer now, and the spatial expansion was getting more and more pronounced. Zac guessed the surroundings had increased around twenty-five times in size, making him feel like a citizen of Lilliput.

This massive transformation was what had opened up a new route for the werewolves and later Zac's group. The section they had just reached looked remarkably different

compared to the much simpler corridors in the Outer Ring. The walls were still made from Memorysteel, but they were designed to give the impression you were walking through a street rather than a corridor. The rooms to the sides looked like futuristic houses, and some even had tinted windows.

Leviala explained that this section had once been the place of residence of the middle-tier workers of the base. The corridor itself reminded Zac of the living quarters of *Little Bean*, as it was roughly twice as wide compared to the outer hallways, and filled with lounge areas and what looked like Zen gardens. There were a lot more doors as well, each of them leading to an apartment ranging from fifty to hundreds of square meters in size.

Clan Cartava had long looted these quarters of everything that hadn't been destroyed during the spatial storms of the Cataclysm. Only the stronger people had pushed deeper into the inner layers when the base shut down for maintenance. Their group still headed into one of the larger apartments, living quarters that had probably once belonged to some chief scientist.

What set this place apart compared to most other rooms was that it had its own small-scale laboratory, which unsurprisingly had grown enormous along with everything else. Following the mapper, they soon found a wall socket hidden behind a table. The socket was covered by a lid, and a gust of stale air hit their group when Zac pushed it open.

On the other side was a metallic tube around 180 centimeters in height, just a bit too low to walk upright. Not even Leviala was sure, but they guessed it was a special tube meant to transport some sort of gas or plasma to this home lab, which was why none of the other apartments had anything like this.

“And we are sure this pipe won't suddenly be filled with some Technocrat poison?” Thea hesitantly muttered as she looked into the vent.

“Uh... No?” Kenzie hesitantly said. “But I think we should have at least noticed some remnants having leaked into this

room if that was the case? That lid wasn't exactly a perfect fit after the expansion."

"I'll go first and block up the tunnel as long as I can in case something comes crashing down on us. But hopefully, it won't come to that," Zac said before he turned to Leviala. "Can you walk on your own from here?"

"I'll make do. My wounds are a bit better by now," Leviala said. "I should be able to walk the last stretch."

Zac nodded as he entered the pipe, and the group kept walking for another hour until Kenzie told them to stop. The werewolf maps stopped soon after the pipe entrance, but Leviala had provided them with a complimentary map. The spot they had reached should be just a few meters from the gate leading to Laboratory 16. From here, they had decided to cut their way out of the wall and let Kenzie open the door, instead of trying to break into the lab.

There were all kinds of alarms in the laboratories, according to Leviala, so if they had to cut their way out, it was better if it was here. A few minutes later, they were out, with Zac having done most of the work. Their activities had drawn the ire of the base, though, and they were forced to back away for another twenty minutes before they could approach the gate.

"Let me," Kenzie said as she floated up to the terminal in the gate, and they all breathed out in relief when the door opened without issue.

They walked inside after confirming no guards were waiting for them, but Zac quickly stopped as the world lurched for an instant. The insides had looked spatially expanded before, but Zac was shocked to realize that the lab had suddenly reverted to its original size.

"How is this possible?" Ogras muttered as he looked around with wide eyes, confirming that Zac wasn't the only one whose perception had shifted.

"The space is normal here?" Leviala exclaimed with surprise. "How odd. Even our outer labs have grown a bit over

the past months.”

“It has to be an effect of the Dao of Space,” Thea said with gleaming eyes. “Space has become relative.”

“Well, it should be a good thing. It means the lab is fully functional, right? Our chances of finding something useful have increased,” Zac said as he looked around the beautifully crafted work areas as he walked into the laboratory, if it could even be called that.

It rather felt like he had entered the headquarters of some IT start-up that had way too much money to spend, with everything from manicured miniature gardens to what looked like an extremely high-end restaurant where every table was placed on a small moat in an indoor lake. It almost made Zac wonder if they had come to the right place.

“This is a recreational area for the scientists,” Leviaia said with a dour expression as she looked at the opulent surroundings. “I guess they needed to relax a bit after experimenting on us like we were beasts.”

“Never mind that,” Ogras muttered. “Where are the good things stored, girl? We need to get back before your family does something stupid.”

“This way.” The Cartava scion sighed as she led the group through the series of gardens.

Zac was wordlessly following along, but he did shoot an imperceptible glance at his sister, who nodded in return as she summoned a couple of drones. They still needed Leviaia to save time, but it was undeniable that a divide had been erected between them after learning what her clan was up to. So Zac had his sister and Ogras keeping constant watch over Leviaia to make sure she didn’t try something.

After all, no matter what her personal belief about who was right and wrong, there was no way that Leviaia would side with Port Atwood if it came down to it, especially if the Zhix started killing her clansmen. They needed to double-check and triple-check everything she said and did, to make sure she wasn’t leading them into a trap of some sort.

Hopefully, Kenzie would be able to spot anything of a technological nature, while Ogras was perennially suspicious of everything around him. Any odd movement from the native would immediately be caught by him.

They soon reached a sliding door made from the same reinforced glass as the glasshouse, and it automatically opened up when they approached, letting them enter a small containment chamber. A second sliding door opened a minute later, and the group entered a spotless laboratory. There were around thirty tables in the main hall, a room of about three hundred square meters, and each of them was connected to a series of expensive-looking machines.

Most of the tables were empty, but the remaining ones quickly drew their attention. A number of different items were hovering in the air, some of them looking complete and a few others seemingly mid-production with the help of several mechanical arms. More importantly, spatial tears were either hovering next to the machines like they were locked in place, or fused into the machines themselves.

There seemed to be a few adjoining labs as well, the layout reminiscent of the glasshouse's side rooms. While the others looked around with curiosity, Zac's attention was drawn by something else: the fact that his quest had been completed.

It felt like he had caught a lucky break this time, as the only threat had turned out to be the sentry robots, as the Cartava troupe couldn't really be considered a formidable enemy. Now the question was why the System wanted to bring him here.

There were no natural treasures in sight, and nothing else that Zac felt was of immediate value. There were these weird machines hovering above the tables, but Zac wasn't so confident that the System wanted him to take a bunch of Technocrat items, considering its disdain for the Dao of Technology.

"What is this room?" Zac asked Leviala, hoping to find some clues.

“It seems this place has been turned into a mechanical lab.” Leviala sighed. “It is honestly one of the worst ones.”

“Oh?” Ogras asked, his eyes thinning. “How so?”

“These kinds of labs usually house various sorts of advanced machinery, which isn’t really useful to cultivators. Sometimes we’ve found items that are valuable to Datamancers and our mechanical troops, but neither of those professions will remain in the outer world.” Leviala sighed.

“So there’s nothing?” Ogras muttered as they walked among the tables.

“The side chambers usually contain raw materials and natural treasures stockpiled for experiments. One can still find good items there. Valuable metals, Race-boosting treasures, pure ener—” Leviala said but stopped in surprise when Ogras turned into a gust of shadows, appearing in front of the closest door leading to a side chamber.

Zac glanced over and wryly smiled, but the smile froze on his face when he was blasted away by a shockwave of tremendous force without warning. He slammed into a table, but his momentum kept him going until he knocked into a wall on the other side of the lab. The shockwave also contained some sort of high-pitched sound that made him nauseated, but he quickly got up to his feet to reorient himself.

Only to see Leviala speeding toward the exit with one of the spatial machines in her arms.

BETRAYAL

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

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

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

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

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

Blood was running from her eyes and nose, and she even swayed while standing still.

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

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

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

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

The exit was blocked as well by a shield even thicker than the one that had kept them at bay with the spider balls, and there were even two series of rings that appeared. They looked just like miniature versions of the terrifying energy turrets the Administrator had used to combat the Collector in the void, and Zac's hairs stood on end when he saw that they were trained right at him.

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

The blaring alarm stopped a few seconds later, and the shutters slid back into the floor. Zac could only sheepishly

smile in response to the glares he got from his companions before he looked out again. The recreational area had turned back to normal, but it had been eye-opening to see just how many security measures were hidden among the gardens and restaurants.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s some sort of Spatial Drill,” Kenzie said with surprise. “Researching its technology was commissioned by some head researcher twenty years ago, but it was just finished two weeks ago. It can drill a tunnel through chaotic space, and it seems even better than the array we used to force open the path to the Mystic Realm.”

“Head researcher?” Thea repeated with confusion. “Who’s that? The Cartava Clan?”

“I don’t know,” Kenzie said as she hesitantly turned toward Zac. “Did she say anything like that?”

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

“Then who?”

“Perhaps the base itself?” Ogras muttered. “Didn’t you mention some Administrator before?”

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

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

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

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

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

“It looks like we are jammed; we can only pray that they are prepared. I don’t get it... Just how did she figure out how

to take this thing?” Kenzie muttered. “If they had any knowledge of an item like this, wouldn’t they have fought harder to come here themselves? Long before we arrived?”

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

“That’s heaven-defying if true,” Ogras exclaimed with shock. “The backlash has to be immense.”

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

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

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

“I can’t see from this terminal,” Kenzie said with a shake of her head.

“Quickly, look around.” Zac sighed.

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

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

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

“I’ll try to figure out some way to escape this place.” Kenzie nodded and walked over to the closest item and started tapping away on her tablet.

“Well, that’s my cue,” Ogras muttered and disappeared, leaving a confused Zac behind.

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

“Doesn’t it send you in a completely random direction?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“Well, yes,” Thea admitted with a grimace.

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

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

“I’m sorry about all this,” Zac said with a sigh. “I underestimated her too much. Now both our peoples might be hurt because of me.”

“It’s not your fault. No one is working harder than you to protect our planet. You simply can’t control everything, and you never know how people will react with their backs against the wall,” Thea said. “It’s an important lesson for us all. Besides, we all knew that the stakes were high going in. Let’s just see if we can turn things around.”

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

He walked over to the storeroom he’d seen Ogras slink toward before, and a frown spread across his face when he saw what the demon was up to. Ogras was trying to snatch the stored treasure, a vial containing some unknown liquid. The only problem was that it was behind a containment field that

looked a lot like the liquid electricity that had flooded the area outside just a minute ago.

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

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

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

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

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

HELPING HAND

Zac couldn't help but give the demon an appreciative look when he saw the objective of his new quest. As far as quests went, this had to be one of the easier ones. The containment field was still keeping Ogras at bay, but with his help, it should just be a matter of time before they breached it.

Better yet, the punishment for failure had been reduced once more, and it was a huge relief to see that his skills were finally safe. Losing four levels would still be a kick to the groin, but he could always regain them later if he needed to abruptly end his training regimen early. For example, he knew he needed to get back to his people after dealing with this place, even if it meant giving up on his quest.

Thankfully, it didn't look like that would be necessary, at least not for the next quest. After all, it was like Ogras said: why were they here if not to seize a couple of opportunities? Furthermore, Zac's instincts told him that the System would point him toward Clan Cartava for his sixth quest.

The System liked war and struggle, and that was the only option left after Leviala's final betrayal. She had chosen to give her clan a shot at escaping, even if it meant trapping Zac here and killing her way out. There was no way he could let that go unanswered. Besides, she had the Spatial Drill now, and something like that might be needed later to drill through spatial storms at the core.

Ogras' words about Divine guidance also echoed in the back of Zac's mind. The drill might be exactly what the

System was leading him toward, but Leviala messing with the timelines might have pushed its plans out of whack.

Zac eventually gave up on trying to figure out the purpose of what the System was doing, instead turning his attention to the task at hand. He needed to seize the first opportunity for his follower. It was a transparent vial containing just a deciliter of some unknown mixture. The liquid was red like blood, but small golden sparks swirled around inside it even though the vial was completely immobile.

It looked a bit like a health potion from a video game to Zac, but it definitely was something more valuable since it was the only thing in the room. Out of all the side rooms, it was the item most likely to be something that could boost one's Race, as the three rooms he had visited only housed various metals. Unfortunately for Ogras, the containment field that protected the vial was extremely sturdy.

"Come on," Ogras growled as extremely condensed shadows glommed on to the energy field.

Zac immediately understood what the demon was trying to do. He was trying to exhaust a small section of the field to create an opening. However, the shadows were being destroyed far too quickly, only slightly weakening the electric field. He sighed and stepped up next to Ogras, his arm suddenly covered in thick layers of leaves as his arm started emitting an aura of death.

"Oh?" Ogras exclaimed, but he quickly understood Zac's plan and redoubled his efforts.

Searing pain ripped through Zac's arm as he forcibly pushed it through the opening Ogras had created. Leaves were rapidly being disintegrated even though they were infused with the Fragment of the Bodhi, and the Fragment of the Coffin only helped block some of the damage to his arm as he reached for the vial.

Pushing forward was extremely arduous as well, reminiscent of how it felt to activate **[Deforestation]** before his Strength had reached its current level. Sweat ran down his forehead from pain and exertion, but he refused to back down

as he desperately pushed forward centimeter by centimeter, finally grasping the vial.

He stashed the item in his Spatial Ring and dragged his arm back, and plumes of smoke rose from his scorched skin. But Zac was still beset by shocking amounts of lightning even after having retracted his arm, and the supercharged power rampaged through his body. Zac actually hoped for his **[Void Heart]** to deal with the mess, but it was too slow.

Organs were lacerated and burned, and even his veins had turned to conduits that allowed the lightning to course all through his body. But the electricity was thankfully an attack without a source, and every wound caused it to exhaust some of its energy. **[Void Heart]** finally woke up as well, releasing a deep beat that could be heard even outside his body, but it barely managed to swallow any of the lightning. It had already been used up on torturing Zac.

The wounds weren't too bad at least, and Zac quickly healed them up with the help of a pill and **[Surging Vitality]**. Ogras expectantly looked at Zac as he stood up and took out the vial, the liquid inside illuminating the surroundings in vibrant gold as it sloshed around. Both were surprised at the change, but the vial quickly turned red again when the liquid stopped moving. Zac knew Ogras wanted it, but he didn't immediately hand it over.

He first wanted to get a sense of the liquid it contained. It didn't give off a strong sense of spirituality, but Zac's cells were still screaming with hunger as he looked at the contents. Zac guessed it had to be made from natural materials before being processed by some unknown Technocrat technique, an alternative method to the pill-making of Alchemists.

"This..." Ogras hesitantly said.

"Just take it," Zac snorted and handed it over after a second. "Don't drink it before Kenzie figures out what it is. It would be pretty messed up if you died drinking poison after all your near-death experiences."

Just as Zac expected, his quest updated itself the moment he handed the vial to Ogras. It looked like the System really

was referring to the items in the side rooms, and it didn't get marked as half-complete until Zac physically handed it over. Just one more bout of electrotherapy and he would be done.

"This is no poison. I can feel it in my bones," Ogras muttered. "With all the netherblasted misfortune we've encountered until now, we're slated for some stunning gains next. Balance of the Heavens."

"I've found it!" Kenzie's voice suddenly echoed from outside, drawing their attention.

"See? Balance of the Heavens." Ogras grinned and flashed outside, with Zac quickly following in tow.

"This thing is our ticket outside!" Kenzie exclaimed as she pointed at one of the tables.

The item hovering on top of it looked like a mirror or a solar cell, a circular disk with a diameter of roughly a meter.

"What is it?" Zac asked curiously.

"This is an escape pod of sorts," Kenzie said with excitement. "It makes use of the spatial energy that's all over this base, and it can teleport people away. However..."

"What's wrong?" Zac asked with a sinking feeling.

"The experiment is incomplete; the control feature isn't quite finished. It might spit us out in the Void, inside the core, or back where we came from."

"Are you able to fix it?" Zac asked.

"I can try, but it will take some time. I need to run some calculations, and my... computer can only work so fast. It might take up to half a day, and even then, I can't promise anything," Kenzie said.

"It's all we got at the moment," Zac said. "Do it."

"So... where do you want it to go?" Kenzie asked. "I think I can get it to send us in a certain direction, but it would take too long to make a proper fix that would allow you to actually steer it."

“Take us back where we came from,” Zac said without hesitation. “Get us as close to the Lunar Forest as possible. Overshoot into the outer rim rather than undershoot if that’s an option.”

Kenzie nodded and started typing away, while Zac took proper stock of what else there was in the laboratory. There were eight side rooms altogether, two of them larger stockrooms full of unguarded materials. These metals and minerals all seemed to be very high quality, so Zac snatched all of them up.

Three of the rooms contained more valuable metals, from the looks of it, each of them no larger than a bowling ball but still protected by the same sort of setup as Ogras’ vial. The seventh room contained something far more interesting, though.

It was a fist-sized crystal that hovered on top of a pedestal, and miniature spatial fractures kept erupting all around it. It had to be crammed full of energy to look like that, likely space-attuned energies thanks to the dimensional treasure. It was still just a piece of stone that Zac saw no immediate use for, but he soon thought of another quest of his as he looked at it.

Materials for Karunthel (Unique, Limited): Acquire 100 Kilograms of [Urgarat Flakes], 1 kilogram of [Realm Locus], 1 living [Ferric Worldeater], 1 [Daemonic Manastone] Reward: Upgrade Iliex Shipyard to Early D-Grade. 1 Custom-Designed Early D-Grade Vessel. (0/4)

According to Calrin’s description, he could very well be looking at a ball of **[Realm Locus]**. It was supposed to be a gemstone full of spatial energy, and it was mainly used when making spatial treasures. Like the weird machines outside. The environment in this Mystic Realm should be perfect for those things to spring up as well, and looking for a few crystals if an opportunity arose was already on Zac’s agenda.

He had no pictures of how **[Realm Locus]** was supposed to look, but he figured that he would know if he had the right thing as soon as he held it in his hand, provided that the crystal

weighed more than a kilo. He didn't immediately try to snatch it, but he rather went over to inspect the last room, where he found Thea standing looking at the protected treasure.

It was another crystal hovering in the air, this one a calm blue rather than the chaotic black of the possible [**Realm Locus**]. It didn't emit any spatial fluctuations like the other one either, but it instead contained a mysterious shimmer that caused Zac's vision to double for a second before he quickly activated [**Mental Fortress**].

"Is there something special about this crystal?" Zac asked curiously as he walked up to Thea, whose eyes were trained on the item.

"My Spirit Tool seems to want to absorb it," Thea said. "I think it might be one of the crystals of those natives you mentioned? It may actually awaken spirituality in my weapon, just like how you've done with your axe."

"Doesn't that sword already have spirituality?" Zac asked curiously. "It sounded like that was the Blade Emperor's thing."

"It's for my other one, [**Petalstorm**]," Thea explained before she shook her head. "It's not worth it, though. We have more important things to worry about."

Neither [**Verun's Bite**] nor [**Love's Bond**] showed any indication of wanting the crystal inside the containment field, which probably meant that Thea was on the money with her guess. The Gemling crystals supposedly contained a part of their soul, and feeding such an item to a treasure with a soul of its own might cause a clash rather than provide any benefits.

"It's fine; we're stuck here for a few hours anyway. Let me get it out for you," Zac said, seeing an opportunity to complete his quest in one fell swoop.

However, he stopped himself before trying something foolhardy, and instead walked out and called Ogras over first. There was no point in getting himself maimed when the demon could weaken the field for him as they'd done before.

“What is it? You really need a third participant?” Ogras grinned as he entered the room. “Fine, but no eye contact. That goes for both of you.”

“Stop messing around. Help me get this crystal out.” Zac sighed.

The demon snickered, but he still walked over the electricity barrier and started flooding it with shadows just like the last time. Zac cracked his neck and made sure there were no lingering threats in his body before he got ready again. He pushed his hand into the shield, but alarm bells suddenly went off in his head as he saw a Memorysteel spike shoot straight toward his head.

The whole room was coming alive as liquid electricity started pouring down the walls by the gallons.

“What the—!” Zac exclaimed as he tried to back away. “Run!”

Both Ogras and Thea were thankfully Dexterity classes, and they turned into gusts as they sped out. Zac was right on their heels, but a shocking pain made Zac’s vision go white for a second as he was stabbed by another spike that shot straight out of the doorframe itself. He pushed down the pain and tried to flash out, but the brief delay had robbed him of his opportunity to get out.

The door was already sealed shut, with another layer of electricity on top of it. Zac’s first instinct was to force his way out, but he hesitated, afraid that attacking the door would trigger the alarms outside and put the others in harm’s way as well.

“What did you do?!” Zac heard a frazzled Thea shout on the other side, but he had no time to worry about that at the moment, as the whole room was submerged in a chaotic storm of electricity.

Zac sighed and turned away from the door, wondering why he’d cursed himself by thinking that the quest would be easy.

GIFTS AND RECIPROCATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A deep thud rippled out from his body, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw the impact it had on the Base Power in the room. It was like the heartbeat had imposed symmetry on the chaos, and he felt he could almost discern some fractals among the lightning bolts as they were frozen in the air. **[Void**

Heart] beat again, and it drew a huge amount of energy into its odd hidden dimension.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zac suddenly swung his axe, cutting a large gash in his arm to the shock of the others. A spurt of black ichor dropped

onto the floor, and Thea's eyes widened to saucers when the ichor turned into a pool of lightning that scorched the ground for a few seconds before fizzling.

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was still a thick blob of energy left over, but Zac didn't use it to push his level to 85. He still had burns covering most of his body, and his organs were badly lacerated. Add to

that his exploded leg, and he would need to use a huge amount of energy with **[Surging Vitality]**. He transformed back to his human form before the energy dissipated, and he urgently pushed all the leftover energy into the skill fractal of **[Surging Vitality]**.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I still need to recuperate a bit,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

In a perfect world, he would have been able to jump into some little spatial bubble and spend a week getting back to a perfect state, but time waited for no man. Kenzie had finally completed her work, or at least taken it to such a level that it

would be usable. Zac cracked his neck as he got up on his feet, turning back to his human form once more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wait,” she said, making Zac look over with confusion.

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

A DIFFERENT SKY

A sense of completion filled her body as she punched the door, causing a massive explosion that launched pieces of the Bloodline Vat in every direction. Rampant energies blasted out of the sealed chamber, her prison for the past month.

But she was finally out.

Inevitability looked around and saw that things were the same. Some of their new serfs had been bloodied by shrapnel, but she wasn't in the mood to enjoy their pained cries as she turned her attention inward.

The crystal was perfectly formed in her body, continuously swallowing her Cosmic Energy and releasing it slightly modified. She had already heard from her master what the change would entail. The angrier she became, the more powerful the energy would become. This power would come at the expense of her rationality, and perhaps even her safety, but who cared about that when it would allow her to kill those who angered her?

She opened her status screen, taking a look at her Race to make sure.

[D] – Zhix – Manic Vessel (Special)

She went over her attributes quickly as well, disappointed that they hadn't leaped forward after weeks of suffering. But the Bloodline Seed had finally managed to imprint a Synthetic Bloodline on her body with the help of the taboo technology. It, unfortunately, wasn't a Combat Bloodline, but she didn't really mind.

Calling it Special made it feel like the Bloodline was something her master had prepared specifically for her. She was about to close her status screen, but she noticed something interesting.

[E] Chains of Fate [24%]. 5%—?

There was a change in her cultivation manual as well, with a new number appearing. She would have to ask her master to be sure, but she guessed that her bloodline gave a five percent power boost at the minimum, rising even higher depending on her anger. As where the roof was, it would depend on how much Zachary Atwood would manage to piss her off.

Good, you're out. Come see me, a voice echoed in Inevitability's head, and her eyes lit up as she hurried toward the building her master used.

However, she stopped in her tracks when she saw her master's situation, her eyes widening in shock. He was pale and gaunt, looking like he was beset by some unknown affliction. His pristine muscles were all withered away, and it looked like a gust would topple him over. The only reason she didn't panic was that his aura was as stable as ever.

"What's wrong?!" Inevitability said with shock after she closed the door behind her.

Just what had happened while she was locked in that damn machine?

"You did it. Good job, Kirath," Adcarkas said with a smile. "I'm fine. I had a tussle with Super Brother-Man. He is stronger than I expected."

"He's still alive after meeting you?" Inevitability said incredulously.

"I met him outside. I couldn't go all out because of the compulsions." Adcarkas sighed as he got to his feet. "Come with me; it's almost time."

Kirath mutely nodded as she followed her master out of the town, moving toward the inner reaches of the Heathen World. Her eyes kept darting toward her master with worry,

seeing how he struggled to keep the pace. But she knew better than to ask or offer help.

A few walls of spatial tears tried to bar their path, but her master easily moved them out of the way so that they could reach further inside.

“There is something I need to tell you. Something I’ve kept from you and your brother all this time,” Adcarkas suddenly said without stopping.

“What’s going on?” Inevitability asked with confusion.

“I was born almost eight hundred years ago. My master was Barvat, the previous leader of the True Path. However, the True Path was almost extinguished when the crusade took place. The war killed most of our people, leaving just Barvat behind, severely weakened. Much was lost in those desperate years, and my master’s conviction started faltering.” Adcarkas sighed.

“How is this related to our current situation?” Inevitability asked with a frown.

Truthfully, she hated listening about the True Path or the Great Redeemer. Their master was as much to blame for her brother’s death as Zachary Atwood, as far as she was concerned. If not for his rules, they would have long killed that human to snuff out a threat in its cradle. Besides, the so-called Redeemer’s convoluted plan had forced her true master to live like a rat for centuries when he should have been the leader of the Zhix.

“Just listen,” Adcarkas said, a dangerous glint in his eyes telling Inevitability that he would not tolerate any more interruptions.

“Barvat asked himself, was all this suffering worth the small morsels of power that Vوريدis A’Heliophos left for us? Are there truly no other paths to take? But such thoughts were obviously heresy, and he suffered great backlashes as a result. However, he somehow managed to hold on for centuries while being tortured by the Karmic Bindings of the Great Redeemer. One day, he managed to complete a daring plan,” Adcarkas

said. “And that’s when he took me on as a disciple, an orphan of just four years.

“He split my soul into two.”

“Wh—” Inevitability blurted, but she quickly stopped herself.

“It was crude, and it shouldn’t have succeeded, but here I stand. Then again, I suspect that I was not his first attempt. Most of my soul is completely bound by the Karmic Bindings, but a small part is free. One part is out in the open; one is hidden, like a whisper in the void.” Adcarkas sighed. “I couldn’t openly defy our master, but my subconscious could slightly alter my actions and sometimes even take over for a short duration.”

Inevitability’s heart beat like a drum as she listened to her master. This was the first time she had ever heard him display anything except devout fervor and fanaticism for the Great Redeemer.

“Obviously, such a procedure caused some side effects, like an unstable disposition.” Adcarkas wryly smiled. “But it gave me a chance to break the chains that bind me. That would have bound you.”

“Would have?” Inevitability muttered with confusion.

“Haven’t you noticed? Neither you nor your brother is as fervent a follower as me or previous generations. It was not a coincidence. My subconscious modified your cultivation manuals. It wasn’t enough to completely rid you of the Karmic Contract, but it was a step in the right direction. That’s why you could attack Zachary Atwood during the Hunt. That’s why your brother could move out without telling me.” Adcarkas sighed, vexation glimmering in his eyes. “You could say I am responsible for the death of Karath through my meddling.”

“That’s not—!” Kirath blurted, but was stopped by a wave of Adcarkas’ hand.

“First I hoped that my changes would lessen the bindings in each subsequent generation, but that goal had to be discarded when the integration took place. I saw no option but

to fulfill the contract. However, everything changed when we found this place,” Adcarkas said. “Here, the Karmic Contract is muted, and I could freely plan for our future.”

“So we’re not going to follow that man when he arrives?!” Inevitability couldn’t stop herself from asking, her eyes widening with anticipation.

“You’ve read the reports. What’s the point of following a man who needed to take a crooked path just to reach D-grade, even with the vast wealth of a grand cultivator clan at his beck and call? And now he’s out of time, needing to perform an even greater sacrifice. Trash,” Adcarkas spat.

“Then what are we doing here? Let’s just go,” Inevitability ventured.

“We can’t.” Adcarkas sighed. “We are still caught in his net. But I think I might have found a solution. Ah, we’re here.”

Inevitability hadn’t checked where they were going at all as she raptly listened to her master’s narration, but her eyes widened when she saw a massive field of spatial rifts blocking their path, hundreds upon hundreds of them.

“Stay close to me,” Adcarkas said as they started to make their way through the field of spatial chaos.

Kirath stayed on the heels of Adcarkas, a sheen of sweat covering her face as they moved forward. Her master was clearly struggling to clear the path for them, and she hated that there wasn’t anything she could do to assist him. It took them almost an hour to move just a hundred meters, but Kirath was shocked to see what was on the other side.

It was a large spatial sphere hovering in the center of a large hall, a starry night depicted in its center. Kirath had heard of these Void Spheres before, but they weren’t supposed to be this big or this stable. It was no doubt an accomplishment of her master. After all, the whole room was absolutely covered in dense inscriptions.

She also noted with interest that there were over a hundred crystals embedded among the inscriptions. She had wondered

where all those Gemling artisans had gone; it turned out that they had been turned into materials for an array.

“What’s this?” Kirath asked with wonder.

“The way to break the bonds of fate. The key to freedom,” Adcarkas said with a smile.

“A Void Sphere?” Kirath asked with confusion.

“Our strength is still nothing compared to Voridis A’Heliophos’,” Adcarkas explained. “So we need to borrow the power of the Dimensional Seed. It’s just a treasure, but is still a tier higher than our master.”

“I understand!” Kirath said, her eyes lighting up. “It’s amazing how Master could think of something as intricate as this.”

“You’re just as important for the next step,” Adcarkas said as he took out a box. “This will require both our effort. For freedom.”

“Me?” Kirath repeated as her eyes turned to the box as her master opened it.

It looked like an egg made from thousands of thin metal wires, each of them woven in extremely intricate patterns. It was roughly the size of her head, but it wasn’t completely solid. She could somewhat discern a sanguine crystal glistening in its core, held in place by some of the wires.

The crystal itself wasn’t something Inevitability recognized, but her antennae felt a sharp backlash from the amount of power it contained. She didn’t know what her master had created, but she knew that it had the power to kill her outright.

A small spatial tear suddenly appeared out of nowhere, cutting a shallow wound on her master’s arm. A trail of blood ran down his hand, entering a small groove on the metal egg. The blood continued to run down the sides of the egg, forming an intricate red pattern across its surface.

“You next,” Adcarkas said as he walked over to Kirath.

She unhesitantly cut open a similar wound as her master. Kirath felt a wave of dizziness hit as her blood dripped down on the egg, and she looked down at it with confusion. Her blood actually followed a completely different set of grooves, forming a second pattern on the surface of the egg before it entered its depths.

“Good.” Adcarkas nodded before he walked over to the Void Sphere.

Kirath followed his actions with confusion, and her eyes widened when she saw him throw the egg inside the sphere. It rippled like the surface of a lake, and the starry night suddenly disappeared. It was replaced by thousands and thousands of harried faces, all of them Zhix. One tormented spirit kept replacing another in an endless cycle until the sphere stabilized and turned completely pitch-black.

“Enter it,” Adcarkas said.

“What? Enter? That thing?” Kirath said with hesitation.

“My body is too wounded to withstand it for too long. But it is not dangerous to you now that your bloodline is awakened. Look,” Adcarkas said as he pushed his bleeding hand into the Void Sphere, causing a small swirl of red to enter its depths. But his arm was mostly unscathed as he dragged it out again. “Besides, I need to control the array to make sure it runs properly.”

“What do I need to do?” Kirath asked.

“Just hold on and don’t move. You will form the connection between us and our master. He will try to stop us from breaking the contract, and it will hurt. But you need to hold on. For freedom,” Adcarkas said as he turned toward Kirath, yearning in his eyes.

“I understand. I will not disappoint you,” Kirath said as she took a steady breath before entering the sphere.

Her heart hammered from fear as she was submerged in the darkness. She didn’t fear getting killed in battle, but this was something else entirely. But seconds passed, and she calmed down soon enough as she felt that nothing was amiss.

It even felt a bit like she was enclosed in her master's embrace because of the enormous concentration of Spatial Energy around her.

There was a weird power burrowing into her body, but it wasn't very painful. It just seemed to blend with the power from the crystal in her chest. She opened her eyes, seeing a small swirl of her blood rushing from her arm toward the heart of the sphere. Just like her master's. She turned her head toward the outside, and she saw her master looking back at her, speaking as he gestured.

I can't hear you, she said, but no sound came out.

Adcarkas still nodded in understanding and indicated for her to take a seated position and steady her mind. She quickly followed his instructions, and she felt a weird power appear all around her a second later. Her master had started.

The weird power soon started to enter her body, and discomfort quickly turned into pain. She gritted her teeth and held on, not wanting to ruin her master's efforts. But the odd energy started creeping into her mind as well, like tendrils of corruption. Her very soul reflexively shuddered and tried to shake off the intrusion, and a sense of wrongness quickly overcame her determination.

Eventually, she couldn't take it any longer, and she opened her eyes again to look at her master for directions. He looked back at her with a comforting smile, but there was a terrifying coldness in the depths of his eyes. She tried to move, but her body didn't listen.

Desolation, sorrow, acceptance.

She closed her eyes again, and images of a long-lost time flickered through her mind. Of the small workshop in the heart of the basin, some distance away from the hive. Of two orphans playing while their master worked on his inventions. A carefree time under a different sky.

A smile crept across Adcarkas' face as he sensed how the resistance subsided, knowing his gambit had succeeded.

“A Fulcrum and the death of a world, to open the path to Monarchy. I’ll provide these things, erasing the debt of the True Path and severing Karma. If my dear master is here to reap the benefits or not, that’s his problem,” Adcarkas muttered as his eyes turned toward the core of the Mystic Realm. “My destiny lies elsewhere.”

BLOOD FOR BLOOD

The kiss came without warning, but it didn't feel wrong. Zac's hand moved to Thea's waist, and the two pressed closer in a passionate embrace. However, the warm softness disappeared as quickly as it came when Thea took a step back, leaving behind only her scent. It left Zac standing with a blank look, the series of events playing on repeat in his head.

"Uh," Zac eventually said after much thought, eliciting a snicker from his sister.

"Just in case." Thea shrugged as she pushed back one of her blond locks behind her ear.

Zac still had some trouble comprehending how things had come to this. Had she mistaken him getting the Gemling crystal as a grand declaration of love? He looked over to Ogras, who stood to the side with a wide grin plastered across his face.

"Hey, don't look at me. One is all you get," Ogras snorted.

"We'll talk later. I'll get you out of here, I promise," Zac finally said to Thea as he composed himself, and Kenzie activated the machine.

A weird egg-like bubble enclosed the two before it shrank back and dropped into a spatial tear that appeared right beneath them. Both the Atwood siblings were gone a second later, and the tear closed behind them. Left were just Ogras, Thea, and a sterile lab.

"So where's my reward?" Ogras snickered as he turned to Thea. "I almost got my ass handed to me to get that little stone

out. How about it? We will probably be stuck here for a wh—”

Ogras didn't get any further as he hurriedly escaped into a swirl of shadows to avoid a sharp blue light that shot straight for his head. He appeared on the other side of the room a moment later, and Thea only gave him a scathing glance as she sheathed her weapon.

“What a violent girl.” Ogras laughed. “I think Zac's better off picking one of his off-world misses.”

“What are you talking about?” Thea asked with a frown.

“Oh, now you're talking with me?” Ogras grinned as he took out the **[Corporeal Serum]**. “I guess I could tell you, but where would the fun be in that? More importantly, the Lucky Token and our Computer Whisperer are gone; you'd better ready yourself for what comes next. Things will probably only get worse before they get better from here on out.”

A painful current ripped through Zac's body as it felt like he was being squeezed through a thin tube. But the pain was thankfully gone as quickly as it came, and Zac realized that his surroundings had already changed. He found himself in the corner of a warehouse, and he breathed out in relief when he saw his sister standing safely right next to him. Their surroundings were not as lucky, as everything within a sphere of five meters around them had been completely disintegrated, though new Memorysteel was already moving to make up for the parts lost.

The scene made Zac's heart thump an additional time, but he quickly calmed down when he realized there actually wasn't any response from the automated defenses. His eyes turned toward the disk beneath their feet; his best guess was that it contained some sort of fail-safe that stopped the base from acting out.

Kenzie breathed in relief when she saw that the disk was still fine, and she bent down and stashed it away. She had already taken away all the other machines from the lab,

leaving just the spatial gemstone and the protected metals behind. It wasn't that Zac didn't want to take them, but just getting out the second item had been dangerous enough, and he didn't want another incident on his hands.

"Let's go," Zac quickly said, and he grabbed Kenzie by her waist as he flashed away, hurriedly leaving the room before setting her down. The base still hadn't responded to them blasting a hole in its wall, but there was no guarantee that it wouldn't do so in a second or two.

"We're alive," Kenzie said, almost looking surprised. "I guess Ogras was right about you. You're a luck magnet. You didn't just survive, you even got the girl. I'm jealous."

"Have you had enough?" Zac asked with exasperation, though he was inwardly a bit embarrassed.

He hadn't expected Thea to make a move like that out of the blue. They had gotten along quite well during their exploratory outings in this place, but she hadn't let on any interest at all. Then again, he wasn't the sharpest when it came to those things, and the more perceptive demon had hinted to there being a spark a few times already.

Zac would be lying if he said he wasn't interested himself. Thea was smart, driven, and she cared for the people around her. She had an aura that inspired confidence even when she didn't say anything, and they seemed to be seeing eye to eye on a lot of things. It was just that Zac hadn't really been thinking about these matters since the integration, especially after what had happened with Hannah and Alea.

It almost felt like he was cursed when it came to love, perhaps to make up for his luck in other departments. But mostly it was the simple fact that it was hard to think about matters of love when you had the fate of a whole planet riding on your shoulders.

"Hey, why are you looking all scrunched up like that? I know you're interested; it's good that you're putting yourself out there a bit after Hannah. Although, I guess it was rather that Thea finally got tired of waiting? You should have gone

all out, like in that picture of the sailor going off to war,” Kenzie said.

“Alright, alright.” Zac sighed as he looked around. “I’ll deal with this after we’ve prevented our people from getting slaughtered. Can you tell where we are?”

“One second,” Kenzie said as she took out her tablet, but a frown slowly spread on her face. “We were teleported in the right direction, but we’re a bit far off. Look.”

A series of dots appeared on the screen the next moment, almost looking like a star constellation.

“I don’t have a map of this sector, but these dots are my communication modules,” Kenzie said before she pointed at one solitary dot far from the others. “This is us.”

“It looks like we’re in the Outer Ring at least,” Zac said with a frown. “But we’ve been sent too far. We passed our own base and have been sent in the direction of the True Sky Faction.”

“Yeah, not even our scouts have made it this far. We’re over ten hours away if we go by the speed of the scouts,” Kenzie said.

“Can you contact our people?” Zac sighed.

“No, we’re too far. I need to get closer to my network,” Kenzie said.

“Alright, jump onto my back,” Zac said.

“I can keep up, you know,” Kenzie muttered, but she still did as he asked.

“I know, but you don’t have my Danger Sense,” Zac said as he converted [**Love’s Bond**] to its shield form. “Ten hours is way too slow. I’m going to be pushing it a bit. Hang on tight and tell me where to go.”

He shot down the corridor the next moment, following Kenzie’s directions. She didn’t have the natural understanding of Leviaala or the other natives, but Jeeves was an AI with amazing machine learning capabilities. They had already mapped so many pathways, and Leviaala had shared some input

before she decided to betray them, allowing Jeeves to make decent deductions of the surroundings.

Of course, where the barriers and spatial tears were hidden was completely random, as far as they could tell.

Zac's mind suddenly screamed of danger just a few minutes after they set out, and he barely had time to stop before he entered a hidden minefield. He skidded to a halt, but his coffin-shield still received two scars in return for smashing the outer spatial rifts.

However, Zac had expected this to happen, so he resumed his mad dash with even greater speed. One thing they had realized over the past weeks was that these barriers at least weren't placed too closely. So if you encountered one trap, then you wouldn't see another one at least for a few minutes. Zac only slowed down to a slightly less frantic pace four minutes later until they hit their next trap.

The two kept up this system of switching between a jog and a sprint, with the coffin taking one cut after another over the following hours. The shield thankfully had amazing restorative properties, and it was always repaired before it received a new scar. Finally, after three hours of rushing, they came close enough for Kenzie to place a communications device, and she quickly tried to contact their forces.

"Who's this?" an indistinct voice echoed out on the other side, barely audible over the sound of explosions.

"It's Mackenzie Atwood. My brother is here as well. What's going on?" Kenzie said.

"Thank god! It's Joanna. We're under attack by natives and their machines! We got your warning, thankfully, which saved a lot of lives. Those lunatics blew up the gate and hundreds of meters of the wall with some sort of spatial bomb. Our whole defensive perimeter was swallowed by the void, but none of our forces was inside," the voice said.

"What?!" Zac exclaimed with shock before he glanced at his sister. "The drill?"

“It shouldn’t have that kind of power, I think?” she said, though she clearly wasn’t sure. “Besides, it requires a lot of spatial energy to run. If they used it now, they wouldn’t be able to use it to get out unless they had some special power source.”

“What happened next?” Zac asked as he started running again.

“They came out blasting before the wall had a chance to heal. We tried to fight them, but they have thousands and thousands of machines. We were forced to focus on defending as we retreated toward the second line of defense. We only made it thanks to the Beast Masters,” Joanna narrated.

“The Beast Masters?” Zac repeated with surprise bordering on disbelief.

He had fought both against and with the Tal-Eladar before, and he hadn’t expected to hear that they were such a big help in this place. After all, there were almost as many Anointed in the Mystic Realm as there were Tal-Eladar, and most of the Beast Masters weren’t anything special.

“They managed to create a beast tide somehow, summoning those Lunar Wolves. They went crazy as they attacked the natives, but they mostly ignored us thanks to some sort of smoke the Beast Masters released. It allowed us to make it back to our second line of defense with far fewer casualties,” Joanna said.

“What’s the situation now?” Zac asked as he breathed out in relief.

It was lucky that he had started mending fences with Verana. Who knew how many lives she and her people had just saved? Losing the Lunar Wolves was a shame, but it wasn’t like he had any thought-out plans for them in either case.

“I don’t think they have any more of those bombs since they neither used them against the wolves nor our second line of defense. They are currently resting up while their machines are trying to exhaust our shields outside the glasshouse. They

have too much firepower; we have been forced to launch raids to draw attention and let the shields recharge; a lot of people have been wounded.” Joanna sighed. “We’ve expended thousands of talismans to minimize our casualties.”

“That’s what they’re for,” Zac said. “I’m on my way. Just try to hold out, and start backing away if you can’t. No need to make a last stand.”

“I understand,” Joanna said.

Fury burned in Zac’s chest when he heard that Clan Cartava really had gone all out to attack his people. Any thoughts of reconciliation were thrown out of his head. He’d quash this uprising and take the Spatial Drill from Leviala even if he had to pry it from her cold dead hands. But he could only keep running for now, steeped in anxiety, as there was still a long way to go.

But finally, they reached the mapped-out areas of the outer rim, at which point Zac could go all out. He turned into a blur in the hallways as he kept using **[Loamwalker]** to maximize his speed. He could soon hear sounds from ahead, running steps and subdued voices. Zac took out his axe just in case, but a flurry of emotions went through his heart when he saw the source of the sounds. The corridors were filled with soldiers with various degrees of injuries.

Some were carrying their unconscious or fallen brethren, while others seemingly had given up, sitting down against the Memorysteel wall with a blank look in their eyes. Zac guessed the wounded were being sent toward the next defensive layer, the gate leading to their secluded section at the edge of the Mystic Realm.

“Lord Atwood!” a bloodied soldier said with relief when he saw Zac appear around the corner. “You’re here!”

It was like a ripple went through the stream of people, with hundreds of eyes turning his way. Zac felt a bit uncomfortable, but he knew he couldn’t just slink away. He needed to say something.

“I’m here,” Zac said with a voice that echoed through the corridors, a voice full of pent-up anger. “I’m sorry I couldn’t get here sooner, but I’ll make sure these aggressors never forget the price of messing with our people.”

It was short and a bit cliché, but it contained an unbending conviction that almost turned palpable as Zac passed through the ranks. There would be blood for blood.

LIKE MOTHS TO A FLAME

Leviala looked on at the destruction from her drone chair with bleakness, her sight only made possible by using [**Heaven's Eyes**], as her physical eyes had already become useless. Guilt and self-loathing filled her as plumes of fire rose to the sky, and the air vibrated from the unending barrage of attacks.

“War always has casualties, child.” Tictus sighed as he kept tapping away on his drone-controlling tablet next to her. “I know you feel this is a mistake, and it might very well be. But the elders are not acting without reason. We know there has been an infiltration, and we know that this outside force might not necessarily have been aiming at us. But we still chose this path; your grandfather still chose to step down voluntarily even after your account. Do you know why?”

“Freedom. The fact that the outsiders are as powerful as you described only spurred the elders into action. What would have happened if we did as you said? We would be forcibly conscripted into a war that was not of our choosing, stuck in this hell as the world around us crumbled. Who do you think this Lord Atwood would see as expendable? What role would we have in his private crusade?”

“But more importantly, this outcome was already cemented the moment that Zachary Atwood closed the door to our prison cell. The same is already happening over at the True Sky Faction. It is a basic instinct to wish to be free,” Tictus said. “Your sacrifice gave us a fighting chance at least. But you’d be wrong to blame yourself for anything.”

Leviala weakly nodded, even that small movement causing a wave of blinding pain in her mind.

“We... should hurry,” Leviala whispered. “I have a bad feeling.”

They should already have been out by now, but Clan Cartava had met setback after setback on their path to freedom. First were the corridors that turned rabid, killing dozens and destroying a large chunk of their mechanized troops the moment they reached the gate to this forest. It was no doubt the work of Kenzie, the mysterious sister of Zachary Atwood.

It turned out that they had kept their guard up even before her betrayal.

But that was just the start. They had been forced to detonate their last remaining spatial bomb just to pass the gate, something that had been meant as a last-ditch weapon to quickly annihilate the opposition without any losses. Now they had been forced into a protracted battle against these lunatics who were far more powerful than normal considering their low levels.

The outsiders had even managed to enlist help from the Lunar Wolves, with thousands of beasts trying to rip through their ranks.

“The elders are still restoring their reserves after pushing back that army of giants. And I still can’t believe a Titan managed to survive somehow. I wonder if that means some of our ancestors made it out alive as well,” Tictus muttered.

“Still.” Leviala sighed. “It feels like a darkness is coming ever closer, threatening to swallow us up at any moment.”

“It’s not much longer. Their shields are on the verge of crumbling. Ten more minutes and we’ll be able to launch a final assault, utterly crushing them. From there, it’s just one sprint to the gates of freedom.”

Foolish.

How utterly foolish he had been to believe that he could stand on an even footing with these natives on the basis of the millions of people he controlled. He coughed out a mouthful of blood as he crawled up to a sitting position. It provided vantage for him to witness the fires that stretched across the horizon.

The True Sky Faction was supposed to be like them by all accounts, a fragmented group whose main advantage was numbers rather than individual strength. They had a council as a deciding organ, and there were even elections every decade by the sounds of things.

But the moment they found a weakness, they pounced like a pack of rabid beasts, forcing their way through the spatial rifts using some unknown means, rushing toward their spatial tunnel. The only reason their soldiers weren't completely overrun was the timely assistance of the tide of beasts that were attracted by the smell of blood. The blood of his soldiers.

Even that was just a delay of the inevitable. The New World Government had worked tirelessly to unearth as many weapon caches as possible over the past year, taking everything they could get their hands on. US Army stockpiles or old Soviet munitions belonging to African warlords, they took it all.

But their rockets had barely managed to take out a third of the far superior machines of the True Sky Faction, and when their cultivators eventually made their move, it was already over. A few ambassadors had managed to escape, but their defensive measures worked against them this time. The moment someone in the outer base heard of what was going on, they'd triggered the trap, closing the tunnel and abandoning their people.

Of course, Thomas Fischer had an override, but it wasn't like he would have a chance to use it, seeing as how he was surrounded by a diverse group of aliens.

"Human, we know you have a method to reopen the tunnel. Tell us how to remove the restrictions, and you and

your people can join the True Sky Faction,” a rugged monkeyman said, his fur silver and bristled from advanced age. “Together we’ll deal with the other factions, creating a foundation that can stand tall in the Multiverse.”

“Joining you bastards?” Fischer coughed with a wan smile as he infused some energy into the hidden fractal inscribed on the back of his tooth. “I’m not worthy. Besides, I can’t have you treacherous bastards running around on Earth.”

“Traacherous? You kept eliciting our help in return for our freedom, but you never delivered on your end. We’ve lost hundreds of warriors and three settlements keeping those cultists at bay. Now the world is ending, and we have run out of both options and patience,” the burly humanoid said with a growl as he looked down at Thomas’ wretched form. “Now, the exit.”

“You can forget it. What life would we lead with monsters like you lording over us? I’d rather leave our people to our own tyrant. At least he’s born in the United States.”

“I gave you a choice, but never mind.” The old cultivator sighed as he turned to one of his companions. “Search his mind.”

Thomas’ heart thumped with fear at the prospect of getting mind-raped by some alien, but he quickly calmed down again, taking a steadying breath. He still couldn’t understand how things had come to this. He remembered the sense of purpose he had back then, how he had led his people through the Tutorial before creating the foundation for his people to survive.

When had his goals changed? When had his convictions changed?

It felt like his humanity had been chipped away piece by piece by the temptation of power. He usually blamed the lizardmen and the insane insectoids for his actions. But in his heart of hearts, he knew better. This new world was poisonous, and he had gladly drunk its putrid waters.

Perhaps it was for the best that it came to this. He could die while he still maintained at least some of his humanity. He knew he was greedy and scheming, but never let it be known that he didn't care for his country. This would be his final gift.

The rest would be up to Zachary Atwood.

“Have you heard of atomic bombs?” Thomas laughed as he looked up at the aliens before he activated the array. “They're banned outside, but who would have thought it was possible to assemble one in this place?”

The eyes of the alien widened with comprehension.

“Run!”

But it was too late. A sun was born, blossoming just a few hundred meters away, and it would soon swallow them all.

“Trash, what kind of warrior kills themselves instead of fighting?” Cervantes snorted and threw the corpse into a wall before he turned to Yoros. “Have you confirmed it?”

“Yes.” The shaman quickly nodded as he ripped the bone spike out of the pretender's head. “Their leaders entered through another portal.”

“Shame. And the item?” Cervantes asked as he scanned through the Cosmos Sacks.

It was infuriating. These weaklings possessed a level of wealth that beggared his own, and these were just some insignificant scouts. Meanwhile, he had been forced to cultivate in this cursed environment, living on runoff and scraps like a rat. He would have formed his core a long time ago if it weren't for his wretched circumstances.

But fate was finally turning.

“They call it a Dimensional Seed. Their leaders seem to want it to reach the C-grade, but it can be used to create a private world. A new home for our tribe?” the shaman

hesitantly said, looking at his leader in hopes to discern his thoughts.

“C-grade or a private world,” Cervantes mused. “Well, my useless nephew failed in his task, but things might not be over yet. The answers lie at the core.”

“Fate congregates toward the center,” Yoros agreed. “Something enormous is brewing.”

“Good.” Cervantes nodded as he turned to his clansmen standing in wait.

The whole room was still illuminated by lunar splendor after having activated the ceremony, with thousands of his kin radiating a ruthless aura. The killing intent was palpable as well thanks to the corpses of the hundred pretenders lying on the ground.

“I know you all yearn for freedom,” he said. “To bask in the glory of the true moon. But we have suffered in this hellhole for millennia. If we try to leave now, we are just victims who managed to escape. That is not the Lunar Tribe. No, we will seize this moment and turn calamity into opportunity. Our people will not have died in vain. We’ll strike at the core.”

A war-hungry roar emerged from his tribe, and Cervantes nodded with a grin. However, Yoros walked over to him with a hesitant look on his face.

“We should hurry. Something changed a few hours ago. The fluctuations are growing erratic.”

Zac flashed through the throng of people with the help of **[Loamwalker]**. It wasn’t like he didn’t want to help them, but what could he do except rush to the front lines? He ran as fast as his legs could carry him and his sister, but each face he passed was imprinted on his mind, building his furious momentum to even greater heights.

This was a cruel reminder of the realities of the Multiverse. He and Clan Cartava didn't really have any great reason to become enemies, but sometimes that wasn't enough to become friends. Conflicting views and lack of trust had led to this miserable outcome, and the Church of Everlasting Dao was clearly adept in muddying the waters even further. And there was nothing he could do but finish things once and for all.

He was still hundreds of meters away from the gate, but he could still feel the deep explosions in the distance as their force transferred through the Memorysteel walls. The incessant tremors were ample proof of the intensity of the battle taking place on the other side. They finally reached the gate, and it actually opened itself as a group of bloodied soldiers were about to retreat.

“Lord Atwood!” a chorus of voices shouted, but Zac's eyes were on the defensive perimeter outside the glasshouse.

It almost looked like the whole sky had been lit on fire.

A constant bombardment assailed the defensive array. It was still holding, but it was obviously on its last legs. Cracks kept appearing, allowing a series of beams to slip inside and wreak havoc on the temporary town inside. Only the glasshouse was unscathed, the reinforced glass seemingly immune to Technocrat energy weapons.

A hundred Anointed stood in a line behind the barrier, a thick stream of energy emerging from their bodies to strengthen the shields. They were each supported by a squad of Zhix warriors who infused them with power. They in turn were supported by a group of supportive cultivators who did everything from protecting them from errant attacks to improving their energy transference.

Emily was one of them, her face pale as she held her hands against a Totem Pole she had conjured.

The physical wall was halfway crumbled already, with most of the Ishiate cannons in ruins. Still, over a hundred warriors stood on top of the wall-walk, desperately sending out attacks as others ran to reinforce the cracks in the barriers.

Zac flashed forward, appearing next to Joanna on top of the wall just as she sent out a storm of fractal weapons through the shield. However, Zac saw how they were quickly destroyed by an onslaught of lasers.

“Thank god you’re here,” she exclaimed when she saw Zac appear. “I don’t know how much longer we would last without you. Those machines are just too annoying.”

Zac looked out across the battlefield and saw what Joanna was talking about. The whole forest outside had been leveled to give way to a massive mechanical army. The flying drones were just one of the machines the Cartava Clan used to fight their war for them. There were just as many drones that looked completely different, like flying red eggs.

They didn’t have any weapons, but it was obvious that they were there to form an enormous red canopy of shields that covered the whole army. There were also landbound machines that packed a wallop, along with a few robots whose function Zac couldn’t discern. As for the Cartava clansmen themselves, they actually stood out of reach, letting the machines do their bidding.

The mechanical army was clearly the most immediate threat, and he turned to his sister, who looked at the army with greed. She had already taken out her tablet, and she was tapping away with fervor. However, she suddenly froze as her eyes widened in horror, just as the drones broke the carefully arranged line a few hundred meters away from the barrier.

They all suddenly shot straight toward the wall, and even Zac could sense a rapidly accumulating energy in the machines.

“They’re booby-trapped! They activated a self-destruct protocol the moment I connected with them. I can’t deactivate it; they’ll blow up this whole town!”

PATH TO FREEDOM

Zac blanched when he saw over a thousand drones shooting straight toward them. Most of the machines thankfully held their position, but he had felt the power of just a handful of spider balls self-destructing just a few hours ago. He understood all too well that the harried defensive shield wouldn't provide much protection against a blast of that magnitude.

“Can you deal with this wave? I have an idea on how to deal with the rest!” Kenzie hurriedly said, and Zac gritted his teeth before he nodded.

The coffin appeared on his back almost instantly, and a thick cloud of pitch-black gases emerged from it as Zac shot out one max-sized fractal blade after another. The others on the wall-walk desperately tried to help thin the numbers of drones as well, and one explosion after another incinerated the air itself outside the barrier.

Unfortunately, there were just too many of them, and the barriers of the defensive drones protected them as well. Only Zac was powerful enough to destroy shields and drones alike, but even then, they only managed to destroy a third of them before the machines were upon them.

A majestic demoness had thankfully already appeared outside the barrier by that point. It was [**Death's Embrace**], the final card up Zac's sleeve. He had hoped to save it for later, but the Mystic Realm kept forcing him into one desperate situation after another. Alea's arms opened wide in

what looked like a welcoming hug, and the drones actually seemed to be attracted by the gesture.

They were spread out into small squads of defenders and attackers before, likely to avoid getting taken out by one all-out attack, but they all turned to move straight toward the demonic avatar. Zac could clearly sense them being dragged by some mysterious force of the avatar though. One explosion after another erupted in her embrace, but they were muted like the fiery outbursts were sucked straight into a black hole.

A small sphere of fire and steel quickly grew in Alea's arms until it was almost too big for her to contain. There were still over a hundred machines left, but Zac knew that the skill had reached its limits. He quickly gave the order, and the avatar's jaw unhinged as she swallowed the enormous ball before turning into a mist that receded into the coffin.

Zac was already prepared, and two streaks of light flickered in front of the wall. Two clouds, one gold and one black, could be seen for just an instant before space split in two and destroyed the remaining suicide drones in one go. Zac exhaled in relief when he saw that the first group was dealt with before he quickly scanned his Spirit Tool. He was worried that something would go wrong after **[Love's Bond]** swallowed a bunch of drone scraps and fire, but it looked like the coffin really could eat anything.

Alea had still not so much as sent him an emotion or impression like Verun often did, so Zac couldn't tell whether feeding her things this way was beneficial or detrimental. But that was a worry for later, as a second squad was already setting out toward them, this one more than twice as big.

"I'm not sure I can block this without creating some massive fallout," Zac whispered with worry to his sister, who was tapping away with such speed that her fingers had turned into a blur.

"I got it!" Kenzie shouted. "I'll knock them all out for a few seconds. Get ready to destroy them. I will not be able to help you for a while after that. My... computer... will need to recharge."

Zac looked at Kenzie with surprise, but he quickly understood what she meant. It sounded like she or Jeeves had developed some sort of energy discharge aimed at Technocrat machines, and it was powered by Jeeves himself. Zac wasn't sure how to feel about that. It was one thing for the AI to help her with the tech side of things and give cultivation pointers, but now it was starting to directly weaponize itself as well?

Where would it end?

He knew that he couldn't be picky at a moment like this, and he nodded at her to go ahead as he started to charge up [**Deforestation**]. He had decided to go all out from the get-go considering that this mechanized army might actually be the strongest force of the Cartava Clan. Kenzie sighed as she shot a forlorn look at the vast repository of weaponry she wouldn't be able to steal before a sharp red light shot out of her eyes as she rose in the air.

Her face turned into a callous mask as she looked down at the mechanized army outside the gates, like an emperor looking down on its subjects. She placed her palm on the tablet in her grip before throwing it out toward the incoming horde. The tablet exploded after just a few meters, releasing a small wave that Zac could barely discern.

It didn't look like much, but it was extremely effective. The hundreds of red shields covering the army disappeared in an instant, and the machines all stopped in their tracks as the drones started to drop from the sky. Zac was already on the move by that point as he jumped down from the wall and rushed toward the army with all the speed he could muster without activating [**Loamwalker**].

"Stop him!" someone roared from within the mechanized army, but the Cartava Clan's caution was working against them now that Zac and Kenzie had arrived.

They had wanted to let their robot armies pave the way for them while they conserved their strength, but they ended up in a position where they were unable to intercept Zac as he swung his arm and then swung it again as two huge axes almost superimposed on each other.

A ripple spread out through the exposed machines before thousands of deep cuts appeared out of nowhere. Many of the falling drones were directly destroyed, while the larger robots on the ground just got their plating shredded. The mechanical army didn't even get a chance to wake up before a wave of flames hit them next, scorching and shredding everything that was still standing.

Just like that, the foundation that had held Clan Cartava safe from the other natives was gone, utterly destroyed because of the deadly combo of Zac and his sister. An army made up of over ten thousand drones and thousands of other weapons was destroyed in an instant, but that wasn't Zac's main goal.

He rushed forward through the wreckage, his eyes trained on the chaotic defensive line behind the inferno. He spotted a few scorched corpses among the burned metal scraps, no doubt Datamancers hiding among the machines.

But those people weren't his concern any longer; his eyes were already trained on the true army of his enemies. The Cartava Clan had let their machines attack the base for hours by this point, and they had clearly grown complacent after dealing with the wolves. They had no proper shields up since the defensive drones stationed at their front lines were still malfunctioning, and many seemed to be frozen in a stupor upon seeing their whole robot army being destroyed in an instant.

Zac felt some hesitation for a second, but he pushed it aside as he emerged through the flames like a god of war. The enormous pitch-black Axe of Desolation appeared above his head, and it clove the air in a horizontal arc. A cloud of destruction billowed toward them, as if Zac's judgment upon the Cartava Clan had taken form.

The wave of desolation moved deceptively fast, hitting the front lines of Clan Cartava before the drones had a chance to reset themselves. The quick-witted cultivators had erected some shields by themselves, but the cloud easily slipped through the cracks. There were no screams as the first clansmen succumbed to the Axe of Desolation. They simply

stopped moving before they fell apart, crumbling into pieces of ash that drifted away.

Some reacted quicker than others as they desperately tried to attack the cloud or run for their lives, the latter finding far greater success than the former. The defenders managed to weaken and delay the wave a bit, but hundreds of people still died in an instant, some of them even E-grade.

Of course, a single attack wasn't enough to completely eradicate an E-grade clan.

A towering eye suddenly appeared in the sky, and even Zac felt immense pressure from it even if its gaze was trained on the wave of desolation. The thick black cloud tried to push even further, but it had already exhausted too much energy dealing with the front lines. It was stopped in its tracks, locked in a stalemate with the fractal eye.

The impasse didn't last long, though, as a massive hole was blasted through the wave. Three seniors walked through, each of them radiating intense killing intent. Two of them were old men with long flowing beards, while the third was an old lady. None of them held any weapons, as far as Zac could tell, but he knew that all three of them were proper cultivators, judging by their auras.

It was no doubt the elders who had stepped forward at this crucial time.

They stopped in front of their army, gazing at Zac with a mix of shock and anger.

“You must be the one called Zachary Atwood,” the man in the middle said with a murderous glare, his aura exploding toward the sky. “You're powerful, but Clan Cartava has waited for liberation for millennia. We will not be stopped by your tyranny.”

A roar of agreement erupted from behind, with the thousands of soldiers glaring daggers at him. The previous fear and hesitation was swept away, replaced with a palpable bloodlust.

Zac's eyes thinned as he looked at the old geezer. His aura was actually weaker compared to the man to his left, yet he seemed to speak for the three. Zac guessed that this was the second elder whom Leviala had mentioned, the one who essentially staged a coup. That meant the old guy to the left should be the previous Grand Elder, Leviala's grandfather and the most powerful warrior of Clan Cartava.

Three High E-grade cultivators and an army assisting them from behind. It was a bit more than he could handle, but he knew that his people would join soon now that the mechanized army was dealt with. He just needed to hold down these three seniors while his people dealt with the others, at which point victory was theirs.

He was about to make his move, but he suddenly felt slight tremors in the ground ten meters away from him, and he immediately guessed something was amiss. He jumped away just as the ground exploded, but Zac hurriedly stopped sending out a fractal blade mid-swing when he saw a familiar head pop out.

"WE ARE HERE! Ah? Why are you here?" Billy roared as he emerged full of vigor, but he quickly lost his momentum when he saw Zac standing right next to him.

"What's going on? What are you doing?" Zac asked with bafflement.

"These big guys told Billy they are good at digging, so Billy wanted to ambush the bad guys," Billy explained as one Anointed after another emerged from the hole, each of them looking fully rested in contrast to those who had manned the walls.

"Ambush?" Zac said with a confused look. "Then why did you scream we're here?"

"A-!" Billy exclaimed while Rhubat sighed and shook their head. "I guess Billy got too excited?"

"It matters not, Wallbreaker. We have appeared right on time," Rhubat rumbled before they turned to Zac. "We're here to assist you, Warmaster."

Zac nodded in thanks before he started when he saw Verana emerge behind the legs of the Anointed as well, accompanied by six other Beast Masters. It looked like this elite squad had planned on going all out when the barrier broke, launching a deadly counter the moment Clan Cartava thought they had seized victory.

But now that Zac had appeared, the Anointed had changed their plan, digging their way out prematurely. After all, there was no way that the energy-sensitive Zhix hadn't sensed his appearance.

"We can just help keep one at bay for a bit," Verana said as she looked at the old lady, who had not spoken until now. "They are proper Late-stage warriors, after all."

"That's plenty," Zac said as his aura started to grow.

"Are you truly determined to bar our way on our path to freedom?" the man to the left suddenly asked, his face a mask of grief and exhaustion.

"It might have been possible to work something out before, but that ship has already sailed," Zac said as he turned back toward his enemies.

"So it has." The man sighed.

His aura was completely unleashed the next moment as an elongated ring of white lightning appeared like a halo behind his back. It was almost blindingly radiant, and it reminded Zac of a vertical eye made from pure energy.

"We'll take that one!" Billy roared as he grew, his height soon dwarfing even Rhubat's. "He zapped Billy before. Billy's gonna thwunk him back."

"That old lady still hasn't made her move," Verana said, her face clearly a bit reluctant. "But we'll do our best."

Lulu, Grub, and Slither appeared from within her sleeves, each of them rapidly growing into massive beasts in an instant. They were a lot more powerful compared to the last time Zac had seen them, probably thanks to Verana purchasing a part of the Beast Crystal mine before Zac went to the Tower of Eternity. Verana wasn't planning on staying behind this time,

and she jumped up on the head of Slither while the other Beast Masters joined in, each of them conjuring mysterious fractals that entered the bodies of the three beasts.

Zac felt he must look like a toddler sandwiched between the hulking Anointed and the awe-inspiring beasts, but his aura told the truth. With two of the elders occupied for the time being, Zac only needed to worry about the second elder, and that was perfect in his book. This man was the mastermind behind all the trouble Clan Cartava had caused, as far as he could tell, and taking him out would make everything else a lot easier.

The ground was already vibrating as the chains of **[Love's Bond]** slithered out from the coffin on his back, each of them looking like a tentacle hungry for destruction. It was the Zhix horde, thousands of furious insectoids to settle their grudge with the Cartava army.

“Go,” Zac growled as he pointed his axe toward the second elder.

The ground cracked for hundreds of meters, and the sky lit up in color as six vast sets of auras clashed, fighting for supremacy.

DESPICABLE

A spectral forest rose from the ground as Zac flashed forward, the trees giving him a second sight as he tried to close the distance to the second elder. Most of the Cartava Clan cultivators seemed to be leaning toward mage classes, which meant that turning the fight into a melee was his best bet at ending things quickly.

The second elder frowned as he looked at the forest that had sprung up around him. He pushed his hand forward, causing hundreds of runes to appear, each of them seemingly made out of steel. Zac could somewhat guess what was going on. The Grand Elder used lightning as an element, his insights probably stemming from the Base Power that powered this place.

The second elder instead had focused on the Memorysteel itself for inspiration.

Zac was a bit surprised none of them seemed to have insights into space even with all the spatial rifts around them, but he guessed it was simply too hard to gain insight into that Dao as an E-grade cultivator in this place.

A sudden pang of danger dragged Zac out of his thoughts as a metal arrow shot straight toward him, coming from the closest rune. It contained tremendous force, and the air itself was frayed as it flew straight toward him. But Zac only glanced at it before refocusing on his enemy as a chain lashed out to intercept.

The sharp sound of metal colliding echoed out as chain and arrow clashed, and a small shockwave erupted. The chain of **[Love's Bond]** was pushed away, but it was clearly Zac who came out victorious in the initial engagement. One of the links had a small white mark from where the arrowhead hit, but the whole arrow was disfigured as it fell to the ground.

One flash forward moved Zac almost a hundred meters, putting him just ten meters away from the old man. A radiant edge was already tearing through the air as **[Chop]** expanded to over fifteen meters, creating a vast kill zone in front of him. The elder looked startled as he moved to run away, but he was far too slow. The blade bit into his torso before he could take more than a single step, bisecting the old man.

However, Zac just frowned as the second elder supposedly died, and his worry was quickly confirmed as Zac found himself surrounded by over a hundred pitch-black spikes that reminded him of Alea's ultimate attack. The bisected old man turned into streams of metal the next moment, shooting toward him with extreme speed.

Destroying all the spikes around him would be too annoying, so he activated **[Loamwalker]** to flash away, but he didn't even manage to take a single step before the two streams of metal reached his legs and turned into two manacles that felt as heavy as mountains. The sudden burden made him stumble, and the spikes shot toward him at that precise moment.

Zac's Danger Sense screamed at him to get away, and the veins on his forehead pulsated as he forcibly took a step forward and disappeared with the help of his movement skill. It felt like the muscles in his legs would tear from the exertion, but a loud snap confirmed that he had forcibly broken the restrictive skills as he moved.

A green barrier appeared around Zac as he activated the first defensive charge of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, just in time as he crashed through a dozen of the black spikes. The barrier barely held as Zac escaped the encirclement, a testament to how powerful the attack was when counting the number of spikes left behind.

He appeared fifty meters away, and he turned around just in time to see a large spatial tear being created by the hundred remaining spikes. They had actually ripped a hole into space when they stabbed toward a singular point, and the air twisted and distorted as the rift swallowed everything around it before space mended itself.

There was no time for Zac to regain his footing, though, as one arrow after another shot toward him from the runes all around him. Zac growled in annoyance as his chains turned into a blur, forming a defensive barrier even more effective than [**Nature's Barrier**]. It was something he had come up with some time ago, but it only worked when there weren't too many projectiles to deal with.

The chains kept him safe for the time being, but he knew that this wasn't a sustainable situation.

He had already spotted ten clones of the old man forming a circle around him, each of them forming different hand seals, no doubt preparing his next major attack. Massive outbursts of lightning and Zhix sigils clashing to his left was proof of a battle that was quickly reaching a fever pitch, and the three beasts to his right were already bloodied as the Tal-Eladar desperately held on for dear life.

The second elder had seized the momentum the moment Zac looked over at that very first arrow. It had given him a short window to teleport away while leaving behind a booby-trapped clone, even escaping Zac's improved senses from [**Hatchetman's Spirit**]. Zac knew he needed to break the stalemate, but it looked like the second elder wasn't actually trying to take him out. He was just probing him while stalling for time, waiting for the others to finish up their fights.

Unfortunately, Zac saw no simple solution. The clones were extremely lifelike, and Zac couldn't actually tell which one was the real elder even with the help of [**Cosmic Gaze**]. Zac knew what he had to do, though he hated such tactics. But this was not the time to hesitate, and the lustrous halo of [**Conformation of Supremacy**] appeared behind his back while he also started infusing a storm of Cosmic Energy into [**Nature's Punishment**].

The axe of the axe-man appeared inside the halo, and Zac shot toward the closest avatar. It was shredded into pieces by one swing of his E-grade skill, the ground itself turned into a deep gorge from the force generated by the halo. The clone wasn't the real elder this time either, and his body fell apart into liquid metal once more.

This blob didn't shoot toward Zac, but it rather rose into the sky as it absorbed the metal runes in the area, forming one massive fractal. Zac spotted a similar fractal as large as a fist suddenly appear on his robe, and he felt a tremendous pressure like he was bound by unseen fetters. It reminded him of those annoying spiderlings he had fought during the final battle of the second beast wave, where each spider that attached to him increased the gravity.

This one mark added over ten times as much weight on his body, but Zac was also not the same person as he had been back then. He bore the weight without a change in expression as he flashed toward the second clone. This one was right at the edge of his fractal forest, and it was the closest one to the Cartava army.

The second avatar was destroyed in a single swing as well, and another huge fractal appeared, just as expected. The strain on his body more than doubled, but Zac only snorted as he pushed his free hand forward. An enormous crack in the sky appeared, but not right above him. It was instead above the army just a few hundred meters away, and the large wooden hand emerged in all its glory.

Zac wasted no time as he rushed forward, running away from the encirclement and his spectral forest. He was surprised to feel that the restraints increased by a whole tier after he left the circle the elder's clones had set up, but he could still move almost freely, supported by his almost inhuman amount of Strength.

Screams of confusion erupted among the natives as an emerald fractal appeared in the sky, immediately putting the soldiers under immense pressure. Confusion quickly turned to fear as a small sapling rapidly grew into a towering tree, with hundreds of branches shooting downward like spears.

It was like the tree had eyes as well, with the attacks only targeting the natives while avoiding the allied army of Port Atwood.

“Despicable!” the second elder roared, and he actually emerged out of the ground in the middle of the encirclement.

It was no wonder that Zac couldn’t pinpoint his location. He had been hiding underground, masking his aura while he let his clones fight for him. But Zac didn’t care that the real elder had appeared, as his eyes were peeled on a young man shouting orders in the middle of the army.

This was a battle for the survival of Earth, and if he needed to act despicably to get the job done, so be it. The second elder seemed to want to draw things out to tip the scales in their favor, but Zac had one card up his sleeve to force his hand: the elder’s grandson. Zac had already spotted the man he suspected to be the one called Yvian some time ago. Furthermore, he was just an Early E-grade warrior, not a match for Zac at all.

Hundreds of barriers erupted as the soldiers tried to defend against the death from above, but the Zhix warriors didn’t have any such worries as they launched another assault with unmitigated bloodthirst. The pitched battle between the two armies quickly turned to a bloodbath as the soldiers found themselves unable to deal with the pincer attack of both Zac and Zhix.

An enormous explosion erupted to his left, and Zac saw Billy appear out of nowhere to block the Grand Elder’s attempt to reach his clansmen. A torrent of lightning bolts blasted out from the glowing eye behind the old man in an attempt to force Billy to give way, but the ten-meter giant released a thunderous roar as he slammed his gargantuan club into the ground.

The whole area shook like the whole Mystic Realm was about to split apart before a towering mountain rose from the ground to block the old man. A section of the mountain exploded in turn as six familiar balls shot out with shocking force, each of them exploding around the Grand Elder,

drowning him in a ceaseless barrage of stone shards reinforced by Zhix conviction.

It was the Anointed that launched a surprise strike while the elder was preoccupied with the plight of his clansmen, and their joint attack caused some serious wounds to appear across his body.

The three beasts were similarly unleashing ultimate strikes to block the infuriated old lady, leaving just the second elder to protect his clan. As expected, a towering metallic beast suddenly rose among the soldiers, looking a bit like the werewolf but wearing a spiked turtle shell on its back. The spikes turned into innumerable spears that slammed into the descending tree, ripping apart branches by the hundreds.

Zac only snorted as he kept infusing [**Nature's Punishment**] with even more Cosmic Energy, causing new branches to sprout and stab at the soldiers beneath. As for himself, two quick flashes put him right in front of the man he guessed was Yvian.

“No!” the man screamed as his face turned pallid in fear.

A barrier appeared in front of him, but it cracked before Zac's overhand swing even reached it, the massive pressure of [**Conformation of Supremacy**] alone enough to shatter it. However, the second elder appeared in front of Yvian out of nowhere, his whole body turning into a pitch-black metal covered in dense sets of shimmering fractals.

It was like he had turned himself into a war machine, and he stabbed his right hand forward while the other hand moved up to block Zac's swing. Zac's Danger Sense warned him of the huge force contained in the jab, but he didn't care at all, and his eyes were filled with death as he stared at his targets.

Just as [**Verun's Bite**] was about to clash with the palm, it erupted with tremendous force, far eclipsing anything he had displayed until now.

“Wh—!” the old man blurted, but it was too late.

A gigantic scar split the ground for over a hundred meters as Zac infused his attack with Fragment of the Axe, the first

time since he'd arrived that one of his attacks were infused with the Dao. The sudden and shocking increase in power had been too much, and the steel-related Dao Fragment that the old man used was clearly just at Early mastery.

A sharp pain spread in his side as the jab of the second elder managed to puncture Zac's body even with his high Endurance. However, the elder didn't follow up on his attack, and neither did Zac. Zac just took a step back to extricate the steely hand from his body before the wound rapidly started to close.

The two forms of Yvian and his grandfather only stood unmoving for a second before they split apart, and it was their deaths that fueled the activation of **[Surging Vitality]**. It would normally be impossible for Zac to use his healing skill in the middle of a battle, but there were just dead bodies all around him while Zhix elites had quickly formed a protective circle while he healed up.

It had been a gamble since the beginning, but it worked out in the end. There was something Zac had noticed the moment he stepped into this Mystic Realm; it almost felt like the Tower of Eternity in the sense that his connection with the Dao was extremely weak.

He was still able to push his Fragment of the Axe forward thanks to his earlier encounters, but he had already realized from his battles until now that none of his enemies really excelled in the Dao. The downed elder was proof of that. He was no doubt hundreds of years old, yet he only had a Low-grade Dao Fragment.

Perhaps this was because of the characteristics of the Mystic Realm, or perhaps it was a result of the Dimensional Seed sucking up all the Origin Dao, but in either case, it gave him a hidden weapon. Thanks to hiding his cards during the whole battle, Zac was able to burst out with extreme force in an instant with the help of a High-mastery Dao Fragment.

Leviala had no doubt warned them of his power before, but by hiding his attainment while targeting Yvian, he had created an opening. Still, there was no satisfaction in Zac's heart for

dealing with the second elder this way. He knew that Ogras would be smiling with pride if he had seen Zac's tactic, but this wasn't how he wanted to deal with problems. His eyes gazed across the Cartava army, which was completely crumbling by this point, and hesitation filled his heart. What now?

And it was at that point another prompt appeared in front of him.

SANKHARA-DUKKHA

Zac knew his people weren't out of the woods just yet, but he still scanned the prompt that had appeared in front of him before deciding on his next move.

Sankhara-Dukkha (Training (6/9)): Emerge victorious and seize the Spatial Drill. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/2)

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of 2 levels.]

He didn't know what the quest name was referring to, but the task was more straightforward. It also confirmed the importance of the Spatial Drill to the point that it almost felt like the System had sensed his hesitation and told him "do what you want as long as you get the drill."

The problem was what he should do now. He had just killed the second elder a few seconds ago, and his death had roused the battle lust of the Zhix as they rampaged through the army with newfound vigor. Less than a third of the native army was still standing, with Zac being the biggest perpetrator by unleashing both the third swing of **[Deforestation]** and **[Nature's Punishment]** upon them.

He could probably force a surrender as long as they dealt with the two remaining elders, but to what end? What would he do, saddled with thousands of prisoners when they needed to move toward the core of the Mystic Realm?

But could he slaughter them all just out of convenience?

Was there some sort of middle ground?

“No!” a wail echoed out from the distance, and Zac turned his head to see the old lady desperately trying to break past the beasts in an effort to reach him, or perhaps the body of the second elder.

Her eyes were stained with tears, and her old body was covered in bloody wounds. The air around her kept twisting and distorting as Grub constantly switched between slamming his enormous teeth together and releasing his massive bellows. Zac remembered all too well the restrictive power those sound waves possessed.

The elder still pushed forward, shielded by an avatar that looked a bit like a huge scarecrow. It was made from hundreds of different plants, with leaves and fruits giving it facial features. Its limbs were made from straw and roots, and it was decked in a robe made from leaves. It stood over twenty meters tall, and it radiated a life force that eclipsed Zac’s own wooden hand while also exuding the aura of a powerful adversary.

The grass around its feet kept growing taller as flowers sprang up around it. Perhaps it was the avatar of a God of Harvest, something the elder had used to nurture the plants of the clan. But that was obviously not its only function, as that avatar alone seemed more than capable of dealing with all three of Verana’s beasts, even when they were empowered by a group of elite Beast Masters.

It wasn’t very quick, but its attacks contained enormous force. Slither tried to block as the elder and her champion pushed through Grub’s restraints, but the old lady was on a rampage. A single punch from the avatar threw the snake over fifty meters away, and it was clearly grievously wounded from the hit.

Lulu harried the old lady while running in circles as she tried to light the scarecrow on fire with her spells, but roots kept stabbing up from the ground, leaving deep lacerations on the foxlike beast. It was like nature heeded the old lady’s call, lashing out at everything around her.

If nothing changed, then the third elder would soon reach the clashing armies. That wasn't the real problem, though. The problem was the look in her eyes as she unerringly stared at Zac. He didn't know the background of this senior, but judging by the bone-chilling killing intent in her eyes as she stared at him, she was more likely to self-detonate than to surrender.

Then something suddenly changed. A ball of extremely concentrated poison shot toward the old lady as Slither unleashed one final attack before it fell unconscious. A series of thick leaves sprouted from the ground, but they were incinerated as the blob flew straight toward the old lady. It contained a corrosive effect of a magnitude that rivaled **[Blighted Cut]**, and even Zac felt some pressure from it.

The elder was finally forced to look away from Zac to meet the new threat head-on. She made a series of seals as the scarecrow hurriedly bent over, placing its two slablike hands to block the incoming projectile. The already oversized hands of the avatar quickly grew even larger, turning into two-meter-thick ramparts.

A storm of purple smoke erupted when the blob hit the wall, and even Zac felt the ground shudder from almost two hundred meters away. That wasn't all the Beast Masters had prepared. Grub released a piercing high-pitched wail that conjured a tunnel that swallowed the elder in an instant. It didn't seem to hurt her, but it was like time had slowed down inside it.

The elder's avatar was already preoccupied with dealing with Slither's attack, allowing Lulu to fire a pillar of white flames straight at the old lady, incinerating the air itself. The elder moved in slow motion inside the pillar, but a storm of golden leaves flew out to block the attack.

Zac breathed out in relief as he started running over. The trio had gone all out, but it still looked like the elder would come out unscathed. However, the situation had given him a window of opportunity where he could quickly restrain her with the help of the restraint module he still carried with him. If he could capture her with the help of that thing, the war

would be over since the Grand Elder was already wounded thanks to the Anointed's surprise attack.

His approach was immediately spotted, and a ruthless gleam shone in the elder's eyes as she looked at him. It looked like she had given the scarecrow some sort of order as well, as it was slowly turning toward him, its hands mostly corroded away. But Zac didn't care as he rushed toward her.

However, a familiar form soundlessly rose from the ground like the soil was made from water, appearing right behind the old woman. There was no hesitation as Rhubat made his move the moment he saw an opening thanks to both the elder and the avatar being preoccupied.

"Wai—" Zac said as he rushed forward, but it was too late.

The elder seemed to have realized something was wrong the moment Rhubat appeared as well, and dozens of vines appeared behind her to tie him up. But the roots were turned to ash as Rhubat exploded with radiant flames, the flames from burning one's life force. Rhubat's fist gained a golden glimmer as it punched straight through the vines and then the torso of the Cartava lady, killing her in one blow.

Her gaze never left Zac's, not even in death.

The foliage and fruits that made up the twenty-meter avatar rapidly started to wither and rot away as it slowly curled into a fetal position. A second later, it was just a putrid ball, but simply standing in its vicinity caused Zac's Danger Sense to go off. Something was brewing inside that thing.

"Quickly, get away!" Zac shouted, allowing the Anointed to scramble out of the way just before the crumbling avatar exploded, disintegrating the old lady and the surrounding fifty meters.

"Thank you, Warmaster," a bloodied Rhubat rumbled as they appeared next to him.

"No problem. Here, take this," Zac said as he threw a large Longevity Pearl to them. "Eat this thing. It might help you a bit."

Rhubat shrugged and swallowed the pearl in one go, their massive size making the pearl seem like a small pill.

“Longevity,” Rhubat said as they looked down at Zac with surprise. “This is a great gift.”

“I can’t have you leave us just yet.” Zac smiled, happy that the pearl seemed to have at least some effect on restoring Rhubat’s remaining life force.

“Not while the crusade is unfinished,” Rhubat agreed.

“Help me with the last one,” Zac said as he looked over at the Grand Elder. “I have an item that can completely restrain him.”

They had already come this far, so Zac felt he might as well take this war all the way. The old man was bleeding all over, but the others in the group were even worse off by now. The powerful explosion had actually saved the lives of two of the Anointed, but one was already dead on the ground. Killing the third elder had come with a cost.

The death of the second elder had made the old man freeze and look over, allowing the other Anointed to barely jump out of the way of a beam of electricity so intense that it lingered in the air like a scar on reality. Only Billy’s aura was still somewhat stable, but he was covered in scorch marks from head to toe, his lungs working like bellows as he greedily swallowed air.

Everyone was unwilling or unable to make the first move, putting them at an impasse for a few seconds. The old man’s eyes moved from the crater to Zac and finally to the rapidly crumbling army of his clansmen. There was fury in his eyes, but more so helplessness. But then there was finally tranquility and a dash of insanity as he smiled at Zac.

“Cartava, forever standing!” the man suddenly roared as he lit up like a beacon, creating blinding waves of lightning that forced Billy and the Anointed to back away.

A collective roar erupted among the remaining Cartava soldiers, and each of them turned into beacons as well as a blazing lightning eye appeared above their heads. The whole

area shook from the outburst of Cosmic Energy, and Zac got a sinking feeling as he saw the madness in the old man's eyes.

“Shit, they're blowing themselves up!” Zac screamed as he looked on with wide eyes as he launched a barrage of fractal blades at the Grand Elder.

The fractal blades didn't even get close before they were turned to ash, and Zac was all out of powerful moves. His blitz had been short and brutal, and [**Rapturous Divide**] was still on its cooldown.

“RETREAT!” Rhubat roared before erecting a series of earthen shields to protect their grievously wounded brethren.

The Port Atwood army had already disengaged, with everyone running for their lives as hundreds of people joined each other in death. The world turned white a second later, and Zac almost felt like the whole Mystic Realm was falling apart. He could only open his eyes a few seconds later, only to see hundreds of craters littering the battlefield, the largest one unsurprisingly the Grand Elder's handiwork.

“Are you okay?” Zac asked as he turned to the Anointed.

“We're fine, Warmaster.” Rhubat nodded as they gazed at the elder's crater. “A valiant ending.”

“Hmm,” Zac hummed, feeling something was amiss, though he couldn't put his finger on it.

Those thoughts were thrown into the back of his head when he spotted a familiar figure in the distance.

“It's over.” Tictus sighed, a wave of desolation emanating from his body. “It's all... over.”

“Grandpa.” Leviala sighed with a forlorn expression.

“I know Father would have wanted to say goodbye, but he was out of time. This way, our elites will be able to bring him away, giving the clan a final chance at survival. Perhaps an

opportunity will arise if they hide until after the treasure matures,” Tictus said as he put away his tablet.

“What about you?” Leviala whispered. “You can still...”

“We’re standing outside the field. If they try to help us, they’ll expose themselves and break the illusion. They are probably already gone.” Tictus smiled.

“I’m sorry,” Leviala said. “If not for...”

“Don’t be. I’m happy to accompany you, child. It’s not right for you to be left alone after all you’ve sacrificed. Besides... Mala, my children... All have already gone ahead. I’m... tired.” Tictus smiled as he looked down at his niece.

Leviala only felt hollow inside as she deactivated her bloodline skill. She had seen enough. Her curse almost felt like a blessing at this point, shielding her from the suffering around her. People she had grown up with, people she had looked up to or despised. A fragmented clan bound together by their common plight.

So many gone in just an instant, crushed by a vengeful judgment. The hair on the back of her neck suddenly stood up as an immense aura came closer, and she could hear the sounds of bare feet walking through the grass a few seconds later.

“Anything to say for yourself?” Zachary said, and she could feel his eyes boring into her.

Leviala opened her eyes and turned toward the source of the sound. She couldn’t see him, yet she could. He towered in front of her like a force of nature itself. She was blind, but she felt that she had never seen so clearly before, not even when awakening her bloodline back then.

Zachary Atwood was an aberration, an entity that should never have been provoked. Fate swirled around him, drawn to him like fireflies were to fire. To go against him was to go against the Heavens themselves. Yet she also knew one fundamental truth.

He was just one. One among many.

One star that shone a little bit brighter in a vast universe of stars and blazing suns, each of them swallowing everything in their surroundings in their unceasing ascent to the peak. People like her and her clan were just the soil that would help these stars grow, and a sense of exhaustion and helplessness washed over her.

But then there was peace.

“In my next life, I pray that I will not become a cultivator,” Leviala whispered as she closed her eyes forever.

RIPPLES

Zac sighed as he looked down at Leviala as her body collapsed in the drone chair. He hadn't touched her, but it wasn't hard to tell that she died. It looked a bit like she committed suicide, but Zac soon realized that was not really the case. One glance with **[Cosmic Gaze]** exposed rampant energies that ripped through her innards. It looked like her body was full of what Zac assumed to be temporal cracks, and there was even a hint of something all too familiar, the aura of the purple Heavenly Lightning.

It felt quite diluted, or perhaps it was more apt to say it was hollow. Still, it was ample proof that her messing with time really came with grave consequences, especially when she didn't have any means to protect herself like Zac with his **[Void Heart]**. The sinister cracks that were only visible to his special sight stemmed from her two cursed eyes, spreading throughout her body.

His best guess was that she had somehow contained or managed to delay the effect. But with the fall of her clan, she simply gave up, letting the curse end her life. Zac had run through the corridors with righteous indignation before, a towering fury building over the betrayal and assault on his people. He had meted out justice, or at least vengeance, but there was no sense of closure at this moment.

Looking down at Leviala, Zac just felt... cheated. The Cartava Clan definitely deserved what was coming to them, but that didn't change much.

“Poor child,” the middle-aged man next to the drone chair said with a sigh.

Zac’s eyes turned to the man, taking in the intricate machinery that covered his Technocrat suit and the helmet lying to the side. He was definitely a Datamancer, probably one of the leaders and main controllers of the battlebot swarm.

“I guess you’re her uncle, the Datamancer?” Zac slowly said. “Where is the Spatial Drill?”

“Why should I tell you that?” the man said with a desolate smile. “My niece is dead, as is my own family. We have lost our elders, our mechanical armies, and most of our elites. Clan Cartava has fallen; this place finally did us in. Just kill me and get it over with.”

“Many have died, but even more should still be alive,” Zac said, steeling his heart as he pointed toward the direction of the gate to the Cartava Clan. “This is just a part of your people. There should still be thousands of civilians relying on your protection. What kind of future they will lead will depend on your answers. Or I can go there and settle things myself, leaving no lingering threat behind.”

Honestly, Zac didn’t want anything to do with the Cartava civilians. He almost hoped they would hide away in some corner of the Mystic Realm, out of sight and out of mind until he had dealt with his real goals in this place. But he had already confirmed that the quest was just at (1/2) in completion, meaning the drill was still unaccounted for. He needed answers, even if he had to use the rest of the Cartava Clan as leverage.

Zac was about to continue pressuring the Datamancer, but a pulse suddenly rippled through the air. It didn’t come from the middle-aged man, but rather seemed to come from the inner parts of the Mystic Realm.

“Wh—” Zac said as he took a steadying step, but he didn’t even have time to react before a second pulse arrived.

He suddenly found himself standing over fifty meters away from the Datamancer, displaced by some mysterious

means. He hadn't even felt himself move. The Datamancer had essentially jumped onto the drone chair of Leviala, and he stared in the direction of the core, his miserable demeanor replaced with a calculating look.

Zac could easily understand what he was thinking: was the Dimensional Seed awakening?

Suddenly, a huge sphere made from spatial tears and the same type of shielding as the base used sprang up around the Datamancer. Zac realized something was wrong, and he rushed forward, his axe already shining with a sanguine light as he activated the first fractal on its handle.

The Datamancer only glanced at Zac before he bent over Leviala's corpse, and Zac felt his blood freeze when he saw what he was doing. He was digging out her eyes with his own bare hands before he transferred them to a special vial he had taken out from a Cosmos Sack. After that, he took out a crystal sphere, a ball filled with something that looked like a black hole.

Zac still couldn't figure out what the Datamancer was up to, but his instincts told him that he had to stop it. The shield was thankfully only so strong, and it soon crumbled under Zac's all-out onslaught. One more swing and the Datamancer would be dead.

"Stop right now, or I'll turn you into mincemeat," Zac growled as he walked closer, only keeping him alive because he needed answers.

The Datamancer frowned as he looked over at Zac before he seemed to come to a decision.

"You asked about the Spatial Drill, didn't you?" the man said as he warily looked at Zac. "Well, here it is."

The Spatial Drill appeared in his free hand the next moment, making Zac's heart lurch. He would instantly fail his quest if the Datamancer destroyed it, but that wasn't the real issue. Ogras' theory of Divine guidance had essentially been confirmed by this point, which meant he'd most likely run into untold problems down the line if he didn't get his hands on

that tool. He expected it to be hidden or in the hands of one of the elders, but it turned out that they had handed it over to their chief Datamancer.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Zac warned, Cosmic Energy already coursing through his body.

“The Heavens have a sense of humor. Just as I was resigned to death, it provided a path of survival. I thought I was ready to pass on, but I guess not. I am but 180 years old. I can still start over as long as I get out of here,” the Datamancer muttered, but Zac wasn’t sure whether the man was talking to himself or to him.

“We can make a deal,” Zac said as he took out a Teleportation Token from his Spatial Ring. “I have dozens of Teleportation Tokens that can take you almost anywhere in the Zecia Sector. Give me the Spatial Drill and help me reach the core, and I’ll give you one along with enough Nexus Coins to activate it.”

The middle-aged man looked at the token with hesitation and greed, but a third ripple suddenly appeared out of nowhere, this one causing them both suddenly to appear five meters in the air. The two landed on the ground without any issue, but Zac got a sinking feeling when the Datamancer’s eyes had calmed down after the spatial displacement.

“The world is ending, and you’re still thinking of the treasure?” The middle-aged man smiled. “I hope you’ll find it in your heart to leave a path for my clansmen. Here, catch.”

Zac was about to try to convince him once more while simultaneously having one of his chains move toward the man below the ground. But his eyes widened in horror when the Datamancer suddenly threw the Spatial Drill out with great force as a series of new barriers appeared around him.

Confusion clouded Zac’s mind, and he didn’t know what he should do. What did the System want from him? The quest told him to get the Spatial Drill, but the drill had led him to one of the topmost Datamancers in the Mystic Realm. Besides, the drill was a Technocrat tool, shouldn’t it survive some

roughhousing, especially with Kenzie there to make some field repairs?

But a sudden realization hit him. Why did he care about what the System might or might not want him to do? Ogras' story about Divine guidance had planted a seed of hesitation, but was there any point to second-guessing himself? He just needed to follow his instincts, and they told him to go for the machine.

Getting the drill was far more important than capturing a Datamancer.

He flashed forward with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but a fourth ripple caused reality to bend for an instant before it was restored. This one was far more powerful than the previous anomalies, and Zac quickly realized that something was wrong. It almost felt like he was in one of those nightmares where he tried to run, but he couldn't move from his current spot. His legs moved forward just fine, though, and he could quickly confirm that it wasn't some sort of illusion.

It was space itself that had started to unravel.

Hundreds of meters had been compressed into what appeared to be a hundredth of the distance. Each step with his movement skill pushed him forward, but it looked like Zac was treading water. Thankfully, the same odd situation affected the Spatial Drill, and it looked like it moved in slow motion on its descent toward the ground.

It felt like time had stopped as he desperately tried to make himself run faster. Zac spared a glance at the Datamancer after a few seconds, and his brows rose in shock as he saw what he was doing. He had already thrown Leviala's corpse to the ground, and it looked like he had extracted something from her chair.

The crystal sphere containing a black hole had been placed inside another contraption, and the two together looked like some kind of doomsday device. The Datamancer was slowly moving to insert another item into the machine, something that clearly was an energy source full of Base Power. The sphere was already radiating tremendous spatial waves, and Zac

didn't even want to think what would happen when the device got a busload of Base Power.

Another odd pulse hit Zac, and he suddenly found himself moving forward with dizzying velocity. He barely had time to refocus on the task at hand, and he stopped just in time to snatch the Spatial Drill out of the air. A wave of relief spread through Zac's body as he put the drill in his Spatial Ring for safekeeping, but he knew things were far from over. He turned back toward the Datamancer to capture him, but he realized that he most likely was too late.

A huge Void Sphere was born where the doomsday device had hovered a second ago. It was more than twice as big as the Void Spheres he had seen until now, but that wasn't the only odd thing. The Datamancer had done something to modify it. It almost looked like it had an arched doorway that held back the outer layer of spatial turbulence. Zac started running, but the distance was too great. The Datamancer passed through the arch before Zac made it halfway back.

But it was clear that he was struggling.

Layer after layer of shielding appeared around the Datamancer's body, but they were destroyed almost as quickly as they were formed. The Cartava elder didn't care. He had almost reached his goal, the core of the Void Sphere. This one didn't show a distant star or the void of outer space, but rather land. It wasn't Earth, thankfully, meaning it was one less thing for Zac to worry about. The sky was yellow while the ground was covered by some weird bone-like trees.

It looked like the Datamancer had already prepared a final escape route for his clan, or perhaps for just himself. Seeing how he had dug out Leviala's eyes before discarding her body like it was trash, Zac guessed it was the latter. Something had changed after the first ripple had arrived, something that the Datamancer believed had given him a chance at survival.

Even worse, Zac felt that the Cartava elite really believed the world was ending, and Zac's own conviction that the natives were wrong was starting to become poisoned with

doubt. But the thought of jumping into the Void Sphere as well didn't even cross his mind.

He couldn't even entertain the thought that the Mystic Realm was falling apart. Even if he managed to escape alive through that spatial bubble, then what? His sister, all his friends, all his subordinates would still be stuck in a collapsing realm, facing death all alone. He was better off fighting for a chance of survival in this place, and the Spatial Drill might be the key to the puzzle.

Zac still kept running toward the Void Sphere, but he eventually stopped a hundred meters away. The sphere was starting to suck in everything in its surroundings, and Zac was afraid that he would be dragged inside if he came closer or tried to snatch the Datamancer with his chains.

Eventually, Zac simply stopped to observe. Part of him wanted to send out a fractal blade as some sort of retribution for how he had treated his niece's body. Something unconscionable like that shouldn't go unpunished. But Zac reined in his bubbling anger, and instead memorized the method the Datamancer used.

Space in the Mystic Realm was becoming weird and unstable, and he and his people might soon need to use similar means to escape. If Zac could learn what to do and what to avoid by observing this attempt, it might save lives further down the road.

Most of the Technocrat shields had already collapsed around the middle-aged man, and his right arm was suddenly cut clean off as he pushed through the inner spatial tears. He looked like a mangled corpse from over a dozen deep lacerations, but Zac could sense that he was still alive when he finally managed to push through the spatial folds, falling into the core of the Void Sphere. His body twisted and distorted, making him look like a blob.

Both the Datamancer and the Void Sphere disappeared a second later, leaving Zac wondering if he actually made it or not. One thing was clear, though: Leviala hadn't been lying about the dangers of those things. Jumping into a Void Sphere

was fraught with danger, and even someone with ample preparations had been pushed to the brink of death in his escape attempt.

Yet another ripple caused space to bend into a U shape, and Zac's heart lurched when he suddenly saw treetops from the Lunar Forest point down toward him. Honestly, Zac wasn't sure whether he or the half-dead Datamancer had the best odds of survival at the moment.

UPHEAVALS

It looked like the structural integrity of the Mystic Realm was starting to unravel because of the mysterious ripples. Zac tried to discern what the ethereal waves were doing as they passed through the area, but his **[Cosmic Gaze]** simply couldn't pick up anything at all. Zac could only guess that the Dao or energy inside those ripples was simply too high-tiered for his skill to catch it, which wasn't surprising considering the grade of the Dimensional Seed.

Zac had a strong feeling that things would only get worse before they got better, and he started running back toward his people.

Short was long and long was short as one pulse after another started hitting him with increasing velocity. The weird spatial expansion and contraction started to leave marks on his body, as an odd sense of hollowness spread through his limbs. It was like his energy had been exhausted from being stretched and molded like a ball.

The same seemed to be true of Zac's surroundings. He could see trees falling apart for seemingly no reason in the distance, and hairline cracks spread across the Memorysteel wall and on the ground. Zac's worries that the whole base would fall apart as the Dimensional Seed matured only intensified, and he needed to confer with Kenzie, who should have some readings by now.

The army had already retreated toward the fort by the time Zac managed to cross the battlefield, where hundreds of mangled bodies still lay unmoving. It should just have taken a

second or two with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but he repeatedly found himself running in the wrong direction or repositioned.

Verana, Billy, and the Anointed had stayed behind to rest up while waiting for Zac, but they started running as well when they saw how quickly things were deteriorating. Verana was carrying her wounded beasts in her arms as she ran for her life, and Rhubat carried one of his brethren over his shoulders as he rushed toward the shield, each step causing tremors in the ground.

“Warmaster! What’s happening?!” the Anointed shouted when Zac finally caught up to them, prompting Verana to look over with the gaze of a drowning sailor seeing a life raft.

“I’m not sure why, but the dimensional treasure is awakening early! We need to gather up our people to not get separated!” Zac shouted back without stopping.

Zac had no idea what he was talking about, but this wasn’t the time to let that on. Gathering together felt as good an idea as any, and he hoped that whatever was going on would at least somewhat follow the rules of teleportation. That if people touched each other, they would stay together.

The pulses kept increasing in intensity, but Zac somewhat breathed out in relief as they managed to make their way back to the base. The shield had already collapsed, and thousands of eyes turned toward him with worry and questions. A glance indicated that most of the wounded had already returned, gathering together with the others within the wall.

He wanted to assure them all that everything would be fine, but his eyes darted toward the core of the Mystic Realm with hesitation. Should he try to get everyone out of here? He was about to speak to his people, but he suddenly found himself unable to speak as monstrous energy suffused everything around him.

The world twisted, and Zac couldn’t maintain even a semblance of control. He was as large as a moon, a single thought taking days to reach his extremities. He was just a speck of stardust, where just a drop of water would be enough

to drown him a million times over. Space had collapsed, where distances and dimensions held no sway.

All was chaos.

It was only possible to make sense of his surroundings for an instant before the universe turned mad again. The world turned flat before it became... less. He saw a vast infinity where space even stretched toward the future and the past, a dimension where space and time had melded into one.

He saw a living world sailing in the shadows of reality; he saw life and death collapsing into themselves. An eye stared back at him, seemingly surprised to be seen. A pair of metallic tearing the sky asunder. He saw a splinter hidden at the bottom of a sea, a shard in the heart of a volcano. Weird visions assailed him one after another as the fundamental laws of space collapsed around him.

The world eventually returned to normal, or at least not as insane. Zac wasn't sure how he felt. It was as though he had caught a glimpse of destiny, or Heaven's secrets themselves. Now, he was back in his mortal flesh, and Zac felt like he was blinded from the truth. But this was no time for introspection, The cataclysmic changes clearly had just begun.

His eyes widened in shock as the towering Memorysteel wall started to fall apart, turning into streams of liquid that rushed toward the core of the Mystic Realm like a river in the sky. And it wasn't the only one. Thousands more just like it appeared in all directions, and Zac was only able to see it since the whole dimension kept bending and twisting.

A terrifying explosion erupted to his left as one of the moons crashed into the ground. It was like a flash-bang of unprecedented proportions had been set off, and Zac felt a terrifying force throw him into the air.

One moment, he saw a forest in ruins; the next moment, he found himself in a vast darkness with a thin line of light. He didn't even have time to panic at being thrown out into the Void before he was back inside the base, and he slammed into the crumbling wall they had built as a defensive line. It was pretty odd that the shockwave had pushed him toward the

point of impact, but Zac was more confused as to why the walls remained unscathed.

The wall was made from massive blocks they had harvested from a nearby island outside the Mystic Realm, and they stood completely unfazed as everything else seemed to fall apart. Was it because the material wasn't native to the Mystic Realm?

Others had realized the same oddity as well, and more and more huddled against the battlements and their false sense of safety. Zac made his way over to his sister, who hid next to the wall, desperately typing away at a tablet.

“Are you okay?” Zac said.

“I'm fine. I'm trying to understand what's go—” Kenzie said, her words cut short as she suddenly disappeared, only reappearing a second later “—ing on here. But it's chaos. There's not much we can do but wait.”

The world kept twisting and shaking for over an hour, at which point most people had fallen unconscious. Even Zac was barely hanging on, and he could eventually just close his eyes and hide against the wall while shielding his sister. But the shakes finally subsided, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief as he popped a Soldier Pill and Fasting Pill to give a quick boost to his exhausted body.

Kenzie had barely been able to stay conscious, but she wasn't in any condition to start dealing with this mess. She quickly sat down in a meditative pose to focus on recuperation. Zac wasn't quite as wrung dry, so he stood up to start looking for clues. The glasshouse, the walls, and the forest were all still there, but the cataclysmic change had caused large sections to fall apart.

More importantly, it was clear that they had all shrunk significantly, to the point that all or at least most of the spatial expansion had been undone. The walls were only six meters tall now, a far cry from their previous fifty-meter height. The same went for the glasshouse, which was now a building of normal proportions.

It almost felt like a good thing, but his heart almost jumped out of his mouth when he looked up.

The metallic lines in the sky were gone, replaced with vast darkness; the Void had suddenly come much closer. There were thankfully no Void Beasts flying about as far as he could see, but it still felt like something was looking back at him from within the darkness. Those terrifying hand-covered tentacles could descend at any moment for all he knew, but things were at least quiet for now.

Perhaps it was thanks to a shimmering film protecting the atmosphere in the area. It almost looked like he was gazing at an ocean made of soapy water in the sky. The barrier rippled like waves on the water, seemingly expanding and contracting like it was breathing.

Zac sighed in relief and jumped up on the wall to get a better look at the situation, but the scene almost made him fall off again. The whole Mystic Realm had been completely transformed, to the point that Zac almost felt he must have been unconscious for years.

First of all, it became abundantly clear that the whole Mystic Realm had fallen apart. The Lunar Forest simply cut off a few kilometers inland, the ground suddenly giving way to the Void. He could see similar scenes through the cracks of the broken Memorysteel wall, and he realized they had been cut off from their way back home.

A quick survey showed hundreds of platforms drifting in the darkness. Some were completely detached and turned into small spatial islands in the Void, but many were still held together by small strips of land.

For example, Zac could spot a strip of land in the distance, a fifty-meter-wide natural bridge that connected their island with the next one over. To fall off it would mean falling into the darkness, which would either result in becoming food for the creatures of the void or being ripped apart by spatial turbulence.

Most of the islands were covered in either exposed and partly crumbled Memorysteel corridors, or a flat slab of

Memorysteel that no doubt held pieces of the research base inside. Others held forests or grasslands, even large bodies of water. It was no doubt the biomes that had been spread across the base, now turned into small pockets of life in the darkness.

But not even this shocking transformation left as great an impression on Zac as what had happened in the heart of the Mystic Realm. With the towering walls back to their normal size and the artificial sky gone, Zac had almost unimpeded sight all the way to the core of the Mystic Realm.

Where an impossibly huge mountain peak stood.

It was hard to get a sense of scope in this place, but he could see land platforms hovering around the foot of the mountain. If those platforms were roughly the same size as the one he was currently situated on, then the mountain was over a hundred thousand meters tall. The mountain itself glistened with a metallic luster, and Zac's eyes widened when he realized that it was probably made from all that Memorysteel that had drifted away earlier.

The platforms almost looked like small pieces of debris rather than islands that were miles across, and it seemed to Zac that most of them were connected to the foot of the mountain. In fact, most of the platforms were held together in a vast spiderweb, providing Zac and his people multiple paths to the mountain if need be.

The mountain didn't look like a natural formation, but it rather felt like the Memorysteel had been subject to some shocking magnetic forces, like it had been pulled up by immense power. It had created a single conical mountain peak that was slightly twisted but oddly symmetrical in a way that made Zac think of soft-serve ice cream.

As for what had been the source of the magnetic pull, it wasn't hard to guess.

A huge metal sphere hovered right above the peak. Judging by its size, it might be as big as a planet, or at least a very large moon. It wasn't an actual planet, though, as the sphere didn't seem solid. Massive ravines covered its surface,

and mysterious energy fluctuations and lights escaped through the cracks.

There was no doubt in Zac's mind. The Dimensional Seed was most likely inside the heart of that sphere in the sky.

The situation was too sudden, too unexpected. The old plans would have to be scrapped, but he didn't know what his next goal was. Honestly, he had no idea how to even get out of this place, let alone complete the missions he came here to finish. It was chaos, both around him and in his mind.

A sudden clap of thunder drew Zac's attention. He realized that the noise came from a platform far behind him, at the edge of the Mystic Realm itself. It was one of the solitary platforms that were unconnected to the mesh of islands. Zac looked on with shock as the protective bubble around it flickered a few times before it disappeared, which was followed by a complete and utter collapse.

It was like the piece of land had been subject to the vacuum of space, and it was ripped apart by immense forces from every direction. Zac looked up at the protective film above, a sense of foreboding gripping his heart.

They needed to do something, and quickly.

BENEVOLENT SHEPHERD

Seeing a moat of land just like the one he was standing on falling apart filled Zac with a sense of urgency, and he jumped down to his sister, who looked a lot better by this point. It was the same with himself. The sense of exhaustion and hollowness was quickly passing, and the soldiers all around them were gradually coming to as well, with groans and mutterings breaking the silence.

“Do you have any ideas?” Zac asked after briefly recounting the situation.

“It’s weird, I thought that the Spatial Energy would increase exponentially after the Dimensional Seed awakened, but it’s just the opposite. The surroundings are almost completely drained,” Kenzie muttered with a shamefaced expression. “I’m sorry, the calculations we ran were completely wrong. A lot of people are in danger now because of it.”

“It’s not your fault,” Zac said. “We would have entered this place no matter what. We just need to figure out our next step. Is it possible to use the Spatial Drill to get out of here in case of an emergency?”

“It’s doubtful.” Kenzie sighed. “We don’t have any localization abilities right now. It’s like we would be randomly drilling for oil without any geological surveys. The chance of hitting the jackpot is minuscule. Perhaps if we could get to the same spot where the spatial tunnel is located, but is that even possible now?”

“Honestly, I doubt it.” Zac sighed as he stood up. “I didn’t see any bridge between our island and the one on the other side of the glasshouse. I’ll check things out to see if we can cross through the void. Or make bridges or something.”

He entered the glasshouse, relieved to see that the door actually opened without issue when he tapped the console that was now just a meter above the ground. However, the situation on the other side of the gate was even worse than he had expected. It looked like the Mystic Realm had cracked almost right along the wall to the Lunar Forest, and less than twenty meters of the corridor remained before it cut off into the void.

The next island looked to be over a hundred meters away with a vast expanse of the Void separating them. The protective film seemed to be cut off right at the edge of the island as well, meaning that there was no atmosphere in the gap. If one wanted to pass through to the next island over, they would have to really enter the Void.

That might sound simple, but Zac knew it was anything but. The Void wasn’t like outer space. He had survived in space for a few minutes after blowing up the *Little Bean*, but he wasn’t as confident about this venture. The Void was a subdimension, a fold between realities, and it was something different from a simple vacuum, from what he had gathered.

The Void Beasts had unique constitutions to live inside the void, but the moment they entered a normal dimension like the research base, their bodies started to be rejected by the surroundings. Zac was afraid the same would happen to him and his people if they tried to jump across to the neighboring island.

Another surprise was that the short stretch of corridor wasn’t actually empty. There were over thirty soldiers who had huddled against the gate, and they almost fell onto Zac the moment he activated the console.

“Thank you!” they gasped as they ran into the glasshouse.

“Did anyone see what happened to the people further inside?” Zac asked a soldier whom he vaguely recognized as a warrior of Port Atwood.

“I’m afraid not,” a human cultivator said after looking around at the others. “We were running back toward this place after you appeared, but the world suddenly turned crazy. I woke up a minute ago, my body just a few meters from that edge.”

“Join the others; we might need to move out soon,” Zac said as he took out a Cosmos Sack. “Help me distribute healing pills and some Nexus Crystals among all the people.”

Zac himself didn’t immediately return to Kenzie’s side, but he rather walked over to the edge of the realm. He only dared to do so after securing his body with the help of the chains of **[Love’s Bond]**. The mysterious film was just a decimeter away from the abrupt end of the corridor, looking like a soap bubble.

There was nothing outside, just vast darkness far more oppressive than any starry sky. He took out a random spear from his Spatial Ring and pushed it through the barrier, which let it pass without any resistance. It wasn’t just morbid curiosity; he needed to see the effect of the Void if he was to lead his people between these precipitous islands.

Something was wrong, though. The spear didn’t appear at all on the other side of the barrier. Zac curiously pulled it back after a second, and he could confirm that it was mostly intact, albeit barely. It seemed pretty run-down, having lost its sheen while large spots of rust had appeared on its surface. It still maintained its structural integrity, but it looked like something that had been discarded in the wild for decades after just a second of exposure.

Zac took a deep breath and reached out his hand, gingerly touching the barrier. His hand passed through a second later, and he felt a sharp pain in his hand that quickly forced him to drag it back. It had taken less than a second, but his fingers looked like all the moisture had been sucked out of them.

The experiment’s conclusions were pretty evident, and they confirmed his suspicions. You could fall through the edge of the platforms, and if you did, you were probably screwed. Just a few seconds in that kind of atmosphere would be

enough to kill most people. It even appeared that something weird was going on with the dimension, from how nothing appeared on the other side. Space in the void might be bent, or perhaps even following some dimensional rules he couldn't understand.

Trying to jump to another platform seemed impossible, in other words, though he would have to test it by throwing some items or corpses to make sure.

A sudden sharp jab of danger shook his mind, and he had his chains drag him backward. It was just in time too, as a massive claw pushed through the barrier in an attempt to snatch him up, the claw looking a lot like the one he'd encountered with Leviala a while ago.

Zac already had his axe in hand, but he didn't make any moves as he looked at the situation. A frown slowly crept across his face as he realized there was a clear difference between this claw and the one he'd seen before. This one was distorting a lot slower. Eventually, it looked like the owner of the claw couldn't deal with the spatial distortions any longer, and it hurriedly drew it back, but over ten seconds had passed by that point.

Zac didn't know exactly what to draw from that lesson, but it was a clear possibility that the difference between the Void and this fragmented realm was slowly decreasing, allowing the Void Beasts to stay inside longer. If that was the case, they were in serious trouble, as even the smallest and weakest Void Beasts seemed to be quite powerful. What if a bunch of eldritch horrors like the Collector suddenly appeared?

They needed to get moving.

As to where, he wasn't sure, but he felt that the closer they got to the mountain, the safer they would be. The protective sphere around the mountain was so thick that he could discern it even from here, while it was just a thin film around this outer plateau.

He was soon back at Kenzie's side, and all of the leaders had gathered together by this point.

“Warmaster, what do you recommend?” Rhubat asked as dozens of eyes were trained on him.

“I thi—” Zac said, but he was interrupted by a prompt appearing in front of him.

“A quest!” someone shouted, and judging by the commotion, it was something everyone had received.

Zac looked at the wall of text in front of him, his frown deepening the more he read.

[Special Dynamic Scenario activated]

[As interlopers of a crumbling Taboo Undertaking, there is just one road to salvation. Set out on a pilgrimage of redemption and claim a Spatial Seal. Only those marked will be saved upon the collapse of the dimension.]

[NOTE: Each person can only possess one Spatial Seal. A Spatial Seal can be gained by extracting it from the Taboo Mountain or killing a seal owner. Only those branded will be teleported out when the dimension collapses. Teleportation will take place upon dimensional collapse.]

[Struggle for Survival]

A sigh escaped from Zac’s lips after having read through the quest, or rather the “dynamic scenario.” It looked like the System really wasn’t all too jazzed about people exploring a Technocrat research base, considering that it didn’t even provide any rewards. The reward was that you got to live another day.

There were unfortunately a lot of questions left even after having seen the rules. For example, how rare were these seals, and what was required to get them? If they littered the mountain, then great, but Zac guessed that they wouldn’t be so lucky considering how there was a mention of killing seal owners.

With all factions congregating on the same spot, everyone grasping for a shot at survival, this was going to turn into a bloodbath. The bloodshed would only be exacerbated by the fact that there was no timer either, and no one could really tell

when this place would fall apart. The conflict would only keep escalating until everyone had a seal or the realm collapsed.

“Survival,” Rhubat rumbled as their muscles tensed.

“You’ve seen the quest.” Zac sighed as he turned to Joanna, who had walked over. “We need to move out. Our starting position is working against us; the other factions are probably closer to the mountain. Get everyone ready.”

“I’ll see to it,” she said before she started barking orders to the soldiers.

Zac knew he would be able to get to the mountain quickly by himself, but it didn’t look like that was an option right now. The reason was simple; the others had gotten one prompt, but he had received two.

Benevolent Shepherd (Training (7/9)): Lead your followers to the Taboo Mountain and provide at least 3,000 with Spatial Seals. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/3,000).

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

He had finally “passed” his training regimen, but it looked like he still needed to complete all the steps to receive a reward. His personal quest also gave him some insight into the odds of survival. A quick survey indicated that there were around five thousand people gathered in the fort.

To save over three thousand meant the seals couldn’t be all too rare, to the point that only a few would be able to get out. The question was only how large a share of the total amount of seals the System expected him to snatch. The higher the share, the bloodier the quest would become.

Zac even had a hunch about the true purpose of this quest. Did the System want him to take out the native factions in his efforts to gather the seals, preventing them from rejoining the Zecia Sector? These unfortunate prisoners had obviously not come here voluntarily, but that might not matter in the eyes of the System.

It might simply have branded them heretics for dabbling with the Dao of Technology.

“What about those stationed at the base?” Joanna asked.

“There’s nothing we can do.” Zac sighed. “We’re cut off from them. Hopefully, we can meet up with them on the way to the mountain.”

Of course, Zac had a sinking feeling that those left behind at the portal might be beyond salvation. The further out they were, the fewer protections the platforms seemed to have. Their base was on the very edge of the Mystic Realm, and it wasn’t impossible that section hadn’t even survived the cataclysmic events just now.

“AH! WHO MOVED BILLY TO THIS SCARY PLACE?!” a shout suddenly reverberated out across the fort, making Zac look over at the source of the voice.

Billy had woken up again, it seemed, and he was standing on top of the wall with eyes as wide as saucers.

“Billy,” Zac said as he flashed over. “Thank you for your help before.”

“Ah, it’s you!” Billy said with a wide smile. “No problem. Billy just helped thwunk the bad guys. What is happening?”

“We need to get to the mountain to get out of here,” Zac said.

“No problem. Billy is great with directions. Billy will lead the way.” Billy sagely nodded.

“Can you help our people first? Make everyone get ready to travel.” Zac smiled.

The giant nodded and jumped back down off the wall, seemingly full of vigor again. Zac turned just in time to see his sister appearing next to him. She released a stream of drones that flew hundreds of meters into the air, forming an impressive surveillance matrix.

“I’ll map out a route for us. Not all the platforms seem to have bridges, while others are like crossroads with multiple options. Some islands might collapse as well, so we need to—”

Kenzie said, but she stopped herself as she looked down at her tablet. “Ah? People?”

“What’s going on?” Zac asked.

“It must be the remaining people of the Cartava Clan,” Kenzie said with a slight frown. “They’re already on the move.”

ISLAND HOPPING

“The Cartava Clan?” Zac muttered with a frown. “What kind of group?”

“Thousands of people. Some of them are E-grade, but most emit very weak energy signatures,” Kenzie said as she read the report on her tablet.

Zac slowly nodded, not surprised to hear the Cartava Clan had left some of their elites with the civilians just in case.

“Where are they going?” Zac asked, his vision blocked by the trees.

“They’re cutting through the forest. It looks like they’re already moving toward the core,” Kenzie said, opening a map. “You don’t think they’ll try to destroy the bridges to trap us here? Less competition for those seals.”

Zac frowned as he looked at the tablet before looking down at his people. Everyone was hustling and bustling to prepare for the move, dressing wounds and desperately absorbing Cosmic Energy from Nexus Crystals. They knew that falling behind in this place would mean death. But it would take a minute or two before they were ready to depart.

“It looks like they are heading for a plateau far away from us, but it doesn’t hurt to be safe. I’ll go ahead to protect our route; meet up with me as quickly as humanly possible. The Cartava Clan isn’t the only faction we need to worry about. Others are already closer to the core, and they might try to dislodge all the platforms,” Zac said.

Kenzie nodded before she pointed at a bridge in the distance. “That’s our best option for now. We have multiple possible routes from there. The only issue is that we might be blocked by the base security.”

Zac’s eyes followed where she pointed, and he nodded when he saw it was the closest bridge apart from one behind them. It seemed like a safe bet, and it wasn’t the same as the one that the Cartava Clan was running toward.

“You’re not going to... you know? Right?” Kenzie hesitated. “That group is mostly made up of mortals and children.”

“No, I won’t go after them.” Zac sighed as he took out the Spatial Drill from his ring and handed it to his sister. “They have paid their price; they’re just a shadow of their former strength. I won’t move against them as long as they don’t try anything again. Try to learn how this thing works; we might need to use it before this is over.”

With that, he set off, running toward the bridge Kenzie had indicated. However, he did perform some looting while he waited. He ran straight through the battlebot swarm and swept up a few of the more powerful-looking machines without losing any speed. Next was the battlefield, where he looted the Cosmos Sacks of the second elder and his grandson.

He did take a small detour to the craters left by the Grand Elder and the third elder. He did manage to find a slightly damaged sack from the third elder, but not so much as a scrap remained after the Grand Elder’s final attack.

Zac quickly realized something was wrong with the situation.

He didn’t have time to properly look for clues, but he had seen quite a few people exploding in a final act of defiance, from the demons just after the integration to the crazed cultists. In all these cases there were always some remains, like a foot or a piece of a skull. But the hundreds of craters on the battlefield were simply empty, like someone had thrown out an offensive talisman.

Had they been tricked?

The possibility only increased Zac's vigilance. It was one thing if the Cartava Clan were led by a small number of guards, but it might be trouble if the Grand Elder was still alive. They definitely couldn't be too friendly to his people at the moment, and they might use this opportunity to launch a counterstrike. With that in mind, he only spent a minute at the battlefield before rushing off, only taking a moment to put the body of Leviala in his Corpse Sack.

The bridge was somewhat close to the gate Clan Cartava had attacked from, but it wasn't hours away any longer now that the base had shrunk. Zac guessed that it would take his people around an hour to get there, and for himself, it shouldn't take more than twenty minutes if he pushed himself.

The Memorysteel wall along the way looked like it was on its last legs. Most of the fractals had gone out, and the cracks were even worse than those at the outskirts of the Wasteland. These cracks were sometimes tens of meters wide, and they seemed to differ from the ominous scars from before. These were completely dead sections of the wall, clearly displaying the void or small sections of corridors on the other side.

Zac's best guess was that the walls and everything else in this place had lost their energy source but that they still worked independently as long as the components were fine.

Thankfully, there were no traps along the way, and the bridge remained intact when he arrived less than ten minutes later. The bridge was actually a Memorysteel corridor that stretched straight through the Void over to the next island. It would probably lead toward an area formerly under the control of the Cartava Clan, though it was hard to tell how much of its original functionality the base maintained in its current state.

The section with the bridge was in an even worse state than the wall section Zac had passed, where the wall had been twisted and turned many times after the ground had been split apart. The bridge looked serviceable at least, with a distinct protective film around it. They would have to walk on top of the crushed and bent Memorysteel corridor, but something like

that was easy enough for the cultivators who had been brought into the Mystic Realm.

After confirming that the bridge worked, he took up a guarding position on top of a piece of the wall, keeping watch on both his surroundings and the situation on the other platform. There were no movements, but Zac heard one clap of thunder after another as he waited, each second feeling like minutes as he watched how the edge of the Mystic Realm crumbled piece by piece.

The crumbling islands at the edge of the Mystic Realm were troubling enough, but Zac soon noticed something else. The Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere was slowly decreasing. It would take a while for it to become an issue, but he couldn't help but wonder how things would be in a few hours. It wasn't completely impossible that they would have to finish the sprint toward the mountain without any ambient energy to assist them.

That alone was a huge issue, as Cosmic Energy was required to use not only skills, but also to take advantage of the superhuman attributes that they had gained from the integration. The quicker they could get going, the better. His wait was thankfully over after just over forty minutes as he saw his army rushing toward him with great speed. Billy was in the forefront, his head swiveling back and forth with wide eyes.

“Haha, Billy did it!” the giant shouted before a massive yawn escaped his lips. “Billy led the people here. Ah, so tired.”

His eyes rolled into his head the next moment as he fell on the ground, but Zac breathed out in relief when the signature thunderous snores assaulted the surroundings.

“Wallbreaker fought desperately in the battle before,” Rhubat said as one of his brethren picked Billy up, carrying him on its shoulder. “His reserves are depleted. We'll tend to him.”

“This platform will fall apart in less than an hour going by how quickly the defensive membrane is losing energy

density,” Kenzie said breathlessly as she walked up next to Zac. “There is no time to waste.”

“Start moving; follow me!” Zac shouted. “Across the corridor. Keep a high pace but keep order.”

Zac himself took the lead, with a swirl of leaves flying around him as he had his axe at the ready. He felt extremely exposed as he ran across the jagged pieces of metal, his eyes constantly trying to see any signs of danger in the void that was all around him.

He could only breathe out in relief when he stepped down on land again, proving that the trip was possible. But he still couldn't help but worry after seeing just how close the protective film was to the exposed tunnel.

More and more people moved across, and no one needed any urging to pass as quickly as possible. Walking across that bridge had felt even scarier than when he was lost in outer space, especially considering he didn't have any token this time that could teleport him outside if need be. Besides, he knew all too well what kind of creatures lurked in the darkness.

Kenzie was one of the first to get across, and she immediately opened her tablet as he looked at the corridors that covered this place. A group of scouts was quickly called over, and Kenzie showed them where the army needed to go.

“Scout close-by corridors, decide on a path for us,” Zac said, and the scouts nodded before setting out.

One of them actually started climbing up along the broken walls in an attempt to get up on the roof, but he was forced down again as half his body suddenly disappeared into the Void the moment he reached the top. He looked half-dead when he fell onto the ground, but he slowly crawled back on his feet with a pallid face.

“Rest up instead.” Zac sighed in disappointment after seeing that his first choice of path was a no-go.

Why go through a maze when you could go above it? But it looked like the roof itself acted as the separator between the

Void and the Mystic Realm on this platform.

More and more people streamed across the bridge, and the broken square was almost filled to capacity after a few minutes. However, a sudden shudder made Zac look down toward the other platform with worry, just in time to see a mass of *something* rip the whole bridge apart while snatching up almost fifty people.

A few people desperately managed to hang on to the ruined bridge as they crawled to safety, but roughly a hundred people were stranded on the other side, shock written all over their faces as they saw their road to survival being lost to the darkness.

Worse yet, with the connection lost, the islands slowly started drifting further and further away from each other. Zac tried to throw a rope across, but it simply disappeared the moment it entered the darkness, never to reappear on the other side.

“The Void isn’t a proper three-dimensional space, I think,” Kenzie said with sorrow. “We can’t really exist in it properly, and directions hold no sway. Even if you get a rope across... I’m afraid...”

“I understand.” Zac sighed as he walked to the edge of the platform.

A hundred desperate sets of eyes looked back at him, but some of them fell to their knees when they saw Zac shake his head. Others were infuriated, screaming and pointing in his direction. No sound could make it across the chasm, but Zac had a good idea of what they were saying.

Cursing him for bringing them to this place.

He sighed and shook his head, but he suddenly had an idea as [**Love’s Bond**] turned into its offensive form, and two chains rose into the sky.

“It’s not—” Kenzie said, but she stopped when she saw what Zac was doing.

The chains didn’t try to pass through the Void, but they instead formed a shape, an arrow pointing in the direction of

the next bridge, the one that the Cartava Clan probably had used. He could see that it was still in one piece, and it was the only option if they wanted to have a shot at survival.

The people on the other side understood what he was talking about, and they started running as quickly as their legs could carry them.

“Its shield is depleting much faster now,” Kenzie said with a frown. “But the shield on this island became stronger. I think the bridges act as power conduits as well for whatever protects these floating plots of land. We might want to break any pathways behind us.”

“Agreed. We keep going.” Zac sighed.

The squad continued, following the preliminary path the scouts had staked out. Zac and Kenzie walked in the front, with Zac on the lookout for Spatial Tears and Void Beasts, and Kenzie keeping track of the paths.

The first minutes were a bit slow, but Zac gradually increased the pace as they realized something; they hadn’t encountered a single spatial tear since the cataclysm. It looked more and more likely that they had been sucked into the mountain or the Dimensional Seed along with all that Memorysteel, and Zac was soon running at as high a pace as the army could withstand, the walls almost turning into a blur.

They did encounter a few closed gates along the way, but they were easily solved by Kenzie. Her Tier-4 clearance didn’t actually work everywhere, but that was easily fixed within a minute by her hacking the terminal.

One small relief about the situation was that the base had completely lost any central control functions. The corridors on the floating islands were like the limbs of a corpse without the core computers taking charge. They had no brain to control them, but you could still trick them to move with some electricity. That allowed Kenzie to fully activate Jeeves to force its way through the protections without worrying about any repercussions.

However, alarmed shouts and sounds of battle erupted at the back of the army, and Zac swore in exasperation as he rushed over. Nothing good ever lasts.

UNDER ATTACK

Zac rushed back upon hearing the commotion, fearing that the mysterious entity that had snatched up his people from the bridge had returned. But thankfully, they hadn't been ambushed by the Collector or any rival faction, but rather the base itself. The walls had gone crazy, frenziedly attacking a group of cultivators who desperately activated one defensive talisman after another to stay alive.

The halo of [**Conformation of Supremacy**] appeared behind Zac's back as he flashed forward. He used the avatar of the axe this time, imbuing each swing with great force and sharpness, allowing him to crush the spikes as they tried to stab at everything that moved.

The cultivators were all elites as well, and they organized their efforts to block the attacks. They normally wouldn't have been strong enough to deal with something like this, but Zac quickly realized that the attacks were pretty weak compared to what he was used to. A series of cracks echoed out a second later, and the walls fell apart, exposing a neighboring corridor on one side and an empty storage room on the other.

Zac bent down and picked up a piece of Memorysteel and found that it was quite malleable.

"What happened?" Zac asked with a frown as he turned to a panting soldier.

"I don't know," the bloodied soldier said. "The walls suddenly started vibrating. Its surface looked like water during an earthquake. Then the wall just attacked."

“I think the programming in the research base is unraveling because of the state of this base,” Kenzie said as she came running. “This might not be the last time.”

“We’ll see if we can gravitate toward open platforms as much as possible.” Zac nodded. “For now, have everyone keep watch for any changes in the surroundings.”

The group set out again, but the scouts soon came back with the news that they wouldn’t be able to reach the platform the way they were going. Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he walked over to the Anointed.

“Help me destroy the walls. They seem to have limited energy now. As long as we can cause enough damage, they should crumble,” Zac said. “Finding a new path would waste too much time.”

“Let us handle it, Warmaster,” Rhubat said. “We know you must have expended a lot of energy during the previous battles.”

He turned to a group of Anointed the next moment, and they nodded in understanding. A squad of a hundred Zhix followed behind, and four seals appeared in the air. The whole section started shaking a moment later as the Anointed unleashed an all-out barrage on the walls. The seals pretty much acted as hammers, slamming into it over and over.

The spikes were crushed as soon as they formed, and the walls had to keep expending energy to re-form the dents and cracks that appeared. Finally, after just forty seconds, the walls crumbled, providing them access to a neighboring corridor.

From there on out, they kept moving quickly, taking the path of least resistance where they either forced their way through the walls or followed the corridors, depending on what seemed fastest. Reaching the third platform went without issue apart from some disagreements about who would go first. Only after Zac and the Anointed quashed any dissent could they get across the bridge, a fifty-meter-wide strip of land.

The third platform continued with Memorysteel walls for ten minutes until they suddenly gave way to large fields of farmland. It seemed to have been recently harvested, and Zac realized they had reached the sector the Cartava Clan lived in.

“I’ll go ahead,” Zac suddenly said before he turned into a blur as he flickered back and forth, running to every corner of the fields over the next thirty minutes as the army kept running straight ahead.

He even entered a series of side paths and corridors, but Zac couldn’t find what he was looking for: the glasshouses that held the Race-boosting treasures. Zac could only sigh in disappointment and rejoin the others. Zac knew it was a longshot that a bunch of valuable natural treasures would be waiting for him in this place, but he couldn’t help himself from making sure.

The Cartava Clan had clearly picked everything clean before their exodus, but Zac had got his hands on two of the Cosmos Sacks of the elders. With some luck, they would hold some of the Race-boosting fruits Leviala had mentioned. But now was not the time to properly go through his haul.

The group kept going, and they soon passed the farmland biospheres to enter the corridors again. However, this place was different compared to what they had encountered so far. It wasn’t the empty shells of the outer sector, but it also wasn’t the abandoned opulence of the inner layer.

Most importantly, the tunnels were drastically transformed from the bare aesthetic. There were paintings, mosaics, statues, and benches adorning the walls, and the roof was covered in what looked like a starry sky. All the art looked somewhat recent as well, no doubt additions left by the Cartava Clan. A huge crack in the wall allowed Zac to see a vast warehouse spanning hundreds of meters even after the spatial expansion was gone.

Inside was a whole neighborhood of small Memorysteel townhouses in straight rows, forming a series of parallel streets. The houses were all made from metal, but they were

somehow dyed in bright colors to bring life to the section. Some of the houses even had small gardens.

Large broken spheres hung in the sky, probably a source of light that had broken during the shake-ups. In fact, quite a few of the houses had fallen apart, some missing whole walls, while others were essentially unscathed. Zac guessed that repairs and upgrades had been made with spatially expanded materials, which then shrank during the upheavals.

It was clear that they had appeared in the proper residential districts of the Cartava Clan, though they were still just at the edge. Those houses likely belonged to families who worked the fields, while the real elites lived somewhere further inside.

Zac and his followers didn't get much further before he suddenly stopped in his tracks, the hairs on his arms standing on end. There was no hesitation as the chains shot out from **[Love's Bond]** to form a wide net that pushed everyone back as Zac desperately retreated.

"WATCH OUT!" Zac roared as he threw out a set of defensive talismans before summoning **[Nature's Barrier]** and infusing it with the Fragment of the Bodhi. A series of terrifying explosions followed, and a scorching heat slammed into the front lines the next moment.

Layer after layer of emerald leaves was incinerated, but Zac kept infusing Cosmic Energy to create a storm of leaves that filled the whole corridor. Others were thankfully quick on the uptake, and a series of barriers quickly sprang up to lessen his burden. Only half a minute later did the inferno subside, allowing them to breathe out in relief.

"Those explosions were definitely not a part of the base," Kenzie said as she looked down at her tablet. "I think we triggered some trap when we entered this section."

"Why did they booby-trap their homes?" Joanna said with incomprehension.

"Revenge," one of the Anointed said. "These natives fight without honor, breaking bonds without pause. I can see them doing something like this."

Zac nodded in agreement. He wouldn't put it past them to leave something like this behind to strike at either him or the Lunar Tribe.

"They might have left some protections behind just in case. The clan must have rushed toward the exit the moment Leviala returned with the Spatial Drill." Kenzie shrugged. "Some things of value were definitely left behind, and they might have wanted to protect these items in case they were able to return in the future."

"In either case, let's go around the town instead of through it. There might be good things in the Cartava territory, but there's no time to waste on something like that now," Zac said as he turned to his sister. "Or is this the only way to the bridge?"

"We can take a detour, but we need to hurry!" Kenzie said with worry in her eyes. "That blast weakened the dimensional protections. We lost something like thirty minutes."

"All the more reason to take the long path," Zac said. "If there is one bomb, there are probably more of them lying in wait."

They returned to the fields and chose a different path, which allowed them to reach the fourth platform without any further issue. The walls did try to attack them a few times as their defensive algorithms went haywire, but that was far preferable to the powerful incendiaries before. The next platform was also almost completely transformed by the Cartava Clan, though this one seemed to house an industrial zone. The warehouses had been emptied out and turned into factories that seemed to house some sort of 3D printers.

The machines were made from Memorysteel like everything else, but they were clearly not of Technocrat origin. They were far too crude for that, yet they were still probably decades ahead of Earth's technological progress. Kenzie's eyes glistened as she looked at the homebrewed machinery, but Zac dragged her away.

There was no point in risking their lives for some machines that would just piss the System off even further. It

had already marked this place as a “Taboo Undertaking,” so Zac wouldn’t be surprised if every piece of technology inside this place was branded in some way or another.

Still, it took them over an hour to pass the island, partly out of fear of more traps and partly due to the complex layout. There were also quite a few security measures that took some time to crack since they had been modified by the Cartava Clan and already supposed to be disconnected from the main AI hub.

Finally, they reached the edge of the island. But just as Zac was about to lead the group across, he stopped as a thunderous sound erupted far in the distance.

Zac looked over, and his eyes widened in shock when he saw one platform after another fall apart. It was like a chain reaction that had started somewhere close to the mountain, and it almost made it all the way to the outermost platforms. A few islands survived the destruction thanks to having multiple bridges, but over twenty plots of land had crumbled in an instant.

“What was that?!” Joanna wheezed.

“I think someone has reached the mountain already.” Zac frowned. “They are destroying the bridges and killing the competition.”

The series of platforms that fell apart was quite far away, but that didn’t stop Zac and the others from feeling a creeping sense of dread. It wasn’t all that hard to destroy the bridges that spanned the void, and there were only so many platforms between themselves and whoever had enacted that ruthless plan.

Seeing dozens of islands just fall apart like that put everyone under a tremendous pressure, and Zac urgently crossed with his sister. The other side was just a short corridor that led to what looked like a large square that you could see in something like a mall. Dilapidated storefronts lined the sides, and a broken glass dome gave them a glimpse of the void outside.

“These Technocrats really knew how to live it up,” Emily muttered as she entered behind Zac. “I can’t believe they have this kind of place inside a research base.”

Zac looked over at the teenager, relieved to see that she looked better. She had been carried by one of the Valkyries for most of the trip, completely drained from using her skills on the whole army. It felt like he needed to find some way for Emily to improve her energy reserves so that she didn’t get this drained all the time.

“I guess you have to add all kinds of things for people not to go insane.” Zac shrugged. “After all, people probably spent centuries in this place back when it was running properly.”

More and more warriors quickly crossed the bridge, and the entrance to the square was quickly filling up, even though it was far larger than any similar structure on Earth.

“What direction should we go, Warm–” Rhubat said, but the Zhix stopped as they suddenly turned toward the broken-down glass ceiling in the sky.

Zac didn’t understand what was wrong, but he suddenly felt an uncomfortable pressure as the protective film outside the dome bulged downward like something was pushing to come through. And he knew all too well what kind of thing that would be.

He could only pray it wasn’t the Collector.

“Incoming! Spread out! Noncombat classes and support staff enter the side corridors!” Zac roared, and the soldiers quickly made a defensive ring around the square.

The barrier cracked the next moment as a huge miscreation fell onto the square with a massive thud. Zac panicked as he looked up at the ceiling, but he breathed out in relief when he saw that the film had repaired itself after the Void Beast had pushed through. Only then did he focus on the target at hand.

The Void Beast looked a bit like a short pitch-black caterpillar, but it had spindly legs all around its body rather than in sets on the bottom. Its body was almost thirty meters long, but it was at least ten meters across as well, giving it a

stocky appearance. Its face was just a black vortex that emitted a black gas, and Zac estimated it might actually be a Half-Step D-grade creature.

However, it was clearly not used to existing in this kind of dimension, as it kept shuddering as the long legs on its back twitched like the creature was in its death throes.

That didn't mean it was completely restrained, and all its legs suddenly pushed forward in a motion that reminded Zac of how octopi swim. It probably moved about in a very similar fashion as it floated around in the void. Of course, this time only the legs on the bottom provided any real traction, but it still almost turned into a black blur as it shot forward.

Straight at Zac.

DENIZENS OF THE VOID

Zac didn't know whether it was lucky or unlucky that the terrifying creature went straight for him, but at least it would prevent the normal warriors from bearing the brunt of the terrifying creature. He quickly threw Emily to a side passage as he readied himself for battle.

“Attack it from a distance,” Zac shouted before he charged up [**Rapturous Divide**]. “It can't survive in this dimension for long. The more we damage it, the quicker we'll be able to destroy it.”

A golden cloud entered the huge maw the next second, quickly followed by a black cloud imbued with the Fragment of the Coffin. A perfectly straight scar in space was ripped open, but Zac was shocked to see that it barely had any effect on the creature. The spatial divide had actually split the creature in two, but it almost looked like Zac's attack was just an illusion.

There were no wounds, no nothing. It was like spatial tears had no effect on the Void Beast. Zac figured that he perhaps shouldn't be too surprised considering that this thing usually lived in the folds between dimensions. The other warriors didn't fare much better, as pitch-black barriers that looked like small tiles of onyx appeared at the tip of the creature's legs, effortlessly swallowing any attack that came close. Only the Anointed managed to launch strikes with enough force to cause some minor cracks in the defensive shields, but they were repaired as quickly as they appeared.

Zac guessed what was going on, and he activated [**Conformation of Supremacy**], this time imbuing the skill with the image of the supreme shield. The creature was almost upon him by now, but Zac didn't back away. Less than half of his people had passed the bridge by this point, and if Zac didn't block it now, then the bridge would be exposed to the Void Beast.

He couldn't let that happen.

A growl escaped Zac's lips as he rushed forward, meeting the beast head-on. His axe was empowered by the weight of the supreme shield in the avatar, and he swung it in a heroic arc right at the bottom of the beast's face, right beneath the massive mouth that reminded Zac of the Collector's maw. He was hoping to crush its jaw and perhaps cut off a few of its legs in one go, but a huge barrier appeared to block its whole face, if one could call a large vortex a face.

Zac only hesitated for a second before he infused the strike with the Fragment of the Coffin and swung with all that he had. He didn't really fear the beast itself, but rather the way that it had made all the attacks just disappear, like it was conjuring portals to the void. However, Zac felt there should be some limits to an ability like that, especially when he attacked in person and infused the strike with a Dao Fragment.

The world shuddered for an instant as the edge of [**Verun's Bite**] hit the large barrier, like he had somehow been misaligned with the surroundings. But his vision quickly turned back to normal as a large crack spread across the black surface of the shielding. Zac didn't get any chance to celebrate or follow up on his initial swing, as the creature slammed into him with the force of a runaway train.

His all-out swing hadn't even stopped the creature in its tracks, and Zac found himself completely overpowered.

A fiery axe shot into his body from the distance as Emily boosted him with her Strength-improving Axe. Hundreds of attacks also harassed the caterpillar to the point that it was completely engulfed by a blinding chaos of radiant skills. Yet those shields kept swallowing everything while keeping the

Void Beast safe, and it seemed completely intent on taking him down.

The only reason Zac didn't get slammed into a wall or, even worse, shot through the corridor and into the Void, was that he hurriedly launched the four chains of **[Love's Bond]**, each of them turning into anchors in the wall or the floor to stop him from getting pushed back. The chains were able to hold him in place, but that essentially put him in a vise that threatened to crush him.

He gripped the handle of **[Verun's Bite]** with his second hand, both his arms shaking from exertion. But it was simply impossible to force the Void Beast back. Its short legs dug deep grooves in the Memorysteel ground as it kept the pressure up and released more and more of that pitch-black smoke.

The cloud emitted a strange pressure that made Zac feel extremely uncomfortable, almost like when he had pushed his hand into the void. Even worse, there seemed to be no limits to how much it could spew out from its gullet. Zac didn't know whether the creature released it to lessen the burden of normal space on its body, or if it was meant as some sort of weapon.

In either case, it was poison to Zac, but he was unable to extricate himself. He was just ten meters from the corridor leading outside, and soldiers were still streaming across the bridge and into the square. Backing down would mean those people getting stuck. But he also wasn't strong enough to force the creature back in his current state, so he could only push his worries aside as he activated **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

The air twisted around him, power surged through his arms, and the painful pressure was no longer so taxing. Zac shoved at the creature with everything he had, and he actually managed to force the Void Beast back a bit. It wasn't much, but it gave Zac the breather he needed to launch another swing, this one empowered by his berserking skill.

The barrier cracked like a mirror in an instant, and the axe bit into flesh. However, a sense of annoyance flared up in Zac's chest as his momentum suddenly disappeared the

moment it touched the body of the caterpillar, making his all-out swing look like a slight love tap.

Zac quickly realized the attack was more powerful than it seemed though, as the legs on the creature's back twitched, and a weird distortion rippled through its body before it returned to normal. Zac's eyes lit up when he saw that his attacks were working, but he didn't have the opportunity to launch another swing before his Danger Sense overpowered the furor brought on by **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

A crackling ball of pure energy had formed inside the Void Beast's abyssal maw, and Zac desperately veered out of the way, barely allowing him to dodge it as it shot out like a slow-moving cannonball. An extremely powerful suction ripped into his body, and Zac's eyes teared when he felt a piece of his chin actually being torn off and swallowed by the ball as it passed by.

A bloody wound on his shoulder was opened up as well, but at least he had managed to dodge a surefire kill. That terrifying ball definitely had the power to crush him into a meat cube and swallow him whole. But Zac still regretted his course of action when he remembered that the corridor and his people were on the other side.

What if the ball hit the bridge? The Memorysteel definitely couldn't take the force that hid in that attack.

Thick earthen walls thankfully rose from the ground the moment Zac dodged as Rhubat and a group of Anointed conjured one defensive barrier after another in an effort to block the sphere. It thankfully didn't move very fast, but it was simply unstoppable in its advance. Massive holes appeared in the barriers as the ball simply ate them.

But Zac's eyes lit up when he saw that the ball had shrunk by a small degree after swallowing five enormous barriers in a row. It looked unstoppable, but it ultimately had the same weakness as all skills; it had a limited amount of energy. It could be exhausted.

"Keep attacking! Fill it!" he shouted, and a storm of flames, earth, and all sorts of objects flew toward the void ball.

Someone even took out an SUV and threw it into the thing, and a creaking sound echoed out as the attack swallowed the vehicle whole.

Zac was about to help out, but he sensed that the creature was gearing up for another attack, and he definitely couldn't let that happen. The first ball had already made it to the corridor by that point, and it had actually swallowed a few people who weren't able to move out of the way because of the thousands of people desperately trying to pass the bridge.

After all, a thirty-meter Void Beast was scary, but not as scary as being left behind on a soon-to-collapse island in the void.

Zac felt the terrible energies brewing inside the mouth of the creature, and he knew he had to risk it. The chains of **[Love's Bond]** detached from the wall as he stomped down on the ground. The creature saw the change, and it started to push again, but he narrowly managed to stay in place by overexerting his legs.

Meanwhile, the chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot forward and snaked around the hulking creature before Zac gripped it with his free hand. He desperately yanked at it with all he had, and it was barely enough to overpower the thin legs and slam the creature into the ground.

A shockingly large club appeared out of nowhere, the knobby skull striking right on top of the creature's head to compound Zac's own hit. It was Billy, who had woken up from the commotion, and he had already activated his Titanic form. Billy's attack was simple and crude, but it contained a shocking force that caused another series of ripples to spread through the creature's body. More importantly, it interrupted the Void Beast's accumulation of its second attack.

The creature tried to get up, but Zac furiously dragged the creature back to the ground again as he lambasted it with dozens of strikes empowered by **[Conformation of Supremacy]**. The first strikes were completely absorbed like the first one, but its body started to twist and bend like it was a mirage.

Zac suddenly managed to rip off a large section of its head after having launched almost twenty strikes, and a weird sticky goo started dripping from the massive wound. The Void Beast's blood didn't pool on the ground, though, but it actually floated in the air like a cloud. A second thunderous smash from Billy hit the caterpillar in the middle of its body, giving Zac a chance to glance at the situation behind him.

The Anointed had thankfully dealt with the void sphere, but the chaos had activated the defensive measures of the corridor. The Anointed were forced to fight against the frenzied defensive algorithm, desperately trying to contain the damage so as not to let the whole corner of the island fall apart.

There were thankfully still a lot of warriors inside the square, and hundreds of strikes slammed into the Void Beast. Each of them carried just a fraction of the power of a single one of Zac's own swings, but when added together, they turned into an unceasing avalanche that forced the creature to expend more and more energy to stay safe.

A high-pitched wail escaped from its mouth as the creature started to madly thrash and twist, and the force threw Zac into the air. The creature seemingly saw its opportunity, and it started forming another void sphere, but Zac only grunted as his Cosmic Energy surged into his forearm. The huge wooden hand appeared a moment later, but it didn't actually conjure the emerald array this time.

The hand instead directly gripped the creature, its wooden fingers digging deep into pitch-black flesh. It had been a long time since Zac had used the hand to physically fight for him instead of conjuring one of the punishments, and he was shocked at the power of the grip. It was like space itself was breaking apart as the fingers squeezed tighter and tighter.

The Void Beast thrashed even harder as it tried to break away, and vast clouds of pitch-black gasses covered it. But it was undeniable that it was in a bad way since its body kept distorting to the point it was barely recognizable by now. Zac was still flailing about in the air since he was connected to the

creature through the chains, but he forcefully pulled on one of the fetters, launching him straight toward the caterpillar.

The whole Memorysteel floor cracked beneath the creature as Zac swung his axe once more, and a second shudder followed suit as Billy hit it again. It was only then that Zac realized that Billy was using some sort of ramping skill like his own [**Deforestation**].

The third hit had taken quite some time to charge up, but it was tremendous, even eclipsing his own strikes. Certainly, Zac was using a skill that he could launch over a dozen times in the blink of an eye, but it was still shocking considering he had over five thousand effective Strength. For Billy, an F-grade warrior, to match that kind of power output was astonishing no matter what kind of restrictions that skill had.

Billy's enormous slam was the straw that broke the camel's back, and Zac felt a huge surge of Cosmic Energy entering his body, confirming the kill. The Void Beast didn't collapse on the ground, but it rather looked like its body was slowly phasing out of reality.

"Haha! Billy is finally 75!" Billy exclaimed with a wide grin, and Zac noticed that dozens of people had wide grins on their faces.

It looked like everyone had a pretty good harvest for participating in taking down a Half-Step D-grade creature. Their contribution was extremely limited, but the amount of energy from killing a level 150 creature Half-Step D-grade creature was obviously massive. And while they hadn't actually hurt the creature, they had at least helped expend its energy by unceasingly attacking it.

A sudden thump from his chest gave Zac a start, and he was surprised to see that his [**Void Heart**] had suddenly awakened even when there weren't any foreign energies rampaging through his body.

There was definitely something inside the dissipating cloud that his hidden node wanted to eat.

HUNGER

Zac's hidden node felt like a ball of hunger trained on a specific spot inside the dissipating "corpse" of the Void Beast. He instinctively understood what was going on though and activated his **[Cosmic Gaze]** as he tried to find the source of the avarice. The creature had turned into a haze by this point, but there was a small spot that released mysterious fluctuations to his augmented sight.

Zac hesitated for a moment, but he still sent one of his chains inside to snatch whatever radiated that odd energy signature. The chain was mottled when it came out a second later, but Zac could sense that it was just temporary. The links would soon heal up by themselves, partly thanks to the huge amount of energy it had swallowed during the fight with the Cartava Clan.

Seeing that the coffin was safe, Zac instead turned his attention to the thing he had dragged out of the cloud. It was roughly as large as a fist, but it was hard to tell what it was made from, as it reminded Zac of a pallasite meteorite, a mix of pitch-black metal and dark-golden crystals. Zac couldn't be completely sure, but he guessed it was the failed core of the Void Beast.

It was mesmerizing to look at, completely different from the fake cores he had harvested from the beasts and Zombies in the Dead Zone. This was a proper Beast Core, albeit a failed one. It still held the accumulation of the Void Beast's cultivation, and it was clearly marked by whatever Dao the caterpillar had gained during its life in the void.

More importantly, it contained massive amounts of energy, far more than any D-grade crystals. The energy was extremely different though. It felt like it was some sort of attuned energy, but also different. It made him think of the blue sword streaks that Thea had gained from the inheritance trial.

The best comparison he could think of was that attuned energy was like lemon-flavored water, whereas the energy hidden inside the small core in front of him was pure fruit juice squeezed straight from the citrus itself. Attuned energies were ultimately flavored Cosmic Energy, whereas this force had become something else.

More impressively, it felt like the energy was almost sentient, as it seemed to flinch every time his hidden node beat.

It almost felt like he was looking at a nuclear warhead with a will of its own, but his **[Void Heart]** was obviously of a different opinion. If the node were a human, it would be screaming at the top of its lungs right now in an epic tantrum, and Zac eventually decided to oblige. He gingerly reached his hands toward the Beast Core and touched its surface.

“What are you doing!” Verana shouted with shock as she hurried over, and Zac noticed that quite a few demons and Tal-Eladar looked at him like he was crazy.

Zac couldn't worry about that at the moment, as thick black tendrils spread across his arm, and it felt like someone had poured molten lead in his veins. Small bloody explosions erupted all along his arm in an instant, and even Zac's body had trouble containing this chaotic power. But things quickly stabilized when his hidden node started to absorb the energy, and Zac almost felt like it was giddy as it thumped over and over. The pain was still excruciating as the energy was dragged from his arm into his heart, but at least it didn't look like he would explode this time either.

His guess from before proved right as well, judging by the behavior of the Beast Core. It initially stormed into his arm with a brutal fervor, seemingly intent on ripping him apart. But the moment his hidden node thumped and absorbed its first

mouthful, the Beast Core drastically changed its behavior as it tried to cut its connection with Zac's pathways.

Unfortunately, it had already been caught by **[Void Heart]**, and it dragged more and more energy from the core with glee. However, it only absorbed a fifth of the energy inside the core before it started slowing down, and Zac got a sense of exhaustion from it. He threw the Beast Core into his Spatial Ring to avoid any mishaps, and only then did he look over at Verana, who gazed at his arm with wide eyes.

"What's wrong?" Zac asked.

"That was a Beast Core! Absorbing the raw energies of a Beast Core is like drinking poison; the energy is too chaotic to control or make use of. And that was the Beast Core of an aberrant life-form! Who knows what kind of dangerous energies it contains," Verana hurriedly explained, though she quickly calmed down as well. "But you seem fine for some reason? I don't understand."

"Don't worry about it." Zac shrugged. "My body is pretty resilient when it comes to weird energies."

"Alright." Verana sighed as she dropped the subject, though there was both curiosity and skepticism in her eyes.

"Is everything okay with the bridge?" Zac asked.

Verana had been somewhere in the middle of the army to guard the soldiers in case the walls suddenly attacked, which meant she had been trapped outside the square when the Void Beast attacked. Not that she would have been a lot of help since all three of her companions were still wounded and overtaxed from the previous fight.

"Everything's fine." Verana nodded. "We got stuck outside for a bit when the wall woke up, but there were no further attacks on us or the bridge. These creatures might hold their own territories in the darkness, preferring solitude."

"Good." Zac nodded, wholeheartedly hoping her theory was correct.

Dealing with one Void Beast hadn't been too difficult. Part of it was thanks to the huge numerical advantage, but it was

mostly because the Void Beast was restrained by this dimension. Its aura was definitely a match to the golem he'd fought in the Dao Repository, but the actual strength it exhibited had been less than half that.

But even with such an advantage, they would still be in deep trouble if just two attacked at the same time. He could only hold down one at a time, which would give the second one free rein to rampage among the normal soldiers. He glanced up at the ceiling again, a sense of foreboding chilling his heart. There was no point in tempting fate.

"We're setting off," Zac said.

The group didn't want to loiter in case another beast was lurking outside the dome atop the square, and they scurried into the corridors with gusto. Zac let the other elites lead the way while he jumped up and sat on the shoulder of one of the Anointed who usually accompanied Rhubat. The weakness of activating [**Hatchetman's Rage**] had hit him, and the ambient Cosmic Energy had gotten so sparse by this point that his natural absorption had turned into a weak trickle.

So he could only depend on the gargantuan Zhix for a while as he started absorbing Cosmic Energy from Nexus Crystals. He also took the opportunity to look inward to see if something had changed with his [**Void Heart**], but Zac was disappointed to see that it had gone quiet again. It didn't look like it was about to spit out anything either, but rather like it had gone into hibernation.

Zac still felt like this was an opportunity for him. He had just remembered that this wasn't the first time he had encountered energy with this particular flavor. He had actually absorbed the very same force from the Collector when they fought, but he was in the middle of a fight for his life at that time and didn't have any chance to look into it.

He still couldn't figure out exactly what it was. Even if it was something more advanced than attuned energy, he still felt he should be able to recognize its flavor somewhat. He had encountered all sorts of cultivators by this point, and he was

seldom completely flummoxed when trying to figure out what kind of Dao they were cultivating.

All fire-related Daos gave off a similar fiery aura, and the same went for all other Daos as well. But these Void Beasts seemed to have a flavor of their own. Zac could only guess it was because of the unique environment they lived in, so he simply named the energy Void Energy in his mind.

Zac wondered exactly what his node wanted with this energy. It usually spat out anything it swallowed, but this particular energy seemed to stay inside. He guessed that it was something that could actually nurture the hidden node, or perhaps even help with awakening his bloodline down the line.

The issue was that he had never heard of upgrading Hidden Nodes. Hidden Nodes were supposed to give permanent and unique boons, sort of like titles. They were either opened or unopened. But was it perhaps possible to upgrade them if they were linked to a Bloodline?

There was unfortunately much he couldn't figure out at the moment. Perhaps he could find some records at the core of the Mystic Realm, though he wasn't sure whether the innermost sector of the research base even existed any longer. That by itself put a pretty big dent in his secondary goals to find out more about Leandra and awakening his bloodline.

For example, those bloodline vats that the Gemlings controlled might already be lost to the Void. His only other chance was to stumble onto something at the core, but he wasn't too optimistic as he looked around.

It was clear the state of the islands was gradually getting worse, and not because of the weakening Cosmic Energy and protective film. Zac believed that the rough state of the walls and structures of the inner island was due to something else. The closer they got to the core, the more the materials had been impacted by the spatial expansion. That in turn had resulted in larger destruction when the Dimensional Seed took everything back.

The increasingly dilapidated state of the corridors at least helped expedite their progression somewhat since more and

more walls had crumbled to provide new pathways. Of course, the sparse Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere also made it harder to restore one's reserves, which made it difficult for the cultivators to keep a high tempo.

They thankfully passed over to the next platform without issue, and Zac once more closed his eyes to focus on restoring his energy after they had passed over.

"Zac," Kenzie suddenly exclaimed, dragging him out of his meditation as he looked down at his sister.

"What is it?"

"Look," Kenzie said as she pointed down a side corridor.

Zac looked over, and his eyes widened when he realized that the section looked remarkably similar to the corridors they had passed just before entering the pipe. However, those paths went in a different direction compared to the route they were following. He quickly jumped down from the Anointed's shoulder and walked over to Kenzie.

"Can you see if it's the same place?" Zac asked with a mix of hope and trepidation.

"Wait a second," Kenzie said as she took out her tablet and changed the screen to a map. "Ah! I knew it!"

"What?" Zac asked.

"I gave Thea a few communication modules while you were recuperating back then, and one has been installed," Kenzie said. "Oh, and there's a message recorded."

"Well, go ahead and play it," Zac said anxiously.

If you hear this, the world has transformed already. Thea's voice emerged from the console. We're fine. The chaos destroyed the laboratory, though, allowing us to escape. We have decided to move toward the mountain to scout things out. Who knows? We're in a pretty good position, so we might actually be able to get there first. I only have one more of these things, so I'll save it until we reach the mountain.

Zac slowly exhaled, extremely relieved to hear the two were fine. He had worried for a second it was Thea or Ogras

recording a final goodbye or something. Then again, he wasn't too surprised to hear they were okay. If anyone could survive on their own in this place, then it would be them.

“What do you want to do?” Kenzie asked.

“Let's follow our original route. You heard her; they'll be at the mountain. In fact, they might already be there by this time. Both of them are powerful Dexterity-based cultivators. They should have been able to get quite far before the energy got too scattered.” Zac smiled and turned back without another look.

“What about the items in the lab? Didn't you need that crystal?” Kenzie asked.

“It's not worth the delay,” Zac said after some thought. “Reaching the mountain before our enemies blow up the bridge is more important than anything else. Besides, if one such crystal can appear here, then I bet there will be more around the Dimensional Seed itself.”

RESISTING FATE

A lance of golden flames tore through the air, and Ogras barely managed to avoid it before he unleashed a beam of destruction of his own. However, he didn't aim at the Bishop in the forefront, but rather at the group of underlings who worked on infusing the weird array at the edge of the mountain.

“Why fight? This is a world of sinners; they must be cleansed!” the Bishop roared. “The Heavens themselves are on our side. Move away; stop resisting fate.”

“Well, you have me convinced,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

He was swallowed by a wave of shadows, appearing in front of the leader as he unleashed a sharp stab aimed at his throat. Unfortunately, a swarm of golden motes of light forced him away yet again. He had already been blasted by one of those things, and he was still missing a chunk of flesh on his side. Ogras tsked in annoyance as he glared at the cultist leader, who looked all too similar to the bastard who took his arm.

This one was far stronger, though, and it wasn't only thanks to the fact that he was no longer restricted like they had been during those beast waves. More importantly, he was backed up by far more professional elites compared to the strike squad who had appeared through the mini-incursion.

He could only flash away again, landing on a cliff made from Memorysteel that gave him a vantage over the cultist

army.

How did things get out of hand to this point? Did those two siblings know that this goddamned place was going to fall apart? There definitely was something suspicious going on, particularly with the girl. There was always that look in her eye when they talked. Like she was holding in something huge.

Was Zachary Atwood downplaying their role in regard to the Technocrat heathens? Did they have some other hidden motives in coming to this accursed place? There was no point worrying about that now. He would be able to ask that annoying guy himself as long as he and the “Lady Marshall” didn’t mess up too badly.

But these cultists weren’t any pushovers, and there were just too many of them.

Thankfully, he had already absorbed the [**Corporeal Serum**], and the effect was amazing. Not only did it provide as many attribute points as a few levels would, but it completely pushed his Race all the way to D-grade.

Certainly, he had already made some impressive strides through the pills he’d extorted at the Base Town along with high-quality herbal baths. But he had to give it to these Technocrat heretics; they knew how to brew a potion. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad becoming the son-in-law to a powerful Technocrat, enjoying these sorts of serums on the down-low while maintaining the façade of a good and proper orthodox cultivator.

Perhaps he should take a cue from Thea Marshall’s tactics.

Of course, the real gain of the serum didn’t come from a small boost in attributes and an increase in his longevity, especially when it felt less and less likely he would get to enjoy his additional life span as the minutes passed. The real gain came from his body’s transformation. Who would have thought that his series of circumstances would result in him getting a Mutated Race?

He still felt some lingering shock when remembering the surprise waiting for him when he opened his status screen after having imbibed the serum.

[D] Planeswalker Demon

Planeswalker Demon, a unique Race not recorded within the Azh'Kir'Khat Horde. An amalgamation of his beast companion and his own Heritage. He had heard of things like this happening before. People encountering fortuitous, or more likely unlucky, encounters sometimes ended up changing their bodies to the point that they no longer could be considered the same Race as they once were.

Truthfully, something like this generally ended in disaster. The races of the Multiverse were the product of billions of years of natural selection, essentially perfect vessels for cultivating the Heavenly Dao. That was why most races looked so similar in their makeup; the cultivation pathways worked best when they looked a certain way.

So to change this product of nature would usually result in a mutation that brought more problems than perks. After all, if it were a good thing, it would be called something like Ascended Race or at least Augmented Race, not something so ominous as Mutated Race.

Yet, in his case, Ogras felt he came out ahead. Perhaps some of that aberration's luck was finally rubbing off on him.

He looked at the vast field of shadows that harried the vanguard army, and it felt like he was looking at his own body. He had never felt so close to his Dao or the shadows he controlled. It was like the difference between a pyromancer and a fire elemental. Both were masters of flames, but only the elemental could claim the Dao of Fire as its birthright, controlling it with inborn ease. That was how he felt with the shadows right now.

Ogras had even sensed the location of a Hidden Node when he and his familiar had been melded into one, roughly in the middle of his spine. Give it a decade or two and he was confident he'd be able to grind it open with his manual even if he didn't find any amazing treasures to help him out. There

still was the hidden threat of where the hell Asshole's consciousness had disappeared to, but that was a worry for later. For now, there were lizardmen to kill.

Thankfully, he wasn't the only one who had made some gains.

A flower of sword radiance and blood bloomed as Thea Marshall appeared seemingly out of nowhere among a group of cultists, killing two and maiming another before they had a chance to react. A towering pillar of fire erupted where she stood, but the human had already disappeared under the guise of Ogras' shadows.

In another corner of the army, a throat was slit open as though by itself, yet no one noticed until the zealot toppled over. Only at that time did fiery shields erupt in the area.

Ogras whistled in surprise as he melded with the shadows. The girl had a knack for timing, no matter whether talking about finding an opening to appear herself or silently assassinating unknowing warriors. She was like a gust of wind. By the time the gale had passed, you were already dead.

Of course, her antics were only made possible thanks to her upgraded weapon. Ogras couldn't help but feel a pang of envy when he saw how huge an upgrade that hidden blade had undergone after incorporating that crystal. It somehow passed right through the defenses of these lunatics without alerting anyone, turning into a supreme assassin's tool.

If only he had taken it for himself instead. An ability like that was exactly what he needed for his new spear. But that little lass had been smart, kissing that netherbeast before he set off. If he made his move now... it would spell trouble. He knew he wouldn't get away with it considering his reputation. But there would be more opportunities in the future.

She was lacking in raw firepower even with her upgraded weapon, even worse than himself, and she could only take out one or two soldiers after staking her life. There was clearly a limit on how often she could use that piercing skill of her blade as well, and she only dared to activate it against the normal soldiers.

Besides, she could only move this freely thanks to him drawing the attention of the Bishop and the elite squad. But Ogras could still see a seed of potential in her now, something he hadn't really felt before. As long as she had a fortuitous encounter or two before evolving, she would have a chance to make a name for herself in the Zecia Sector in the future.

Of course, not like the monster in their midst.

Unfortunately, even with their recent boosts, they were fighting a losing battle. Ogras once more unleashed a barrage of spears from a mirage clone in the distance as he stabbed out from the shadows with his spear. A golden shield appeared to block once more, and Ogras could only sigh and recede into the darkness again.

His eyes turned to the growing golden fractal covering the edge of the mountain, and he knew it wouldn't be long before yet another series of islands fell. The plan of the cultists was crude but effective. They had quickly figured out that it was actually the mountain that protected the realm fragments floating around in the Void.

They somehow infected the energy keeping the islands safe before destroying the bridge connecting to the platforms outside, causing a shocking chain reaction. That would leave more energy for the mountain itself, likely extending the time it would be able to remain before this hellhole collapsed.

It would also cut off any unlucky people who still hadn't reached the mountain.

Normally, Ogras wouldn't care, considering he had already made it, but he needed to stall these lunatics until backup arrived. He and the Marshall girl had already spotted their people scrambling on their way here, but there were a lot of islands to pass on the way to the mountain, and the cultists were too efficient in their method of destruction.

That was how the two found themselves in a battle of attrition against an army of over a thousand cultists who seemed intent on setting the whole mountain on fire. They could only slip through the cracks and cause some annoyance and delays, and hopefully, that would be enough.

Another wave of flames spread out as a hundred cultists slammed their staffs into the ground, and a scorched Thea was forced to desperately jump to safety while Ogras barely managed to fend off the waves while retreating.

“This one is done for.” Ogras sighed as he appeared next to his companion. “Let’s back off and recuperate before the next wave.”

Thea wordlessly nodded as she took out a Nexus Crystal from her pouch. Her eyes were sunken from exhaustion, and Ogras knew he didn’t look much better. He had just thirty percent left in his tank, and they would need to keep going for hours if they wanted to delay the cultists long enough.

The two scurried into the cracks in the mountain, taking advantage of the uneven terrain to hide from the pursuit. A squad of elites tried to follow them through the cracks, but it only took a few minutes to lose the trail.

Ogras thumped down on the ground in a secluded crevasse a few minutes later and started absorbing some energy as well. Thea mirrored his actions as she ate some dried rations to fill her stomach as well. The rumbling thunder of yet another collapsing island echoed out in the distance.

“This is the final stretch; keep going!” Cervantes urged as his eyes were veritably burning with hatred.

The sky collapsed once more as another accursed tentacle of the Collector greedily grabbed at a clump of tribesmen. He was exhausted, but Cervantes still roused his bloodline as he flashed forward to intercept.

His whole body transformed into a radiant light that took the form of a massive wolf’s head, and it bit down on the tentacle with enough force to rip space apart. A shudder spread across the tentacle as Cervantes infused a storm of energy through his fractal teeth, but he knew all too well how durable this bastard was. This bite of his was just a scratch to this monstrosity.

A part of the light turned into his legs as he touched down on the ground to readjust his momentum, and a geyser of moonlight pushed the appendage far into the air by taking advantage of the momentary immobility from his bite. His tribesmen didn't waste his efforts by staying to fight alongside him, but instead opted to make it worthwhile. They urged their exhausted bodies to turn into beams of light as they flashed forward toward the bridge, leaving an illuminated corridor through the end of the island.

A dozen tentacles were already descending by that point, all of them aiming toward Cervantes himself. He wasn't surprised. This ancient bastard had harried them for hours and across three whole islands, and it had already realized who it was that kept it from adding more bodies to its collection.

The whole sky was blotted out by hands, some of them clearly belonging to his tribesmen, but Cervantes didn't panic at all. A hateful sneer spread out across his face as he threw out a meticulously crafted machine as large as a full-grown man. A sharp whistle was released by the machine before it froze in space, and a silver radiance spread out the next second, illuminating the whole sky.

The light lingered for a second before it started to change, congealing into what almost looked like solid matter. It wasn't actually what happened, but Cervantes melded with the tunnel of light to escape the Lunar Domain. It was his father's invention, a method to stabilize space with the Dao of the Moon.

Its original use was to forcibly stabilize chaotic zones during the Cataclysm, but it worked quite well in dealing with Void Beasts as well. The tentacles started to rapidly distort as the laws of space were reinforced, but the Collector was unable to easily extricate itself. Space had already become too stable, and even Cervantes would have a hard time moving through that domain, let alone a Void Beast.

The appendages were trapped for the moment, giving Cervantes and his rearguard the opportunity to cross the bridge. But the Collector was ultimately a pinnacle creature, and space itself cracked as the monstrosity ripped itself free. It

did lose quite a few of its trophies in the process, but Cervantes knew that it was ultimately just a flesh wound.

They were safe for now, but Cervantes still had a hard time swallowing the hatred in his heart. Over two hundred of his tribesmen had been snatched up over the past hours, each of them handpicked elites whose talents would be a great asset when rebuilding their tribe on the outside. He couldn't believe their bad luck that this horror had decided to doggedly target them when there were no doubt far easier trophies to collect.

One day he would return to this accursed dimension just to rip this bastard in two.

“People ahead! Humans!” a scout suddenly exclaimed as her eyes flickered with light, her warning dragging Cervantes back to the present.

Cervantes hesitated for only a second before his eyes gleamed with ruthlessness. He took out a small syringe and injected it into his arm, and he felt a surge of power spreading through his limbs.

“Ready yourselves for battle,” he growled.

FINAL STRETCH

“This is the final stretch; keep going!” Zac shouted as he urged the warriors around him to keep running.

The faces of the soldiers were pallid masks of exhaustion by this point, but they kept putting one foot ahead of the other as they gripped Nexus Crystals in their hands. The last ten hours had pushed them to their very limits even though they weren't the ones who carried the main burden of their mad dash.

The problem was the increasingly sparse Cosmic Energy. It kept getting worse to the point that there was barely any left at all by now. Just maintaining a superhuman speed was a constant source of drain, and with battles peppered in, these people were running on fumes by this point.

After all, most of these people didn't even have a tenth of Zac's monstrous reserves, and the fact that they were cultivators didn't help in the slightest in this energy-sparse environment.

But there was no option but to keep going even if they were out of strength. They were all painfully aware of the situation. They had heard the crashing sounds of collapsing islands coming ever closer. They had seen the huge golden flames at the foot of the mountain, causing a shocking chain of destruction that ended with a whole section of islands being decimated.

And their platform was next.

There had only been a vast emptiness to their left when they crossed the previous bridge. The neighboring islands were all gone. It was lucky that they had decided to run diagonally across the islands in an attempt to reach a more western point of the mountain. Otherwise, they would have already been thrown to the Void.

Part of Zac had even considered picking up his sister and making a run for it, but he knew he would only be harming himself if he did that. There were just so many barriers in the way as they crossed the islands, anything from walls they needed to punch through to gates that needed to be hacked.

There were even thousands of battlebots that still roamed the inner islands like the whole base hadn't gone up in smoke, immediately attacking upon spotting his people. If Zac had left the others behind, he would long have run out of energy by this point from the constant expenditure. That by itself was suicide since there was a hostile force waiting at the foot of the mountain.

The only lucky break, if you could call it that, was that they had only been attacked by one more Void Beast as they ran, and that one had been roughly at the same level as the caterpillar from before. They had completely overwhelmed it with a furious assault, barely slowing down before moving on. There were a few times that a claw or an appendage appeared out of nowhere to snatch a few people, but there wasn't much Zac could do about it.

It looked like the smarter Void Beasts were content with staying outside the islands, with the dumber ones falling through the protective film. After all, the whole Mystic Realm was crumbling. The Void Beasts only needed to wait for the last islands to collapse and then gobble up everyone who was launched into the darkness.

Zac couldn't help but wonder about the fate of the True Sky Faction and the New World Government. The first islands that collapsed should have been roughly in the area where those factions resided. If the New World Government was still stuck in the outer sectors of the base, they were definitely dead

by now unless the spatial tunnels back to Earth still worked even in this environment.

It was a big blow to Earth to lose that many elites, but Zac didn't have the luxury of worrying about others. He had kept running ahead with rotating elite squads to pave the way ever since the weakness from using [**Hatchetman's Rage**]. They cleared the corridors of automated sentries, laser traps, bugging walls, and all kinds of dangers.

These forays allowed the weaker of his followers to just focus on keeping up, and the army usually caught up within minutes of Zac's elite units setting out. But Zac knew the truth. Every time the bulk of the army caught up, there were a few people missing. This had turned into a true death march, and some people simply dropped down on the ground with their reserves completely drained.

Zac knew it, the soldiers knew it, but no one spoke about the fallen people who formed a trail of suffering across the past five or so platforms. They could only look ahead, praying that they would be able to cross the final hurdle before it was too late. Zac was in full panic mode by this point. It had been over an hour since the last set of islands collapsed.

It felt like the floor beneath his feet could collapse at any moment, and he would be launched into the Void. This was the innermost section of the research base, and he had spotted multiple places that seemed to hold treasures, but he didn't even consider looking into it. Any leftover energy he had was used to clear any hurdles in front of them instead.

The others were of the same sentiment, and four Anointed next to him didn't need any prompting to slam into the Memorysteel wall in front of them with almost suicidal fervor. The whole area shook as they unleashed a frantic barrage, turning the wall into scraps in just seconds. Zac unhesitatingly rushed straight through, and his eyes lit up at what waited on the other side.

There were no more corridors, just the twisted Memorysteel of a broken base that had formed a sharp and uneven square at the edge of the island. On the other side was

a thirty-meter-wide wire that led to their goal, the “Taboo Mountain.” As long as they ran up that bridge, they would be safe, or at least not in immediate peril.

However, reality often didn’t live up to one’s hopes and dreams, and Zac’s eyes widened in horror when he saw the bridge leading to salvation start to crumble just as they made it.

A wave of flames rolled down along the collapsing rubble, and his heart beat like a drum out of fear when he realized that those runic flames were even eating the protective film. The cultists weren’t just blowing up the path itself, they even targeted the protections that kept the islands safe. No wonder the other islands had crumbled so quickly.

“Break the bridge!” Zac roared as he flashed forward.

There was nothing else he could do. They had already missed their chance of crossing, as part of the bridge had already been swallowed by the Void. The only thing they could do now was to cut off the rest before those flames reached them. The island they stood on was still connected to the mountain through neighboring islands, which would hopefully keep it from collapsing.

The Anointed quickly caught up and assisted him, and a series of desperate attacks hammered down on the Memorysteel wire as the wall of flames crept closer. But the bridge finally broke off, allowing Zac’s group to breathe out in relief. The flames were all swallowed by the Void just like the bridge itself, and the island didn’t immediately fall apart like they had seen before.

The advance squad breathed out in relief, but they all knew that this only amounted to a stay of execution. They had lost their access to the mountain. Without the energy provided by the Taboo Mountain, the barrier would quickly start to weaken even without the interference of the Church of Everlasting Dao.

Running toward the next bridge was hopeless as well. The next bridge was a full two islands over, and they had to pass

through complex Memorysteel corridors, while the cultists could run right over.

Besides, they were approaching the section of the previous Wasteland. A lot of those islands were fragmented or extremely small, and quite a few had already crumbled even without any outside interference. The protective film was clearly a lot weaker there compared to the rest of the islands, and going there was tantamount to suicide.

Zac's eyes turned to the army standing on the edge of the mountain, a towering fury burning in his chest. They were sneering and laughing at him like they were watching a great show as the protective film was slowly dissipating on their island. They might not be able to attack Zac or his people, but they clearly didn't feel that they needed to.

"What do we do, Warmaster?" Rhubat frowned. "Can we build a new bridge?"

"No." Zac sighed.

"We can!" Kenzie interjected as she came running, accompanied by Joanna and a group of Valkyries. "I think this thing will work!"

Zac felt the flame of hope reigniting in his chest when he saw what she was holding: the Spatial Drill. His eyes turned to the short stretch of darkness separating their island and the Memorysteel mountain. It was less than a hundred meters. Was this the true purpose of why the System wanted him to go back? He needed the Spatial Drill to save his people at this very juncture.

"What is that?" Joanna asked as she curiously looked at the weird Technocrat tool.

"A Spatial Drill. It can create some sort of tunnel in space. It was this thing the Cartava Clan planned to use to escape this Mystic Realm," Zac explained as he turned to his sister. "How long do you need?"

"Just a few minutes," she said. "It's good to go, but it needs to dig a path through the Void."

“A few minutes,” Zac muttered as he looked up at the weakening barrier. “Do it.”

Kenzie nodded and walked over to the very edge of the island before she started tapping away at her console. The Anointed had heard their conversation, and they formed a protective circle around her to let her work uninterrupted.

More and more of his people streamed into the broken square, but they stopped in their tracks when they saw the vast chasm between the island and the mountain. A few of them simply slumped down on the ground with eyes devoid of hope, while others looked to Zac for salvation. They hadn't heard the conversation between him and his sister, but they could clearly understand the severity of the situation.

“Don't give up! We will open a spatial tunnel to the other side,” Zac roared as he looked at the exhausted army. “I know you are tired, but there is a hostile army on the other side. We'll need to take them out if we want to live. I'll lead the charge, but I can't do it alone. I need the assistance of all of you. Prepare yourselves.”

Thousands of faces lit up when they heard they still had a shot at survival, and the whole square lit up as people frantically started absorbing energy from Nexus Crystals. They all knew who was waiting on the foot of the mountain. Many had even fought against the crazed cultists before. They knew they were in for a tough fight, and every extra morsel of Cosmic Energy might be the difference between life and death.

“Everyone, eat a Springroot provided by our people, right now,” Joanna added from the side. “Anyone who hasn't eaten one in one minute will be executed. If you see someone faking or exchanging it, immediately report it.”

The Valkyries reacted instantly, each of them taking out a large bag of Springroot as they walked through the ranks. Everyone quickly ate the root without hesitation, more than used to this procedure. A commotion erupted as a Zhix suddenly tried to break off, but the warrior was cut down by his brethren before he could even take a step.

A similar scenario happened a moment later when a human cultivator stealthily tried to swap out the provided root with something he had hidden in his sleeve. The moment he was exposed, he tried to flee, only to get crushed by a close-by Anointed.

Zac had no idea when those two shape-shifters had snuck into his ranks, but he guessed it was sometime during the dash toward the end. Everyone had already been forced to eat a Springroot the moment they'd set out toward the first bridge, at which point a few cultists had been exposed as well, according to his sister.

There had been no time to continuously test everyone as they ran for their lives, though. Which had allowed a few of them to blend in with the others.

Seeing that everything was dealt with, Zac sat down the next moment, gripping a D-grade Nexus Crystal in each hand as a storm of Cosmic Energy entered his body. There was only so much he could replenish in a scant few minutes, and he estimated he was only 40% full by the time Kenzie shouted.

Zac opened his eyes and saw a large vortex at the edge of the platform, seemingly fused to the exceedingly thin defensive film. The Spatial Drill was hovering in the air in front of it, constantly releasing a powerful beam into the hole. Kenzie had also pushed two odd spears into the ground at the sides of the vortex, and Zac guessed they were there to maintain the tunnel as soon as it was finished.

“What’s going to happen next?” Zac asked as he walked over with **[Verun’s Bite]** in his hands.

“The drill should reach the other side in a minute or so,” Kenzie said. “At that time, space will be directly connected between our two sides. You can’t let the cultists blow up the gate though. The drill is running on some weird spatial energy, and it only has fuel for this one attempt.”

“I’ll deal with it.” Zac nodded as his eyes turned to the cultists waiting on the other side.

They had clearly figured out that his people were up to something, and they were making preparations of their own. Zac tightened his grip as he took a deep breath. He was exhausted, but he could only forcibly rouse his body to meet the challenge.

It was time to exterminate these lunatics once and for all.

FOOTHOLD

Zac was ready for war, but the cultists were perhaps even more so. Not a single zealot had moved on toward the next bridge, by the looks of it. They had instead taken defensive positions while one sun after another ignited and rose into the air like a fiery sentry. Not only that, the whole edge of the mountain was lit on fire, with flames reaching over twenty meters into the sky.

It looked like the Church of Everlasting Dao had figured out their plan, or at least didn't want to take any risks.

"Has anyone seen Ogras or Thea?" Zac asked as he surveyed the army.

He couldn't be certain about Thea, but Zac knew that Ogras was somewhere on the mountain. They had seen a huge eruption of shadows around twenty minutes ago, but it was swallowed by an even larger fire. The demon was probably trying to help them out, but Zac hadn't seen a hint of either him or Thea since they reached the square.

"I've looked, but I haven't spotted them. But I'm sure they're fine," Joanna said. "They might be waiting for an opportunity to strike."

Zac solemnly nodded as he imprinted the defensive measures in his mind. Whoever entered first would find themselves right in the crosshairs of over a hundred attacks. Not only that, he could clearly sense that there was some sort of array at the edge of the mountain, but neither [**Cosmic Gaze**] nor [**Primal Polyglot**] could tell what it was.

That wasn't because the skills were too weak, but rather that he couldn't see the situation too clearly. The surface of Taboo Mountain was roughly twenty meters above their current platform, so he could only see the thick crust beneath. The only reason they could spot the army at all was thanks to the incline and the fact that the mountain was far enough away.

"Can you change where the other portal appears? Like on the other side of the mountain?" Zac hesitantly asked.

Even if he couldn't see everything, he could see enough. Even he wasn't certain he'd walk out unscathed from an all-out attack that the whole cultist army had prepared for almost five minutes.

"No." Kenzie sighed. "I can only drill a straight line. That's why the Cartava Clan needed to get to a specific spot to escape this place."

"Alright." Zac nodded with a somber expression. "I'll go all out from the start and try to create a safe zone right next to the exit."

"We will be right behind you, Warmaster," Rhubat said. "We'll secure this lifeline for our warriors no matter what. Here, take this."

The enormous Anointed took out a small spike, though in the hands of Zac, it would look like a proper spear. Zac took it in his free hand and turned it over curiously. It didn't look like something from the System, but rather an ancient weapon from the Zhix homeworld. It was exceedingly beautifully crafted with dense scripts covering the long metal shaft, and its bladed spearpoint was made from some purple metal he had never seen before.

"What's this?" Zac asked with confusion.

"It is **[Judgment]**, the symbol of the crusade. Stab it into the ground, and we'll do the rest. The ancestors will protect us. I hoped to save it for the final battle, but we'll have to make do without it."

“This...” Zac hesitantly said as he looked at the spear in his hand.

It seemed like an artifact of extraordinary value. But that value, unfortunately, seemed to be largely cultural. There was something mysterious about the runes, but he couldn't sense any spiritual fluctuations from it. This was a battle of life and death, and he wasn't sure he could trust some pre-integration weapon to save their hides.

“Do not worry, Warmaster. I know what you are thinking, but the energy gathered in this weapon would easily kill those miscreations we've fought on the way here. It is simply sealed. It will take a second for it to awaken, which is why you need to activate it immediately. We'll follow right behind you and take charge of the process,” Rhubat explained.

“Okay.” Zac slowly nodded as he looked at the spear.

He still couldn't figure it out, but Zac guessed it was like the Sanskrit on Mount Everlasting Peace. The spear had been consecrated with Zhix conviction for over a thousand years, which might have created something magical. In either case, stabbing it into the ground wouldn't take any time, and if it didn't work, he would simply have to figure something else out.

“Is it offensive or defensive in nature?” Zac asked.

“We do not know,” Vanexis said with a shrug next to Rhubat. “It has never been activated before.”

“Great.” Zac wryly smiled as he looked at the elite soldiers standing behind him.

Billy stood with the group of elite Anointed that would enter right behind himself, and he had an unusually somber expression. The demons and Tal-Eladar were right behind them, and Emily stood in their ranks. Zac felt bad about pushing a teenager to the front lines, but her totemic ability was just too useful. Thankfully, she knew enough not to actually enter the battle, but rather focus on buffing.

This small elite squad would be responsible for taking control of the edge of the mountain, after which the rest of

Port Atwood's forces would enter.

“Any second now, get ready,” Kenzie said, dragging Zac's eyes back to the portal. “And stay safe.”

“I've defeated these guys so many times by now.” Zac smiled. “Nothing will go wrong.”

Everyone soon turned to the portal. Zac's heart hammered as adrenaline coursed through his body, and the muscles in his legs were taut with tension.

“NOW!” Kenzie shouted, and Zac shot forward like a bullet straight toward the portal.

The four-meter-tall vortex had looked like a window into the void before, but just after Kenzie exclaimed, it transformed to instead show a fiery hellscape with hundreds of suns hovering in the sky. The Spatial Drill had directly connected two positions in contrast to teleportation arrays, and Zac found himself inside the inferno the moment he stepped through.

Scorching heat licked his face, but Zac roared as he blasted his Dao Field based on Fragment of the Coffin and empowered it with his **[Spiritual Void]**. It was like a concussion grenade had erupted right where he stood, pushing the golden flames away for over thirty meters around him.

Zac had managed to clear the area of flames the moment he appeared, but his Danger Sense was still going haywire. There was a dense script covering the ground, and the fractals had actually started to climb up his legs, looking like fiery snakes. The fractals felt like molten steel against his skin, and Zac found himself encumbered by greater and greater weight pressing him down.

It reminded him of the bindings Brazla used on him in the lava bath, and while it wasn't too bad for him just yet, it would be devastating for the normal soldiers. They would turn into sitting ducks unable to move with this level of restraints. Worse, those were just one of the preparations of the cultists. There were already hundreds of attacks soaring toward him, and cascading waterfalls of golden flames were descending from the suns in the sky.

Some of the suns were even falling toward him, the air itself incinerating from their descent.

Even Zac felt some fear at the shocking display, but he could only put his trust in the Anointed as he stabbed the spearhead into the ground before he took two rapid steps forward. A fractal blade attached to **[Verun's Bite]** grew fifty meters with each step, and it was like he was an apostle of nature as a storm of verdure erupted around him, from the leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]** and the forest of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**.

By the time Zac had taken his two steps to create some distance from the portal, the edge of **[Chop]** had gained the mysterious sets of fractals of life and death. A wave of darkness swept out, swallowing the first wave of attacks.

However, these were the elites of the incursion, and Zac frowned when he saw how quickly the energy of **[Rapturous Divide]** was being expended. But it thankfully only needed to last for a fraction of a second before the opposing wave of energy rushed forward, causing the familiar friction of life and death.

Dozens of attacks, most of them based on the holy fire Heritage of the Church of Everlasting Dao, were ripped to shreds as the spatial delimitation appeared. It was quickly being whittled down, but Zac desperately pushed back by steadily infusing both the half-circles with their respective Daos. Infusing two Daos at once was usually impossible for him with his awful control, but he managed to force it for a second as he channeled Cosmic Energy into his next skill.

A loud thunder-like clap from behind almost made Zac lose his footing, but the omniscience of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** let him proceed without worry. It was the advance group of Anointed, who had surrounded **[Judgment]**. They were led by Rhubat and Vanexis, and all of them were slapping their enormous hands against their chests in what somewhat looked like a haka.

Zac was worried for a second that their actions would prove fruitless, but he was thankfully proven wrong almost

immediately. A wave rippled out from the spear embedded in the ground before it exploded with mysterious white light that spread like a wildfire. The golden fractals around it cracked and dimmed down as one spectral monolith after another rose from the ground.

Even the golden inscriptions that had reached all the way up to Zac's knees were subdued by the radiant glow of the Zhix heirloom, and it felt like a huge weight was literally lifted from his shoulders, which allowed him to move freely. It didn't look like it was the Anointed who personally helped him, but rather that the spear itself was intelligent. For example, Zac's fractal forest was completely unaffected, and Billy was fine after being drenched in the light as he rapidly grew into his Titanic form.

It was the monoliths rather than the light that was the source of a shocking pressure though, a pressure that exceeded anything Zac could have imagined from such an unassuming weapon. The pillars radiated an aura that even eclipsed the Peak-grade talismans he had used when fighting for his life outside the Tower of Eternity. It proved that the spear was a real treasure and most likely the most powerful item of the old Zhix world.

He still didn't know exactly what the Anointed's ace would do, but it did lessen the pressure Zac felt a bit as he started summoning the first axe of **[Deforestation]**. The divide of **[Rapturous Divide]** had only lasted for a few seconds before it was finally overpowered by the frenzied assault of the army.

"Destroy the gate!" an infuriated roar echoed out from a soldier in the core of the cultist army, but how could Zac let that happen?

The source of the shout was definitely one of the leaders of the army, judging by his outfit, but Zac could tell that it wasn't the people he had fought back at the undead incursion. It wasn't the true leader, but Zac still sensed that he was at least at the same level as himself. That by itself usually meant a free kill for someone like Zac, but the Bishop was clearly

empowered by a War Array that far eclipsed what his Valkyries were able to conjure.

A huge sun shone above the Bishop's head, and it was like the other suns empowered it, which in turn empowered the Bishop himself. He radiated a fierce holy aura, and he had hundreds of soldiers backing him up. It was vastly different from fighting him in a one-on-one.

Whatever the Anointed was conjuring wasn't ready, but it wasn't like the cultists were going to wait around for them to finish. The huge glowing orbs were almost upon him, and Zac couldn't let them get any closer. They were crammed full of chaotic energies, by the looks of it, and if they slammed into the ground, they might even be able to break off the edge of the mountain.

Thankfully, his skill had already been fully infused by this point, and Zac swung his arm as the enormous hatchet above his head mirrored his movement. He didn't target the leader, but rather a dense cluster of incoming attacks. It felt a bit of a waste to waste the first swing of **[Deforestation]** on blowing up attacks instead of taking out part of the army, but he didn't have a lot of options.

A wave of unmatched sharpness rippled out, and a series of coruscating explosions almost blinded him as a large number of the glowing suns were ripped apart. It almost looked like a meteor shower as burning pieces of molten stone rained down on the ground, but the leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]** were powerful enough to divert the fallout before they incinerated from the heat.

The sky was unfortunately still littered with incoming attacks. Zac felt a bit unwilling, but he could only prepare to activate his second swing in order to clean out another set of suns.

However, he quickly stopped when he realized that his backup was already on the move.

JUDGMENT

The darkness of the Void was completely pushed away from the skyline littered with fiery spheres and the fires that raged all around Zac. He was about to make his move, but a massive foot flashed right past Zac as an earth-shattering roar caused the ground to shudder. It was Billy, who was already swinging his grotesque club like a baseball player, the knobby skull at its top aimed straight for the descending suns.

The air itself shattered like a broken mirror as Billy unleashed some sort of earthquake-like skill, but that wasn't the end of it. Enormous spikes shot out of the ground, each of them stabbing at or blocking another sun. Billy had somehow managed to take control of the Memorysteel itself, and one sun after another exploded in spectacular fashion.

The explosions were earth-shattering, and Zac's eyes widened in shock when they swallowed Billy whole. However, the giant quickly shot out of the flames, golden flames licking his whole body. Burns covered him from head to toe, but he seemed mostly fine. His hair had been singed completely clean, including his eyebrows, and Zac's mouth quirked up when he saw that he had gained a brother monk.

Billy was ultimately just one person, and there were still a huge number of attacks threatening to blow them all to kingdom come. But the shadows of the large spikes unexpectedly detached from the Memorysteel and stabbed into the air, extinguishing one sun after another. An azure tornado swept forward out of nowhere as well, rippling through a

series of the attacks that the cultists had launched toward the spatial gate.

It was obviously Ogras and Thea who had appeared, but Zac couldn't actually pinpoint their position. He guessed they were stuck on the other side of the cultist army, which was just fine considering that it forced the enemy to constantly split their attention.

Still, even with Ogras and Thea joining the fray, it wasn't enough. There were over a thousand elites from the Church of Everlasting Dao present, and they had spent five minutes filling the glowing orbs in the sky with immense amounts of energy. Their preparations wouldn't be stopped with one attack or two.

However, a ghastly white spear suddenly shot past Billy's head to pierce a close-by sun with enough force to actually cause a spatial tear. The crack in space swallowed most of the subsequent explosion before both the spear and the sun were gone in a puff. Zac's eyes lit up, realizing that the Anointed's preparations were done, and they had made their move as well.

He didn't really want to waste his second swing of **[Deforestation]** on the scorching suns, especially when he wasn't even sure it would work, considering Infernal Axe was partly fire-based. Seeing the Anointed helping out was a relief, but he was extremely confused, as he couldn't see anything with the vision granted by **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. That spear had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

He turned back to see what was going on, and his eyes widened when he saw the drastic change that had taken place right under his nose.

Who were these people?

It felt like he was looking at two realities at once. **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** told him that there were only the monoliths, the small group of Anointed, and the vanguard of the elite army behind him. But his actual eyes were telling a different story, as they saw one fierce warrior after another appear atop the pillars.

Each of them was at least four meters tall and radiated an appalling amount of killing intent, something that was only possible after a huge amount of bloodshed. One warrior in particular was just shocking. It was at least seven meters tall, dwarfing even the living Anointed. It held a small spear that looked just like **[Judgment]**, which Zac had stabbed into the ground, and the air twisted around it as the warrior pointed the spear forward.

The hulking Anointed in the front was clearly the leader, and the spectral warriors behind it threw out a barrage of attacks in response to the command. They almost blotted out the sky as they slammed into the suns, the attacks, and even toward the standing army. Glimmering golden shields erupted in front of the whole zealot army, but even they looked a bit shellshocked by the enormous force contained in the attacks.

The whole sky rumbled for an instant, and Zac could only stare in wonder as the preparations of the Church of Everlasting Dao were absolutely shredded.

Each spear almost contained as much power as a swing from Zac himself, and they could easily destabilize one or two suns, which quickly extinguished the remaining ones. The cultists found themselves under tremendous pressure as well, as cracks kept spreading across the barriers from the powerful attacks.

The soldiers were true elites, though, and they didn't panic or break ranks, but rather kept infusing their shields with more and more power. The Bishop also swung a censer in his hand, and the sun above him instantaneously doubled its luminescence. It clearly had a huge effect on the army, as the faltering barriers quickly recovered, and new suns started forming in the sky.

The titanic spectral Anointed in the front seemed almost alive as it glared at the Bishop with death in its eyes. It threw out the copy of **[Judgment]** the next moment, aiming straight for the huge sun that emboldened the cultist forces. Zac had his vision blur from the tremendous conviction stored in that attack. It felt like the spear held enough force to pierce the whole mountain, let alone a puny sun.

“Seal!” the Bishop roared when he saw the incoming attack, and an enormous sigil wrought in gold suddenly appeared, held aloft by four golden giants.

The twenty-meter-tall giants looked harried and tortured, and fetters bound their limbs to the sigil as they hoisted it in front of them. Zac couldn't tell whether the giants were real or something created with Cosmic Energy. Perhaps they were even corpses that had been turned into treasures. But they radiated unquestionable might, and Zac couldn't even look into their eye sockets, where white-hot runic flames burned.

The sigil was uncomfortably familiar as well, a perfect copy of the one he had broken over at the cultist incursion. Where it had come from, Zac had no idea, but it was continuously being empowered by the whole cultist army, judging by the energy streams he could discern with [**Cosmic Gaze**].

Zac froze in place as he looked at the spectacle. The Church of Everlasting Dao really had some cards up their sleeve. It was a lucky break that the Anointed had managed to force this enormous thing out early on since Zac felt that he would have been forced to use a lot of effort to break it apart by himself. He could only hope that the effect of the Anointed's ultimate strike lived up to the pressure it emitted.

The enormous sigil had appeared right between the two opposing factions, and the spectral Anointed's spear slammed straight into the core. It was like the world froze when the two forces met, and a painful headache almost made Zac topple over as odd hymns echoed in his mind. Others weren't any better off, with the demon and Tal-Eladar elites toppling over before they even had a chance to launch their first salvo.

The Anointed and zealots were hunkered over as well, but they were a bit better off. Even the dozens of spectral Zhix seemed to barely be able to maintain their form, but they didn't seem content to just dissipate. The ghastly squad shot forward, each of them slowly losing their forms as they approached not the sigil but the giants holding it.

Soon they were just streams of immense conviction, and one hole after another was punched into their bodies as the ghosts sacrificed themselves to take down the enemy. It was just the kind of crazed determination one could expect from the ancient leaders of the Zhix, and Zac seized the opportunity to help out. He had held off on his second strike long enough.

A cascading wave of flames rippled forward and slammed into one of the flanks of the army. He didn't dare to attack the giants or the sigil, afraid that his strike would also harm the efforts of the Anointed, but he saw an opportunity to cause some real damage to the army itself. A sea of shadows suddenly swept toward the second flank as well, and the cultist army found themselves beset from behind.

The sea of shadows turned into a churning storm of shadow spears, and it was like a hurricane that kept picking up momentum. Zac's eyes lit up when he realized that Ogras was using **[Soaring Ocean]**, the Dexterity-based E-grade skill available in his Dao Repository. More and more spikes kept appearing, and the cultist army was soon beset by thousands of stabs in the blink of an eye.

Each of the stabs didn't contain a lot of power, but the barrage was unceasing and ever growing, creating constant pressure on the army. Together with the inferno that Zac had ignited on the other side, the soldiers were no longer able to reinforce the core sigil in the heart of the army.

As expected, the fires in the eyes of the golden giants visibly dimmed soon after Zac's and Ogras' strikes landed, and small cracks spread across the sigil. But things weren't over just yet. The sigil quickly regained its luster, and Zac started to feel a sense of trepidation.

"Attack!" the Bishop roared from the other side of the sigil, and flames lit up over the heads of almost half the army before they shot into the enormous golden runes.

The giants shuddered before they visibly started shrinking like they were being drained of all their moisture. They were turned into desiccated husks in an instant, all their energy absorbed by the sigil as it suddenly hovered in the air by its

own power. The spectral spear of the titanic Zhix exploded, causing one final scar on the golden surface before it disappeared.

The crack quickly spread across the whole surface of the golden rune, but Zac wasn't sure it was a good thing when he saw some weird energy start pouring out from the cracks. It was like space itself crumbled in front of the sigil as tears started to spread toward him and the portal. These weren't spatial tears, but something else entirely.

There wasn't the void of space inside the cracks, but rather terrifying white-hot flames that made Zac's very soul shudder from just looking at them. That wasn't the only thing; the portal behind him actually started twisting from the pressure released from the cracks that slowly crept toward them.

He definitely couldn't let this continue, so he immediately unleashed the final swing of **[Deforestation]**, imbuing the strike with everything he had. A wave of darkness rolled forward, and one radiant light after another was forcibly closed as the gray clouds of desolation flooded into the cracks. It looked like two wrongs did make a right in this case, as the terrifying cracks were actually destroyed by his strongest attack.

However, even Zac's final strike proved insufficient to completely quash the incoming attack. Zac tried to figure out what punishment would be best to use, but the Zhix made their move first. There were just six of the spectral Anointed remaining, including the leader. The others had already sacrificed themselves, and it looked like the last group was about to do the same.

Even the monoliths that towered among the trees of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** rose into the sky, and ghosts and graves melded into a huge wave that followed right behind the wave of desolation. The whole area was quickly drenched in silver radiance, but Zac still felt enormous blasts of chaotic energies being forcibly suppressed inside the light. The explosions grew more and more sparse over the following seconds. Zac slowly felt his Danger Sense calm down as the silver light dissipated.

The Anointed behind him bowed deeply toward the chaos, their faces full of admiration. A tremendous explosion erupted the next moment, and the sigil cracked in two as the husks of the giants were ripped apart. A chorus of groans and wails could be heard even through the clamor of the pieces of the rune slamming onto the Memorysteel floor, and Zac knew their opportunity had arrived.

“Attack,” Zac growled with a low volume as he shot forward, a swirl of leaves forming a barrier around him as he pushed through the errant energies.

The golden barrier was down, and the cultists were suffering from the backlash. This was the optimal time to launch a swift and decisive counterstrike. A skill like **[Nature’s Punishment]** might force the warriors out of their muddled state from the massive energy fluctuations, so Zac personally rushed forward to deal with the head of the snake.

A wave of warmth spread through his body, proof that Emily had appeared as well to conjure her totem.

More and more soldiers of his army poured out behind him through the portal, each of them rushing forward behind a vanguard of Anointed. It quickly turned into a multi-race army of elites, and it kept getting reinforced as people flooded through the spatial tunnel. They looked exhausted, but determination burned in their eyes as they rushed into the haze.

The fury of almost getting lost in the void burned in their veins, and they were ready to unleash the stress accumulated over the past hours on the Church of Everlasting Dao.

ASURA

A swarm of drones shot out through the portal above the heads of the soldiers as well, though Zac could still see that Kenzie hadn't passed through the portal. They didn't follow the charging army but rather formed what looked like a protective array. Layers of barriers appeared the next moment, protecting the spatial tunnel from any errant attacks.

It allowed Zac to focus on the task at hand, and he rushed forward, aiming straight for the most energy-dense spot according to [**Cosmic Gaze**] since the previous attacks had turned any visibility to zero. A squad of lizardmen soldiers suddenly appeared to his left, but they didn't even have the chance to react before they were bisected by a fractal edge that ripped through them like they were made from dry wood.

It wasn't Zac himself, but rather the special edge he could summon with [**Chop**]. As for himself, his back was already lit up with a lustrous halo as he took another step with [**Loamwalker**], appearing right in front of his target. Or so he thought.

Zac expected to appear in front of the Bishop, but he instead found himself face-to-face with a three-meter-tall Asura with six arms. One arm held a cudgel, another a spear. Two held burning censers, and the last two were empty-handed. It radiated an oppressive aura as four burning halos behind its back lit up the surroundings. Dense scriptures were visible inside the flames, and Zac found himself drifting off after trying to discern their meaning.

He quickly snapped back to reality just in time to avoid a lance of flames that shot out from one of the Asura's hands. An extremely forceful attack with the cudgel quickly followed, but Zac had already adapted by this point and met fire with fire as he swung **[Verun's Bite]** at an upward angle. A scorching wind slammed into his face when the weapons clashed, and he felt a stab of pain in his arm when a foreign Dao tried to burrow its way into his body.

The wave of heat was extremely painful as well, forcing him to close his eyes for a moment so as not to get blinded. The power of the divine avatar was pretty impressive, but he was obviously no slouch himself. His upward swing had forced the Asura off its feet and thrown it a few meters back. It was already working on its next attack, as two plumes of golden smoke spread out around him from the censers.

Zac had no idea where this oppressive creature had come from, but he could only assume it was some sort of transformation of the Bishop. In fact, after having clashed once with the divine being, he realized it was expending life force at a crazy pace, far more than the Anointed ever did. He guessed that this transformation was an ultimate suicide attack that only the elites of the Church could use.

Not only that, but the Asura was also clearly imbued by a War Array since Zac could see streams of energy enter its body from the still-shining sun above. He wanted to attack the support squad, but he couldn't actually figure out who was powering the sun. He had heard of War Arrays with masking abilities before, but this was the first time Zac had encountered one.

Killing the soldiers who empowered their leader with a War Array was such an obvious tactic, so a lot of people had worked on solutions to the issue. One such method was to obfuscate the source of the boost, just like now. It helped keep the supporting soldiers safe, but it had clear disadvantages as well. First of all, it only worked in large-scale battles where the Array Masters could blend in with other soldiers. Secondly, the range was generally limited.

Zac thought of ignoring the Asura and instead targeting the normal soldiers, but he eventually gave up on the idea. The Bishop was radiating impressive power, and he would be able to cause a lot of destruction of his own if Zac wasn't there to stop him. The Bishop was probably more than willing to adopt a scorched-earth tactic, but Zac was a lot less willing to sacrifice his people.

The censers in the Asura's hands had already been activated, and more and more of the golden dust spewed out in the surroundings. Zac knew he couldn't let the Bishop continue unchecked, so he disappeared from his position as he activated his movement skill. Zac appeared behind the Asura almost instantaneously, and a powerful swing empowered by **[Conformation of Supremacy]** shot straight toward the halos that kept burning life force.

A pained wail suddenly shocked his mind, forcing Zac to quickly cancel his attack. It was Verun, which was actually harmed by the fierce heat. Something empowered by that much life force could even harm his Spirit Tool, it would seem, so Zac could only find another method to deal with his enemy. The Asura turned into a blur before he had the chance to launch a second attack.

The golden deity pivoted with almost impossible speed, and the unencumbered hands made some unknown seals. Zac felt some danger the next moment, and he barely had time to jump back before one of the halos released a massive conflagration that swallowed the Asura and the ten meters surrounding it. It was the golden dust in the air that had ignited in spectacular fashion.

The flames were extremely intense, to the point that Zac couldn't see anything inside. He knew that even he would get badly burnt by those flames, so he could only stand guard outside the flame pillar, waiting to see what happened with the Asura. After all, he hadn't gained any Cosmic Energy, not that Zac believed the Bishop would blow himself up the first thing he did.

As expected, the bladed head of a spear shot out from the conflagration with enough force to disperse the flames. Zac

angled his head to avoid the stab, but he still felt a burning sensation on his throat, as the spear radiated a terrifying heat. This much wasn't enough to stop Zac in his tracks, and he took a step forward while taking advantage of the outstretched spear.

[Verun's Bite] keened as he ferociously swung at the Asura's chest just below the outstretched left arm holding the spear. The cultist tried to intercept the strike with its cudgel, but Zac caught the Bishop's arm in a viselike grip with his free hand as he continued the swing. Just as he was about to leave a grievous wound, another arm turned to a blur, and one of the two censers appeared to block his edge.

The ceremonial tool was destroyed in an instant, and the whole hand holding it was cut off at the elbow. Zac was, unfortunately, unable to keep his momentum going, as the censer exploded after being destroyed, releasing a huge cloud of that extremely combustible golden dust.

As expected, a halo lit up the next moment, and Zac stepped back to avoid a second inferno. However, his eyes widened when he realized that one of the free hands had grabbed his robes by the lapels, lifting him just as he was about to activate **[Loamwalker]**. The whole world turned white as a searing pain threatened to swallow him whole, but Zac forcibly suppressed the agony as he swung his axe in a ruthless downward arc.

He felt molten metal beneath his feet a moment later, and he desperately rushed out of the conflagration. The flames dissipated only a few seconds later, exposing an Asura that now was missing two hands, standing knee-deep in molten Memorysteel. The Bishop seemed utterly undeterred as he rushed forward to engage in another melee.

The screams and clamor of battle echoed all around him, meaning that the battle had turned into a frantic melee just like his own situation. Visibility was still very limited, as the Asura had actually managed to set the Memorysteel around it on fire, but he could see blazing suns slamming into the Anointed's sigils, causing massive shockwaves. The ground beneath them was thankfully pretty thick, but Zac still couldn't help but

worry that their war would destroy the whole section of the mountain, sending them into the abyss.

The quicker he finished the battle, the better. But Zac didn't use any of his aces even knowing that. He had already managed to confirm that the true leader of the Church of Everlasting Dao was missing. This man was pretty powerful, but he was ultimately just slightly stronger than the other Bishops they had fought.

The leader he had encountered in the Dead Zone wasn't there, and Zac guessed that part of the cultists had already set off toward the Dimensional Seed. There was also the True Sky Faction, the Lunar Tribe, Void Beasts, and god knows what else to worry about. He couldn't burn through all his ultimates the moment he set foot on the mountain.

Thankfully, it didn't seem like it would come to that anyway. Zac and the Asura kept fighting in a brutal melee, where the Asura tried to ensnare and incinerate Zac while Zac kept whittling the cultist down with ruthless efficiency.

A thump echoed out as the arm holding the large spear fell onto the ground, and the Asura was covered in wounds and golden blood by this point. Zac was working quickly and methodically to dismantle it, but he was once more forced back as the Asura started swinging its censer like a lasso before unleashing a massive wave of flames.

Zac sighed in annoyance as he backed away again, his eyes scanning for a weakness in the sea of flames. He hadn't managed to unleash a killing blow, but not for a lack of trying. It felt like the Asura's Danger Sense could rival his own, as every time he was about to launch a lethal strike, one of the four halos erupted, forcing Zac to back away.

The Bishop was on his last legs, though. One of the halos had already extinguished after just one minute of heated exchanges, and the remaining three were a lot dimmer compared to before. Each wave of flames was powerful enough to harm Zac, so they were definitely powered by a pretty significant amount of the Bishop's remaining life force.

A couple of waves more and he might not even be able to keep standing.

Zac shot forward again, and he caught a lucky break when the Asura stumbled forward due to exhaustion and blood loss. Zac pounced on the opening, but he realized something was wrong when he saw a ruthless gleam in the Asura's golden eyes.

“Glory to Heaven!” the Asura roared with an otherworldly tone that sounded like a chorus rather than one singular voice, and its arms wrapped around Zac's body in a burst of speed.

Over a hundred screams echoed out from all over the battlefield the next moment, and the sun above their head turned almost blindingly radiant. The halos behind the Bishop's back turned horizontal as they rapidly started expanding, and the sun above their head started falling apart as the halos gobbled up the chaotic energies. Zac tried to get out of the bear hug, his struggles only turning more violent as his Danger Sense kept growing in volume.

He was caught in an extremely tight embrace, but he was still able to move his right arm somewhat. It allowed him to unleash a furious barrage at the midriff of the Asura, and he suddenly felt a surge of Cosmic Energy enter his body as the Bishop was hacked in two. However, Zac's eyes widened in shock when the death of the cultist leader had no impact on the halos growing above their heads.

“Retreat!” Zac roared in case any of his soldiers were in the vicinity as he untangled himself from the corpse of the Bishop.

However, he personally stayed behind as his Specialty Core activated. Transforming in the middle of a battlefield was a risky move, but he couldn't deal with the current situation in his human form. If the Bishop's final attack was allowed to go off, it might collapse the whole section of the mountain. It was instilled with all the remaining life force of the Asura, along with what Zac suspected was the life force of the hundred soldiers who just screamed with pain.

Some fractal leaves wouldn't cut it against something like that; he needed to bring out his big guns.

He was making a bet that his transformation would be quicker than the final attack of the Bishop. The three remaining halos kept expanding, and Zac couldn't help but panic as he saw them expanding toward where battles still raged. But the transformation finally completed, and Zac instantly stomped down on the ground. The fortifications of **[Profane Seal]** sprang up the next moment, sealing the growing halos inside.

Fifteen spectral chains started slamming into the radiant flames, but the halos were just too full of power. The chains couldn't even get near them, let alone damage them. Still, Zac kept infusing more and more Miasma into the skill to keep the lashing going. He hoped that every slam would weaken the halos a bit, which would make it easier to contain the final eruption.

As for Zac himself, he saw no reason to stay inside the cage. The chains of **[Love's Bond]** wound themselves around a Memorysteel cliff next to the closest gate, and Zac threw himself out through a small opening in the door he created. The Miasmatic gate closed behind him just in time before an apocalyptic explosion erupted inside.

Cracks spread across the gates and the towers of **[Profane Seal]**, and the dome in the sky fluctuated wildly from the pressure. It looked like he was trying to contain a sun. Zac infused more and more Miasma into the skill, but he knew that it was just a matter of time before it fell apart.

Just five seconds later, the Miasmatic cage crumbled, and a sea of fire so dense that it had essentially turned into a liquid rolled toward him. Zac's skill had absorbed most of the kinetic force of the blast, but much of the raw energies remained. Zac could only grit his teeth and conjure **[Immutable Bulwark]** and expand it as much as he could.

The skill turned into an indomitable wall that towered twenty meters into the sky. But his Seed of Sanctuary had unfortunately been used to create the Fragment of the Bodhi,

meaning that he was no longer able to turn it into a huge protective dome like before. A series of earthen walls suddenly appeared to the sides of his barrier though as one Anointed after another appeared.

A scorched and bloodied Billy also appeared before he slammed his club into the ground, which caused a series of jagged metal spikes to block off part of the heat. Finally, a towering wall of shadows rose behind Zac, making it harder for anyone to spot Zac's transformation. Their help was enough to create a long enough wall to contain the flames, and they raged just for half a minute before they finally ran out of steam.

The sounds of battle were growing more and more sparse as well, and Zac even heard the sound of hundreds of drones flying about, blasting the ground with their powerful lasers. If Kenzie had gone through the portal, their people had mostly reached the mountain already, and with the Bishop gone and the remaining cultists exhausted, things would be settled soon enough.

The question was what he should do next, and his eyes turned toward the huge metal sphere hanging in the sky.

THE GIFT OF LIFE

Ibtep took a deep breath before activating the teleportation array. They had spent the last two days traveling from hive to hive to better prepare for their mission. Zachary Atwood's warnings had made Ibtep worry that their preparations weren't enough, so they had gone ahead and collected another 10 billion Nexus Coins just in case.

Of course, this also put Ibtep under even greater pressure, as more and more Zhix knew of their goal. Ibtep didn't know whether they would even dare return if they failed. Ibtep would definitely get hanged by their antennae as a warning to young warriors, their precious larvae farm scorched to the ground.

But Ibtep was ready. They had gone through all the wise teachings of Nonet's predecessor, and their backpack bulged with preparations meant to tackle every scenario. They had even brought their tastiest grubbies this time, each of them full of flavor and energy. Even a vaunted otherworlder should be impressed by such a fine specimen, no?

Ibtep touched their hand against the large Nexus Hub, their heart beating with a mix of fear and excitement. As far as Ibtep knew, they would be the first Zhix to ever leave their home planet. Who knew, perhaps songs would even be written about this journey in the future? A screen appeared, and they unhesitatingly pressed the button that would activate the teleportation to a place called "Zerathar."

The talisman in their hand started buzzing, and the Nexus Hub emitted a deep pulse that somehow swallowed Ibtep's

surroundings. The grand structure housing the crystal disappeared, as did the doorway to the outside. Remaining was only darkness. The dark only lasted for an instant, though, as an energy pillar of unimaginable power shot out of the crystal, stretching out into eternity.

Ibtep's mouth widened into an O. The Seeker in their heart wanted to properly study the marvel, but they hurriedly jumped into the pillar in case it only lasted for a short while. Ibtep found themselves hurtling through the darkness, shot through who knows how great a distance. It felt extremely novel at first, but even Ibtep started to get bored after ten minutes had passed.

Just how far was this place?

Their wait was thankfully soon over, and the darkness was finally replaced with a flash of light, and Ibtep found themselves in a beautiful garden. Ibtep was transfixed as they looked around. Not only was the Corruption – no, Cosmic Energy – of unmatched density in this stretch of paradise, but even the sky was different than anything Ibtep had seen before.

Rivers of light flowed across the firmament, showering the plants and the ground in a warm light. Ibtep could actually see some fishes jumping about in the river, somehow ignoring the laws of gravity. Even some of the plants seemed to be able to float in the air, forming small pockets of greenery bobbing about.

Calls of various critters echoed across the gardens, but they created a beautiful melody rather than a discordant cacophony. Ibtep couldn't be sure, but they actually felt it was by design. Ibtep stood transfixed in place, a storm of emotions wafting over them. This was it, what their somewhat surly brethren disregarded in favor of normalcy and tradition. The sense of adventure, the beckoning call of the unknown.

Ibtep was doubly happy to have taken on this mission. How would they ever encounter such a marvelous place otherwise? It wasn't just like soup for the soul, but Ibtep even realized they had actually gained a level just from breathing in the aromatic atmosphere. Granted, some of the boost came

from the unique properties of their Seeker class, where visiting new places provided him with energy.

But Ibtep had never gained energy anywhere close compared to what they'd gained just now just by standing around for a few seconds.

“Move, you're in the way,” a gruff voice echoed out from behind, prompting Ibtep to jump up in a scare.

A large humanoid with six arms glared at Ibtep as he passed, but he didn't do anything further as he left along a cobblestone path. Each step took the cultivator hundreds of meters, and he was gone in an instant. Ibtep breathed out in relief, realizing they had forgotten themselves. Zachary Atwood had warned about the dangers of this place, and an example had presented itself so quickly.

The six-armed warrior was powerful, shockingly so. Ibtep's antennae had been completely overwhelmed when the man passed by, and they could only guess that the man was in the peak of E-grade at the least, or likely even higher. It was shocking. A random chance encounter in this place had put them face-to-face with a being more powerful even than the greatest Anointed or Zachary Atwood himself.

A sudden cough drew Ibtep's attention, and only then did they realize that there was another person close by. It was a human, and she looked at Ibtep with a slightly crooked smile, seemingly hesitant whether she should talk with them.

“Hello, I am Ibtep. May I ask for directions to the Zethaya Hive?” Ibtep asked as they walked up to her.

“The Zethaya Clan? This whole building is part of the Zethaya Pill House, Zerathar Branch...” the guard hesitantly said as she looked Ibtep up and down.

Ibtep knew that look all too well. She was no doubt hoping for a bribe. Ibtep grimaced in reluctance, but they still decided to follow their guts. First impressions were important.

“Thank you, my friend. For your troubles,” Ibtep said as they placed one of their finer larvae in the human's hand.

The guard's eyes were wide with shock as she looked down at the squirming critter in her hand, and Ibtep inwardly groaned, realizing they might have over-tipped this time. Not only were these little critters delectable, but they might even be extremely rare in this part of the universe. Ibtep needed to remember Zachary Atwood's warnings. It was dangerous to show off one's wealth in a place like this.

"Ah... I... Thank you?" the guard said as she gingerly held the larvae. She found her bearings soon enough, though, and indicated the same road that the six-armed man had earlier walked. "The main lobby is just down this road. Seeing as young master came through the private teleporter, a personal liaison will help you during your visit."

Ibtep nodded in thanks before walking down the path, their eyes curiously peering back and forth. Normally, they would have stayed behind and asked the helpful human all the questions that had appeared in their mind, but now was not the time. The mission came first.

Only after a few minutes did Ibtep actually understand what the guard meant about this place being part of the pill house. They weren't actually outside, but rather inside a building of enormous proportions. The rivers in the sky and the sky itself were artificial, like carvings of hive artisans. This place gave a lot warmer feeling than the empty interiors of the base Lord Atwood and the Anointed were exploring, though.

But it begged the question; were all otherworlder houses this big? Did they have claustrophobia, the odd condition Ibtep had learned about from Emily?

Ibtep eventually reached another part of the massive structure, this one a large hall full of people. Thousands of people, some of them radiating almost blinding power. Even the weakest of them seemed to be in the middle E-grade, but many were far stronger. Ibtep could sense at least twenty who most likely had reached the next step on the road of cultivation, D-grade.

The scene subdued Ibtep's excitement, and some worry crept into their heart. Anyone in this hall could kill them with

a wave of their arm; was this mission even possible to complete?

“Young master, welcome to the Zethaya Pill House,” a man suddenly said, the sudden sound causing Ibtep to jump a few meters in fright. “Ah, my apologies. May I ask what requirements young master has today?”

Ibtep turned around and saw a middle-aged male human standing in front of them. He had a short black beard and wore a set of wide robes that made Ibtep think of the acolytes who served the Anointed and prepared the rites of the hives.

This man was far more powerful than the clerics of the Zhix, though, and Ibtep guessed him to be in the late stages of E-grade. However, he didn't emit the same type of oppressive pressure as Lord Atwood or the three great Anointed, but rather a soothing aura that made Ibtep think of the moss gardens back home.

“I was sent by Zac Piker,” Ibtep said as they took out the second token Lord Atwood had provided. “He sent me here because we require the aid of a skilled alchemist.”

“Zac Piker...” the man muttered like he was tasting the name in his mouth as he accepted the token with both hands. His eyes suddenly widened in shock as his eyes turned to Ibtep. “AH? It's him?”

The man had been very courteous before, but Ibtep almost felt like a warlord being led through a conquered hive as the man suddenly ushered them through the large building as a wide smile adorned his face. The liaison kept introducing the various facets of the Zethaya hive and what sort of services they offered on the different floors.

“May I ask how Lord Piker is doing? He disappeared from the Tower of Eternity quite suddenly, from what I heard,” the man suddenly asked as they entered a secluded hall with a dense earthy smell.

“My lord regrets he cannot come in person. He evolved some time ago and is now focusing on consolidating his

cultivation by taking control of a Mystic Realm,” Ibtep dutifully said.

“Oh?” The middle-aged man thoughtfully nodded as he led Ibtep into a secluded room with a view of the garden with the flying rivers. “As expected of a hero reaching the ninth floor of the Tower of Eternity. His progress is rapid. May I ask what brought you here today? We’ll do our best to fulfill Lord Piker’s request.”

Ibtep’s mouth widened in a grin, feeling that knowing a big shot really had its benefits. Now Ibtep could only pray that these people could find a solution to the plight of the Anointed. They quickly took out the urn holding the Elixir of Anointment and placed it on the table, and the man curiously looked at it.

“This is...?” the middle-aged man asked with confusion.

“This is the Elixir of Anointment. It is a tonic that will cause a warrior to grow to over twice their normal size and gain impressive power for their grade. However, it will make the user unable to cultivate and unable to break through to even E-grade.” Ibtep sighed. “There are over a thousand warriors who have taken this elixir on our home planet, and Lord Piker has sent me here with two goals in mind.”

Technically, it wasn’t Zachary Atwood who had sent them, but Ibtep didn’t believe that he would mind Ibtep using his name in a way like this.

“An Army Serum,” the middle-aged man hummed. “What is Lord Piker’s wish?”

“First of all, find a way for those who underwent the Rite of Anointment to keep progressing on the path of cultivation. And if possible, improve this elixir to remove its demerits,” Ibtep said, their heart beating quickly as they looked at the middle-aged man with hope in their eyes.

“I understand.” The man nodded as he took out a token and infused it with energy. “I have called one of our resident Master Alchemists to take a look at the serum you’ve brought. He’ll be able to give a preliminary estimation.”

An old human entered the room a bit later, and Ibtep found himself almost unable to breathe from the shocking pressure the man emitted. However, just as quickly as the pressure came, it suddenly disappeared, allowing Ibtep to breathe out in relief.

“Master Wamon,” the liaison said with a bow. “A friend of young master Boje requires assistance, *Lord Piker of the ninth floor*. He has sent his acquaintance here to seek our help.”

The brows of the old man named Wamon rose, and he slowly nodded in understanding as he looked at the urn on the table with a curious glimmer in his eyes.

Have you encountered any problems so far? an aged voice suddenly emerged in Ibtep’s head as their antennae vibrated uncomfortably. This little insectoid is just a child, but the main branch has deemed that little lunatic as a Tier 2 personage. We cannot bear the burden if we create a grudge with such an unlucky star.

I ushered the messenger straight here; he should only have talked with the guard at the teleporter, the voice of the liaison answered.

What was going on? Were these two talking with their minds? And why were their words completely exposed as though they were talking out loud? Ibtep couldn’t imagine they were aware of someone listening in, and they made sure to keep their faces impassive. One of the orders of Lord Atwood was to sound out the situation on the outside, and wasn’t this the perfect opportunity?

The two kept talking in secret as the old man opened the urn and caused a few drops of the elixir to float in the air. Ibtep couldn’t be sure, but they guessed that the old Alchemist was observing the compound.

“It’s a very novel Army Serum, but it seems to be bound to your particular genealogy,” the old man eventually said after ten minutes. “There is much room for improvement, but the second request... I’m afraid that the Zethaya Clan will be unable to help you.

“What you have here is something generally called an Army Serum in the Zecia Sector. These kinds of elixirs help forces quickly nurture a large number of low-grade warriors with strong offensive powers. But these serums always have huge drawbacks, the most common being the one you mentioned, not being able to break through,” Wamon said. “There are Army Serums that will allow one to break through to E-grade, but those are strictly controlled by C-grade forces. For us to evolve this serum to such a level... Would require the grand elders of the Zethaya Clan, and it would have geopolitical implications. I’m afraid that’s far beyond this little branch.”

“So there is no hope?” Ibtep sighed, their antennae drooping with disappointment.

“We might not be able to help you improve this formula, but we can help you with the other request.” Wamon smiled.

“Oh?”

“We can create an ‘antidote’ based on this elixir, one that would allow your people to cultivate and break through again. However, you should understand that this type of antidote isn’t perfect. Those who take it are unlikely to become proper cultivators, and reaching D-grade is highly unlikely. Most importantly, the majority of the power they gained from taking this serum will be stripped away when taking the antidote,” the old man said. “But it will allow them to break through.”

“Yes, please. Do that.” Ibtep quickly nodded. “How much does an antidote cost?”

“This is a small matter; the clan would be upset if they learned we charged the friend of Lord Piker for something like this. We will analyze this compound and prepare ten thousand doses free of charge,” the Alchemist said. “Incidentally, young master Boje wanted to present some small gifts to Lord Piker in case he appeared in this branch, but we do not know what he requires. Would young master Ibtep perhaps know what he desires?”

Ibtep forcibly stilled their fast-beating heart before thinking back to their interactions with Lord Atwood since the

time they first met. This was important and a way for Ibtep to both make use of months of observation while also giving back to Zac! So, what did Zac desire? Zachary Atwood was mostly busy killing things all over the planet, so that should be his biggest interest. Unfortunately, there were no good gifts to give in that regard.

But he had shown a predilection for something else.

The first time Zac had set out from his island, he came back with Emily, the one he called his mascot and who now lived in his private compound. The second time, he came back with almost a hundred young females, all of them beautiful according to human standards. The third time, he came back with his kin and two more young females. There was also the one called Thea Marshall, along with the odd alien Verana Tir'Emarel.

Lately, his speed of collecting females had decreased, but that was understandable considering how busy he was. Besides, perhaps his requirements were increasing as his powers grew?

Ibtep had spent a lot of time learning about human culture, and this behavior was clearly out of the norm considering the standard human coupling was a monogamic pairing. It was a unique desire of Zachary Atwood. This was perfect. Zachary Atwood had given the Zhix the gift of life, the continuation of their culture through arranging this meeting. This way, Ibtep could give the gift of life right back.

“Lord Piker likes younger females,” Ibtep said, making the two humans freeze. “The hundreds he has are not good enough. If you can get the word out that the Lord is looking for better ones, I am sure he will be most grateful.”

SEALS

The last remnants of the Bishop's suicidal attack eventually dissipated, which allowed Zac and the others to deactivate their defensive skills. With the Bishop down, the battle was all but over, and there were two options for Zac at the moment: go with his army for a while or immediately ascend the mountain.

“Ah, why do you smell weird?” Billy suddenly said as he stepped closer to Zac, dragging him out of his musings.

“Might be because the guy I fought smelled?” Zac shrugged as he activated his Specialty Core once more.

“Haha! Just like Billy when Billy was fighting the ratlight. Billy made Nigel puke once by standing ten meters away. But Billy will not puke even if you smell like a corpse.” Billy laughed, but he suddenly gave a start. “Ah? You smell normal again?”

“Crazy world, different smells.” Zac smiled, prompting Billy to sagely nod in agreement.

Of course, it was simply Zac having returned to his human form again. His actions might have been spotted even with Ogras' shadow wall, but everyone was busy fighting their own battles. Most people would probably guess that he had used some death-attuned talisman from the undead incursion if they even realized the skills were wrought with Miasma.

That wasn't an accident. Zac had already let his Valkyries spread rumors about him finding all kinds of death-attuned treasures when taking out the Lich King. He knew that his

excuses weren't perfect and that people would soon put two and two together about the identity of Mr. Black. This way, he would hopefully be able to create some misdirection, which was only helped by the fact of how outlandish the truth was.

The Anointed next to him were obviously not as easily tricked due to their extremely sharp senses, but they didn't comment on the transformation either.

A scream in the distance reminded Zac of the situation, and he could only table the matter for now. He still had some energy left in the tank, and while this battle was a rare opportunity for his people to improve through battle, he didn't want his elites to die in a place like this.

"Let's finish things up before deciding our next step," Zac said, and the Anointed nodded in agreement.

Zac set off, and the remaining pockets of fiercely resisting zealots were cut apart in seconds wherever he appeared. Explosions quickly started to rock the area as the cultists realized that it was over and decided to blow themselves up. His people were thankfully already used to the crazed conviction of the Church of Everlasting Dao, so very few soldiers were killed by those final blasts.

It took just ten minutes until the battle was over, with not a single cultist remaining. Zac had tried to capture a few to question them about the whereabouts of their leaders, but they simply blew themselves up without hesitation the moment he got close.

The battle had been pitched even with the advantage of Zac providing aid. The cultists were not only higher leveled than most, but they had better Heritages as well. Their skills more powerful, and they were also better trained. If it weren't for the large number of Anointed steamrolling everything and smashing their cooperation, the losses would have been way worse.

But even with the advantages Zac himself brought, along with the activation of **[Judgment]**, over three hundred elites had fallen in the battle. His people were simply too tired after the mad dash to the mountain. They had lost at least two

hundred soldiers who ran out of energy, and many of those who made it were just hanging on by a thread. They weren't in any condition to fight, and many had been killed even if they stayed in the back.

"Everyone, rest up for an hour," Zac said as he looked across the harried army. "I know you're tired, but we need to gather those Spatial Seals if we want to get out of this place."

The soldiers' faces relaxed from relief when they heard that they could finally rest, and most plonked down on the ground where they stood, not caring whether they were sitting right next to a corpse or a patch of burning metal. Everyone quickly closed their eyes and started absorbing energy from Nexus Crystals.

The ambient energy wasn't actually bad on the mountain; on the contrary, it even eclipsed the energy back on his island. It looked like all the Cosmic Energy of the Mystic Realm had been gathered in one spot, which benefitted the survivors greatly.

Zac was about to sit down and rest as well, but he sensed a familiar aura approaching. His heart lurched for a bit, but he quickly found his bearings before turning around with a smile.

"Hey." Thea smiled.

Zac was about to answer, but he forgot himself, and his smile froze when he saw Thea's state. She had thick dark circles under her eyes, to the point that it almost looked like she had two black eyes. Her hands and face were covered in burns, and her aura was fluctuating worryingly.

One of her arms was limply hanging to her side, and her battle suit was drenched in blood. It was no wonder he had only seen Thea releasing a single attack at the beginning of the battle. She had clearly pushed herself beyond her limits even before he arrived. After all, she was still in the F-grade and didn't have the benefits of the energy reserves that reaching E-grade brought through the easily gained levels.

Zac hurriedly flashed over and grabbed her by her waist before he flashed away again. A few quick steps took them to

a secluded spot behind a Memorysteel cliff, and he carefully set her down on one of his cultivation mats.

“Are you okay?” he said with worry as he quickly took out a couple of Soul Crystals and healing pills.

Her physical wounds didn't seem too bad, though Zac knew she didn't have his nigh unkillable constitution. Her unstable aura was a lot worse, as it usually meant her soul was wounded or overdrafted.

“I'll be fine. I'm just a bit wrung dry.” Thea sighed as she gratefully accepted the Soul Crystals.

“Just rest up; we'll talk later,” Zac said as he sat down next to her.

Zac himself was in a much better state than Thea. His energy reserves were running a bit low, but physically, he was fine apart from some burns and minor wounds. He would be back to full strength in just a few hours. As for Thea, he wasn't so sure. He feared it might take weeks, even months for her to get back to perfect condition.

He didn't want to disturb her at this moment, so the two sat next to each other in silence and focused on recuperation. With no one coming to disturb them, Zac also took stock of the situation while absorbing Cosmic Energy.

The first thing he noticed was that a brand had appeared on the top of his right hand, shining with a gray light as it emitted spatial fluctuations. His first reaction was that the Asura had left some sort of dangerous mark on him at the end, but he quickly discarded that thought. It was clear that the “flavor” of the rune on his hand was completely different compared to the Heritage of the Church of Everlasting Dao.

Besides, he noticed that Thea had an identical mark on her hand, and he quickly realized what was going on. He had gained a Spatial Seal sometime during the battle. However, he couldn't remember seeing that seal on the Bishop's hand. So either he got it from one of the soldiers he killed afterward, or it could somehow be hidden.

However, considering how bloodthirsty the System was, Zac doubted that it would let people obfuscate the fact that they were in possession of a ticket out of this place.

It was a relief to see that both he and Thea were safe for the moment, and that relief only increased when he opened his quest screen. His quest had actually increased to **(738/3,000)** in progression, meaning that this battle had progressed his quest by almost 25%. It proved that it shouldn't be too hard to complete the quest.

The zealots might have reached the mountain pretty early, considering how soon they managed to start collapsing bridges, but they seemed to have focused on taking out the competition rather than gathering seals, from the way it looked. Even then a majority of them owned a seal, from the looks of it.

Only after fifty minutes did Thea stir, prompting Zac to look over.

"I thought we lost you guys for a second there," Thea said with a weak smile.

"Well, if there's one thing I'm good at, it's staying alive." Zac laughed. "I'm glad you're okay as well. About before..."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that when things were so chaotic," Thea said, her eyes flickering.

"No, I'm glad you did," Zac said as he put his hand on hers.

Her mouth quirked upward a bit as her lithe fingers entwined with his.

"Shameless couple," a teasing snort suddenly emerged from the shadows.

"You again," Thea muttered before she turned to Zac. "If he was half as strong as he is annoying, he would have routed those cultists by himself."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there isn't really time for you to take a romantic time-out," the demon said, ignoring Thea's jab.

“What’s going on?” Zac asked with a frown as he got up with a grunt.

“Your sister and the scientists have made some measurements. This place will last three more days at the most. The seed is continuously accumulating energy inside that globe in the sky. The dimension won’t be able to take it any longer than that,” Ogras said. “As for whether the treasure is already ripe for the plucking or not, who’s to say?”

“Three days.” Zac frowned as he looked up at the steel moon hovering above the mountain peak.

“We tried ascending the mountain before,” Thea said as she followed his gaze. “There is a weird pressure that increases the further up we go. Most people won’t make it past the halfway point. I’d say you need the strength of an E-grade warrior to reach the peak.”

“It will probably take half a day to reach the seed from our position, perhaps even more if there are complications inside the sphere,” Ogras added.

“I’ll stay with our people... for now,” Zac said without hesitation. “We’ll follow the same general plan as before. We’ll circle the mountain to look for the Dominators while harvesting seals.”

“What? Why?” Ogras exclaimed with confusion. “There’s no guarantee that the one to first to reach the Dimensional Seed will get it, but it certainly won’t hurt our chances. That insect bastard is probably up there as well by now. The same goes for that leader of the cultist lunatics. The real stage of this Mystic Realm isn’t on this desolate mountain; it’s up there.”

Zac waved his hand, and his quest appeared in front of them the next moment.

“Benevolent shepherd,” Ogras muttered before his eyes lit up. “You’re thinking that the Ruthless Heavens wants you to stay down here for a bit?”

“Exactly.” Zac nodded. “If the System only wanted me to lead our people here, then it wouldn’t add the requirement to get three thousand seals. I think there is something important

left to do down here. It's not like I have to keep completing the quests, but my main goal ultimately isn't the Dimensional Seed. It's dealing with the threats to Earth before the three days are up."

"Alright... What about the other natives?" Ogras asked.

"Ignore them if we can. They all have their strengths, especially the Lunar Tribe. They'll be a pain in the ass to deal with here, but we can slowly figure things out after we exit this place," Zac slowly said.

"What if there are too few of these seals?" Thea asked as she looked down at her hand. "We didn't really have the time to scout around too much when we dealt with that squad of cultists, but they aren't exactly littering the ground."

"If there are too few seals to go around, we'll target the Lunar Tribe," Zac said. "They have already proven hostile to our faction, and I'm guessing that they will hold the most seals anyway. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if they'll target the Cartava survivors and Gemlings for their seals. We might be able to reap all the rewards after they have exhausted themselves."

"Nothing like harvesting some ill-gotten gains." Ogras grinned with a ruthless gleam in his eyes.

"How's your condition?" Zac asked, changing the subject as he inspected the demon. "It didn't work?"

Zac wasn't asking without reason. The demon had clearly changed since they last met, but not necessarily for the better. Ogras had essentially turned monochrome by this point, the last red tint of his patterned skin gone. Had that serum perhaps accelerated the transformation into a shadow creature?

"I'm just dandy." Ogras grinned. "In fact, never felt better. That bastard is thoroughly subdued, at least for now."

"Good." Zac nodded as he stood up. "Let's go talk with the others. We'll take our people for one final push before we climb the mountain."

BAD OMENS

Hekruv Vira sighed as he looked out at the remaining droplets of light that lit up the Void like fireflies at the end of their flight. Another one had just winked out, no doubt because of the energy finally running out. They had built a hundred arks just in case, but now just three remained.

One could argue that the losses didn't quite match up to the numbers, considering the remaining arks only survived thanks to powerhouses infusing them with their power. But it could also be seen as an abject failure in the sense that their old, weak, and sometimes young had all been sacrificed while the powerful saved themselves.

A shudder racked the whole lifeboat, and the passengers didn't dare breathe as they looked at the barriers keeping the Void at bay. They had held again, but everyone knew it was just a matter of time. Hekruv glanced at the enormous sphere above the mountain before his eyes turned to the pulse that rippled out toward eternity.

One thing good about that shockingly powerful treasure awakening was that most of the Void Beasts were forced away or downright killed by the spatial fluctuations, which grew more and more intense.

The downside was obviously that their arks were caught in this subdimension, unable to find any rifts in space to escape through. Those fluctuations had crushed them all, and Hekruv wouldn't be surprised if the energy emanations would have great repercussions even on the surface dimensions.

But this was no time to worry about the outside world. They first needed to grasp their final shot at survival. Their vessels were meant to escape through the edges of the Mystic Realm, but now they had almost reached the core.

Just a little bit more.

“What is this interference?!” Voridis roared with fury as his Cosmic Vessel once more was thrown out from the hidden dimension, small cracks covering its hull.

He was so close that he could taste it. The swirls of fate suffused the whole region. A few more jumps and he would be able to pinpoint the planet.

“Master, the ship will not survive another jump, according to the readings,” a wet, slightly gurgling voice said. “The spatial fluctuations are too powerful.”

Voridis looked at the wretched state of his “disciple” with a frown. It was extremely lucky that he reached Seed #7 before reaching the main target, the world inhabited by Zachary Atwood. Some things could only be discovered by experimentation, and there were clearly some issues with his original plan.

The Fulcrum’s soul was supposed to be a conduit, but the forces ripped it apart much too quickly, turning it all into a chaotic mix of discordant wills and Karma. It made the bridge between the fate of the world and Voridis too fragile, and he had only managed to get a taste of it before the connection was cut.

Voridis had barely managed to salvage a small piece of the rapidly dissipating energies as the world died, and that morsel was utterly insufficient to allow him to form a world of his own. He had instead used it to perform a series of tests with the help of his new little follower, Vasidas Medhin.

It was lucky that Voridis hadn’t followed his first instinct to extract his soul and discard him as he originally meant to

when planning this whole undertaking. He had come to realize that such an action might have led to unexpected troubles. After all, his whole plan was only made possible by utilizing the Dao of Karma to form a master-disciple bond with his beacons.

Most things could be circumvented, but it was often easier to just follow the Dao. Killing his disciple would sever Karma, but doing so might actually break his connections to his other beacons.

Luckily, the dynamics of discipleship were not something that was etched in stone. Wasn't allowing your follower to enjoy the effects of your experiments a way to nurture your successor? If Vasidas happened to have some adverse reactions that showcased the faults of the experiments, wouldn't that be the best for everyone involved so that the master could correct his wrongs?

A stroke-like shudder racked Vasidas, which brought Vوريدis out of his musings. The young man's demeanor had changed, and Vasidas hatefully stared at his master like he wanted nothing more than to rip him apart and eat his flesh.

It looked like the Fulcrum's remnants had appeared again.

"Just how do you keep appearing?" Vوريدis muttered with a mix of curiosity and exasperation. "You should have been annihilated by the storm of Fate."

He waved his hand the next moment and suppressed the remnant soul, allowing his disciple to regain his mental faculties. Vوريدis didn't believe that such an issue would prove a problem for himself, considering the vast difference in power between himself and Zachary Atwood, but he had still perfected the filtering system to make sure too much remnant wills didn't enter his world.

Some corruption was bound to appear when subverting fate, but as long as he held the supreme will, it should be slowly salvageable. He would break through and immediately eat his prepared longevity medicine. The additional eons of life span would be enough to figure out his next step.

“Have the golems start repairs,” Voridis muttered. “I’ll take the opportunity to make some more calculations. I might be able to reach the planet in a single jump based on the accumulated Karma in this region. Hopefully, the spatial turbulence will calm down by the time I’m done. If not, we’ll have to simply break through.”

“I’ll arrange it,” Vasidas quickly said and shuffled toward the warehouse housing the repair golems.

Voridis took a deep breath as he gazed out in the beyond. The heavens were shifting, and he couldn’t help but feel a strong sense of urgency.

Galau sighed as he put down the damaged piece of armor before making some notations in his ledger. What was it with pirates and fake inscriptions? Every fake rune he encountered felt like a loss of wealth, like he had been tricked somehow.

“Why so glum?” a laughing voice asked. “Being a junior quartermaster isn’t quite the same as becoming a merchant, but it should beat being tortured to death for information.”

Galau looked up to see his new friend of circumstance. His purple hair had been cut into a mohawk that was made into a thick braid that reached down to his neck. Galau couldn’t understand why he had done something that weird. Not that it looked bad, but it was a very popular hairstyle among the pirates.

Was Average trying to get himself killed on the chaotic battlefields?

“I just thought about the unpredictability of fate. How different my life would be if I didn’t sit down at that table.” Galau wryly smiled as he put down the ledger keeping track of the spoils of the Muscle Brigade.

This family and their shitty naming sense.

“Well, that guy seems to have that effect.” Average grimaced as he sat down on the table. “Neither of us would be

in this scary hellhole if not for him. I would have completed my hunt and returned victoriously, and you would have gone back to your clan to live the rest of your life in obscurity.”

Galau glared at the annoying teenager, but he quickly retracted his ire. Average might still be F-grade while Galau had broken through, but the combat strength of the two was miles apart. He had learned that all too well during the obligatory sparring sessions of the Muscle Brigade.

“In fact, I heard from Fath— I mean the general, that he might be the reason we’re out here in this desolate sector,” Average added, seemingly not having noticed the scathing look.

“What?” Galau asked with confusion. “What does Zachary Atwood have to do with our brigade?”

“The Stele of Conflict,” Average said with some fear in his eyes. “That thing is a treasure far exceeding this whole sector. Even its shadow has great repercussions.”

“What does that have to do with us?” Galau asked with mounting worry.

He had barely survived his return from the Tower of Eternity and the subsequent escape from his clan. The elders hadn’t wanted to take any chances with scary forces like the Tsarun and Heliophos Clans in the mix, so they planned to simply hand him over and wash their hands clean of the whole situation.

If not for the Peak family, he would probably be dead by now. Pretty Peak had honored her agreement, and she arranged for people to fake his death before sending him far away from his clan. He hadn’t expected her to send him to the Eternal Legion though, and now just two months later, he found himself stuck deep in the unclaimed territories outside the borders of the Allbright Empire.

Galau was now called Gubao, named so by Pretty Peak herself, a junior quartermaster under the logistics department of the Muscle Brigade. It was far from his original goal, but it honestly wasn’t all bad. These war-hungry lunatics kept

fighting with pirates and alien life-forms at any chance given, and weird and valuable resources kept flooding through the logistics department in turn.

He had learned more over the past month compared to a whole year in the Base Town. Besides, his assignment was quite safe, and he never left the warship as it sailed through the Million Gates Territory in search of the Empire's enemies.

"Haven't you heard? We're heading further inside the Million Gates Territory than the Eternal Legion has been for centuries," Average said with building excitement. "We'll reach a wormhole that should take us deep into the heart of the territory in a month. No support system, no safety nets. Just pure chaos and a million roads to power."

"WHAT?!" Galau screamed as he took a step back, feeling that he had almost been physically assaulted. "Wha... Why?"

"I told you. The Stele of Conflict appeared. The emperor believes that it was a sign that war is coming. And the first clues have already appeared." Average shrugged.

"Clues?" Galau frowned. "And it's in the middle of the spatial anomalies?"

"Exactly!" Average said. "We're at the forefront of history. Weird spatial fluctuations have been sensed all over the Zecia Sector over the past weeks, and they are just increasing in power. The anomalies are particularly powerful in the Million Gates Territory, which isn't surprising, considering how unstable the dimensions are here."

Galau took a deep breath as he pushed down the mounting panic in his heart. He had already escaped death a few times now, and he knew that he needed to retain his mental faculties if he was to survive this next calamity.

"What are we looking for?"

"We don't know, but the timing is too coincidental. The fluctuations are so powerful that some teleportations have failed mid-activation, and Mystic Realms are popping up like mushrooms after rain. We are here to investigate if these changes are manmade," Average explained.

“What does that mean?” Galau asked. This was way beyond his knowledge.

“The emperor fears that a Space Gate is forming, and it’s what’s causing the anomalies,” Average whispered after making sure no one else was around.

Galau’s eyes widened to saucers as he quickly realized the implications. He didn’t know much about conflicts between the powerful, let alone wars between sectors. But he did know one thing. The reason that wars between different sectors were so rare was the exorbitant cost of teleportation.

It might not be too much for a C-grade Monarch to visit a neighboring sector, though the cost without a token was still quite prohibitive. But to teleport billions of warriors across the vast emptiness of space, and to maintain logistical lines for millennia in a sector-wide war? Impossible. Even the wealthiest Monarchs would become bankrupt before the war even started.

But things changed completely if a Space Gate appeared. It was like a door connecting two points in space, and walking through it didn’t cost a dime. Creating one was completely impossible, at least for the factions living in frontier sectors.

However, they could appear on their own.

Space was malleable, something that was doubly apparent in a chaotic area like the Million Gates Territory. It was technically possible for a powerful enough wormhole to appear, creating a connection between two different sectors. From there, you just needed to stabilize it, and you suddenly had a Space Gate that would likely last for tens of thousands of years until it broke apart.

Stabilizing such a wormhole was extremely expensive, but something that a couple of C-grade powers could stomach if it allowed them to plunder a whole sector. The Zecia Sector.

“And the most likely place for such a wormhole to appear is here, where the spatial barriers are weakened,” Galau concluded with a mix of shock and horror.

“Exactly, which means the Albright Empire would be thrust to the front lines,” Average agreed. “We might be powerful, but we can’t withstand the wrath of a whole hostile sector. So we must get to the bottom of what’s going on and take proper precautions.”

“All because that guy summoned that plaque?” Galau muttered.

“I mean, it’s not like Zachary Atwood is related to the weird ripples that are destabilizing the Void to the point that a Space Gate might appear,” Average snorted. “But him summoning that Stele is still a pretty bad omen, right?”

SHORTAGE

The soldiers were still exhausted after the mad dash over the last hours and subsequent battle, but no one complained when Zac gave the order to start moving. Some had already gotten their hands on a seal through the battle, but it was mostly the Anointed, demons, and Tal-Eladar who were safe by this point thanks to their higher killing efficiency.

Everyone understood the situation: if they didn't start hunting for Spatial Seals, they'd be dead in a few days.

“Did you get your seals from the mountain or killing?” Zac asked Thea as they walked at the front of the army, keeping a brisk pace.

“We found them somewhat quickly some ways up the mountain,” Thea answered. “I don't think they spawn at the foot. The cultists took a long route between the bridges, and they even sent squads of a few hundred up the mountain for two hours at a time while the others worked on destroying the islands.”

“Wouldn't be surprised if the further up the mountain you go, the more seals will appear,” Ogras added from the side. “Especially since the lunatics almost picked the lower layers clean.”

“Alright,” Zac said as he changed course, leading the army up the mountain as they walked around it.

The goal was to essentially travel to the opposite side of the mountain in search of the traitor Zhix, but there was no point staying at the foot. Not only would it mean missing out

on extracting seals, but it would also increase the time it would take to reach the area controlled by the Gemlings. In fact, with how big the mountain was, it would take way too much time that way. The foot was extremely wide, and only by taking the shortest route would they get there in time to deal with the traitor before the realm collapsed.

“Did you find anything else?” Zac asked as they made their way up the mountain.

The Memorysteel mountain had a lot of normal-looking features, like cliffs, ravines, and steep mountain walls. But it also had a distinctly spiral form, and they made their way up one of the major spirals.

“We only spent half an hour exploring before those lunatics started blowing up islands. We rushed toward them the moment we realized what they were up to,” Ogras slowly said. “But we did learn some things. These seals only last for a short while. If no one snatches them within a minute or so, they disappear, and it wouldn’t reappear even after we waited for a few more minutes. Things might get chaotic.”

“Shit.” Zac sighed, and Thea nodded in agreement.

Both of them had clearly come to the same conclusion; it would be impossible to impose any sort of order on who got the seals. Zac and the other leaders had already discussed setting up an order by lottery for the general population, and Kenzie had even prepared everything in her tablets. But how would it be possible to enforce something like that when the seals appeared and disappeared at random?

They were strapped for time as is, so they couldn’t wait around god knows how long for every Spatial Seal. It would go to whoever was closest, and if multiple people found themselves equidistant to a seal, problems were bound to occur. After all, those seals were the difference between life and death, and who knew how people would act when pushed to the limits.

“There.” Ogras suddenly pointed toward a crack in the Memorysteel a few hundred meters away. “We both found our seals in a cave that looked a lot like that. I think they migh—”

Zac grabbed his sister, who was walking just behind them with her head in her tablet, and flashed away before the demon had a chance to even finish his sentence. Of course, he was heading straight for the cave mouth.

“Hey!” Kenzie exclaimed as she glared at him with annoyance, but Zac didn’t stop moving.

People might think he was playing favorites, and he definitely was. But Zac didn’t care. They all would be dead already if not for his sister, and he wouldn’t be able to completely focus on the task at hand until her safety was secured. A few steps with **[Loamwalker]** later, he reached the entrance, but they only reached a few meters inside before they stopped from surprise.

The cave didn’t exactly look like he had expected.

It was actually a small plot of land, with around a hundred trees sitting on a patch of soil. Of course, the trees were definitely not in their natural habitat. The crowns of the larger trees were broken or pressed right into the roof of the cave, and over a dozen trees had simply fallen over. Their root systems were ripped apart, and it seemed like only a small part of the soil had been moved to this place. The rest might have remained on one of the islands or been stuck somewhere else on the mountain.

“It looks like a piece of a biodome that has been preserved,” Kenzie said with interest as she looked around.

Zac was a bit surprised that whole sections had survived getting pulled into the mountain like this. But for now, he was more interested in finding a Spatial Seal for his sister. And it didn’t take long before he could spot a slight fluctuation with **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

“Come,” Zac said and flashed forward, arriving in front of a normal-looking rock in the middle of the transplanted forest.

The fluctuations were slowly getting stronger, and suddenly, there was a small shimmering brand on it, identical to the one on Zac’s hand.

“Why did it appear on this specific stone?” Kenzie muttered as she hunched down next to Zac. “It seems to be a completely normal rock; there were millions just like this one in the Lunar Forest.”

“Try taking it for now,” Zac urged with some anxiety. “Every seal we miss means one person dying.”

Kenzie nodded and gingerly touched the rock, but both were surprised when nothing happened.

“You need to crush it,” Ogras said from behind as he suddenly appeared, and Kenzie quickly followed his instructions, as the seal was already flickering like it was about to dissipate.

The stone turned to gravel after Kenzie exerted some pressure on it, and the seal jumped onto her hand. Zac felt a wave of relief as he stood up again, only now having the peace of mind to analyze the situation.

“Did you encounter more places like this? With proper patches of land from the base?” Zac asked.

“There are some.” Ogras nodded. “Both intact Technocrat rooms and patches of dirt like this one. I’m a bit surprised this cave is fine, though. The cultists seemed intent on torching everything since they deemed this place cursed. After taking any Spatial Seals, that is. Guess they missed this one.”

“Do you think it’s possible to leave some people here and let them farm the seed one by one?” Zac ventured. “Or do you think that they won’t regrow?”

“Hard to say.” Ogras shrugged.

“I don’t think new ones will regrow. The energy readings in this place are a lot lower compared to before I took it. It’s like the seal was formed by remnant Spatial Energy left in these trees or the soil. I guess the seals are not stable, so they will jump back and forth in the area until someone picks it up. These trees will definitely not regenerate new Spatial Energy, so there shouldn’t be any more seals appearing in this place,” Kenzie said. “Besides, the Spatial Energy might drift away to other parts of the mountain.”

“So if we find spots with higher Spatial Energy, we’ll find Spatial Seals?” Zac mused.

“I’m not able to actually see it,” Kenzie said, and Zac sighed when he realized that it was the same for him. He’d only spotted the seal when it was starting to form.

“With how many we need, we’re probably better off spreading along the whole mountain instead,” Ogras said. “The stronger ones will form a line and trawl the mountain further up, and the weaker ones will stay at the lower layers. That way, the strong warriors won’t take the easy-to-snatch seals.”

“Some might hide away as soon as they find a seal if we spread out, though,” Kenzie sighed. “A lot of people are shellshocked. If they find a seal in a hidden cave like this, they might just sit down and wait out the time until the Mystic Realm falls apart.”

“Can you monitor things with your drones?” Zac asked.

“Sure,” Kenzie said after some thought as she started walking back toward the army. “A bit big-brotherly, but whatever.”

The warriors might see it as ruthless to force them to keep going, but Earth still had a lot of enemies in this place. Zac needed more hands to fight, and it wasn’t like there were any guarantees that staying behind was any safer than going with the group.

Zac quickly explained Ogras’ findings and their plan to the leaders of the respective factions, and everyone in the army was soon informed of the situation. The weaker warriors and the few noncombat cultivators looked especially relieved upon hearing that they wouldn’t have to compete with the elites for Spatial Seals.

The group kept ascending for another two hours, at which point the pressure from the mountain was starting to cause some issues for the weaker people. Zac was obviously not even slowed down this far down the mountain, but after

walking around for a while, he had to say that Thea's earlier estimation might actually be a bit optimistic.

He doubted most people would even make it halfway up the mountain.

Zac was almost certain that it was the System that had arranged the pervasive pressure that covered the mountain. It had created extremely precise layers where the pressure was exactly the same. Each band was extremely wide, and with the incline, you needed to climb roughly an hour before reaching the next segment.

Of course, Zac would be able to go a lot faster than that, though he would probably be slowed down closer to the peak.

The moment you stepped into the next band, the pressure drastically and instantly increased. Furthermore, the pressure seemed to be somewhat exponential. They had entered the first band after ascending for roughly ten minutes, and Zac estimated it required around 30 Strength to forcibly endure. Of course, you could use spells, Dao, or other means to block out the pressure if you weren't a Strength-based cultivator.

The second band seemed to require 70 Strength to nullify, and the third roughly 120. It wasn't too hard to see that there were exactly eighteen layers to the mountain, provided that each layer was equally high. If the difficulty kept increasing at this pace, you'd need the equivalent of 600 Strength to withstand the pressure at the halfway point.

And that was just withstanding it. To actually travel with that kind of weight on your shoulders would quickly drain and exhaust most people. Zac guessed that most people would be forced to stay in the third and fourth layers, with just a few entering the fifth to ninth layers to search for seals. Going higher than that would quickly exhaust your energy, and only a handful would be able to reach the peak.

Zac wasn't too worried for himself. Even a pressure equivalent of 2,000 Strength at the peak would only slow him down a bit, but he hoped that this was just a test arranged by the System that wouldn't follow into the sphere in the sky. He

really didn't want to fight Void's Disciple while carrying this kind of weight on his shoulders.

The long train of Port Atwood's soldiers soon turned into a wide human chain that moved further and further up the mountain. It took a few hours for everyone to find their suitable altitude, at which point they stopped ascending and instead only moved clockwise around the mountain.

Zac kept constant watch as well, but he had to admit it was slim pickings for seals even after they spread themselves out like this. His quest barely updated once per minute, and most of those who gained seals were those the furthest up the chain. This obviously didn't go unnoticed among the others, and people tried to forcibly endure the higher layers in hopes of finding a seal.

But the pressure was simply too pervasive. Anyone who walked further up than they could handle quickly found themselves unable to keep up with the high pace of the group, and falling behind meant they definitely wouldn't get their hands on a seal.

Zac and the elites who had already gotten their seals walked in step with the army, partly to keep order and partly to explore the large number of caves they encountered. Almost all of the caves in the first four layers were unfortunately looted and burned to a crisp already, but it was clear that the Church of Everlasting Dao had only performed cursory sweeps further up than that.

They had already found some loot from a dozen caves, but they had also found themselves face-to-face with hundreds of battlebots hiding like spiders in a few others.

It looked like the cultists had launched blitzes where they rushed the first six layers or so, snatching the easy-to-spot seals in the highest layers while ransacking the lower ones. Large swathes above the fifth layers were completely untouched, and some caves that required some time to cut open the entrance had been ignored as well.

Still, it was an undeniable issue that the weaker soldiers were getting too few seals. As things stood after six hours, the

strongest warriors would all be safe as long as they kept going for a day or so, but not even a week would be enough for the weaker cultivators. The cultists had been too thorough, and they had an almost fifteen-hour head start on Zac's group.

They had probably cleaned out the lower layers of at least a third of the mountain, and those easily attained seals had already fallen into the hands of his own elites by now. The other factions who had made it to the mountain were probably frantically looting the lower layers as well, leaving just those impossible-to-attain seals behind.

It really looked like they would have to fight and kill for seals no matter if you were talking about completing his quest or finding a path of survival for his people.

TREASURE MOUNTAIN

There was not much Zac could do to help his people apart from urging them forward toward parts of the mountain that were hopefully not picked clean. He did consider turning around more than one time, instead heading in the direction of the Lunar Tribe. There was no way the cultists had picked the lower layers clean in that direction.

But Zac eventually gave up on the idea. Not only was the Lunar Tribe in that direction, but also the Cartava Clan and presumably the second cultist group, considering they had already infiltrated the werewolves. Forcing their way in that direction would result in unacceptable losses, when they could instead hurry toward the opposite side of the mountain, where the traitor Zhix hopefully waited.

If they still hadn't found enough seals after dealing with the Zhix problem, they could consider their next move.

It was not only bad news all around, though. While the weaker people in the army suffered under the immense pressure of an uncertain future, the elites were actually having impressive gains. The middle layers were a lot more intact compared to the lower ones, probably because the cultists didn't have time to properly loot.

The plan of the Church of Everlasting Dao was no doubt to blow up every single island before turning toward the riches on the peaks, but Zac and his people had cut that strategy short. So that left those in Zac's army who already had a Spatial Seal with ample opportunities to line their pockets.

Zac became more and more sure that the System had a hand in forming the mountain as the hours passed. There were not only clear delimitations of the layers, but the rewards were similarly spread out. Even discounting the cultists' locust-like approach, the upper parts of the mountain clearly contained better things.

The caves held all kinds of valuables, most of which seemed untouched even by the natives. Zac was currently standing in a cave in the eleventh layer, and the pressure was strong enough to turn a mortal into mush. But the neatly lined-up bushes in front of him were completely unruffled in such an environment, and their leaves somehow rustled by themselves, creating a bell-like jingle that was amplified in the cave.

He had no idea what these bushes or their small yellow berries were, but they were obviously something that was intentionally grown, judging by how uniform the rows were. Zac sighed in disappointment that he didn't possess a Herbalist Bag, a type of Spatial Tool where you could store plants without killing them. Still, taking the bushes as is was a good harvest.

Both his affinity to nature through [**Forester's Constitution**] and his very cells told him that these berries were something good, and even the leaves seemed to contain quite a bit of energy. Perhaps they could be used in medicinal baths or as feed for spiritual beasts, so Zac went to work.

For the first time in a while, Zac used his axe as a lumbering tool rather than a tool for slaughter, and one bushel after another entered his Spatial Ring. He definitely wasn't lacking space, so Zac swept through the whole cave like a hurricane, leaving not even the energy-rich soil behind.

Zac exited a moment later and, after confirming there were no issues with the army, started looking for the next cave to hit. There had been occasional deserters who needed to be whipped into shape in the beginning, but the Zhix were more than happy to take on that role. They saw that sort of behavior as the highest form of dishonor, and after they had dragged a few cowardly cultivators by their feet back to the army, almost no one dared to sneak off any longer.

Zac scanned the surroundings as he jogged back and forth between the eleventh and the ninth layers, and his eyes lit up when he spotted a burst of nature-attuned energies spreading out like a plume a few hundred meters ahead. There were definitely more spiritual plants in that direction. He knew that such an eruption would have been spotted by others, though, so he started running forward, each step moving him almost a hundred meters even across the uneven terrain.

He swore in annoyance when shadows congealed right at the cave mouth just as he was about to reach the cave.

“Too late this time.” Ogras snickered with a grin that almost split his face apart, seemingly taking more pleasure in beating Zac to the cave than getting the treasures within.

Zac could only shake his head and set off again, not wanting to waste a single second just standing around. Especially if that second was watching the demon ooh and aah over the rare herbs. Zac and the other leaders had quickly decided to turn whole caves into first-come-first-serve among seal holders, and he wasn't an exception to the rule.

Part of the motivation was to avoid any fighting for resources hidden inside the caves, but the main reason for it was simply to reward people for repeatedly risking their lives in the Mystic Realm. And some people were walking away with impressive gains, from the looks of it. People were scurrying back and forth among the Memorysteel cliffs with almost manic fervor.

It wasn't really a loss for Zac to let people take everything they could. There were only so many caves he had time to loot personally, and it was unlikely he would have time to return to these sections later. Better it was used to motivate and power up his people than for it to get lost to the Void in a few days.

The fact that the System didn't provide any rewards for its area quest wasn't as surprising any longer. Zac had initially thought it was punishing people for entering a Technocrat lab. But it had rather dragged all the realm's riches into the mountain, turning it into a real treasure trove.

The competition to find and reach the caves was fierce, but Zac was powerful enough to freely walk among the higher layers. So his competition was just Ogras and a handful of other elites. He was still keeping a pretty decent distance from the peak, never going past the twelfth layer. Part of the reason was that he was actually losing Cosmic Energy just walking around, starting on the eleventh layer, and part of it was to quickly be able to help out his army if some problems cropped up.

After all, some people had actually died in the caves after being overeager, and dangerous situations kept popping up one after the other.

Most caves and crags were safe, but some held battlebots that started blasting the moment anyone entered. Others held intact Technocrat rooms, many of which had the standard defenses. One unlucky cultivator from the Marshall Alliance had actually been completely incinerated by a light beam just like the one the base had used to keep the Collector at bay.

There were also stressed-out beasts who had been moved all the way here from different biospheres, hiding in their caves in fright. There were even some plants that were almost as lethal as the Rageroot Oak. So it had almost turned into a lottery what you could find inside the caves by this point, and the Atwood elites were quickly turning into gambling addicts.

Thankfully, the people who had been brought to this place were professionals, and deaths were pretty rare. Anyone who had survived the integration until this point had multiple ways to stay alive, including methods to scout ahead or determine threats to their lives. If things seemed too dangerous, they could always pass on it and head for the next one.

Kenzie was fast becoming the elites' best friend, happily sending one of her endless drones into the caves in return for 25% of the loot. A few other scouts provided similar services, but they obviously weren't able to spread themselves out like Kenzie could with her drone swarm.

Of course, this feeding frenzy was completely separate from those still hunting seals. Those who still looked for seals

could enter all caves to take a look, and seal holders would immediately signal if they spotted a seal. Mostly there was no one close enough to snatch it in time because of the distances involved, but it had saved a few people.

Zac soon found another point of interest, an actual sliding glass door embedded in a sheer cliff wall. It most likely meant it was a piece of a room rather than a biosphere on the other side, but he couldn't see the situation inside because of some sort of smoke. Zac readied himself in case its defenses still worked and walked over to it.

The door didn't open by itself, though, perhaps because the terminal was missing, and Zac had to force the sliding door open.

A dense wave of some sort of medicinal aroma hit him almost like a punch the moment a crack opened in the door, and he stopped in his tracks with some worry. Zac breathed out in relief after realizing that his cells greedily swallowed the energy in the air. It didn't seem to be poison, but Zac felt it wasn't attuned energy either.

He walked inside after marking the door with his initials, making sure others knew it was claimed. Zac closed the doors behind him to not let any of the medicine escape, and a small torrent soon appeared around him as his body greedily absorbed everything it could. Zac couldn't be sure, but he believed that he had reached a bloodline lab since it felt like every cell in his body was slowly improving thanks to the haze.

Most of the interior of the room was shrouded in the fog, but there seemed to be at least some Base Power remaining, judging by flickering lights in the ceiling. Zac started walking inside, but he stopped after just a second upon realizing that the whole room was flooded to his ankles. He took out an illumination crystal and bent down, and he saw that it wasn't water he was standing in.

The liquid was a bit viscous and had a greenish tint, and it didn't take long to realize that it was the source of the thick haze. There were still some medicinal properties remaining,

but it was like a medicinal bath toward the end of usage. This place had probably held some vats before that had cracked when the world shifted.

Zac sighed in disappointment as he looked around. Who knew how much of the medicinal properties had been wasted when the liquid started leaking. The compound was clearly not stable, and getting exposed to air seemed to make it dissipate.

At least he knew what was going on, and he activated **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** after some thought. Visibility was simply too bad because of the fog. A small spiritual forest rose in the mists, and Zac suddenly had a perfect view of the laboratory.

There were no tables with experiments in this place, and neither were there any side rooms like in the lab he'd visited before. There were still some things of interest, though. First of all was a large pod that could easily fit Zac inside. It stood in the middle of the room, and Zac realized it was filled with liquid when he got close.

However, the liquid inside had a shimmering emerald hue, and its medicinal properties were clearly completely intact in contrast to the stuff on the floor. It almost felt like Zac's cells were drooling with hunger even though the pod had great sealing capabilities, and he could barely stop himself from forcing a way inside.

Next to the pod was a series of consoles that probably were meant to control and observe it, or the test subject who entered the pod. They were slightly submerged like everything else, but they were still working. However, the screens did flicker ominously like they could break down at a moment's notice. Zac glanced at the displays, but they were just showcasing dense lines of information he couldn't make heads or tails of.

Finally, two thick tubes were connected to the pod, and they ran to the edge of the room. One of them was connected to a large vat, but it was unfortunately broken. It looked like just part of the lab had been transferred here since the massive container was essentially cut off in the middle.

There was no doubt that the liquid on the ground came from this broken container.

The other tube didn't extend into a vat, but instead into some sort of machine. Zac couldn't tell its purpose, partly because of incompetence and partly because the machine was cut off in the middle just like the large vat. But it all somewhat looked like a dialysis machine since half of a tube ran from the machine to the top of the broken container.

The medicinal liquid would move from the vat into the pod, and the user would absorb the medicinal properties in there. The exhausted liquid would go through the other tube into the machine, where the liquid presumably was infused with more treasures or whatever the medicinal effect came from. This formed a cycle that would keep going as long as one had the materials to run the machine.

The cycle was obviously faulty with both vat and infuser being broken, but Zac's eyes turned to the pod in the middle. It held one last dose of the medicine. The question in Zac's mind was what purpose the pod served. Did it improve the efficacy of the drug, or did it just contain it?

He didn't know if he needed to harvest the whole thing or if he could just siphon out the liquid. His instincts leaned toward the former since Leviala had talked about bloodline vats. Just drinking the mixtures in this place didn't seem to be enough; they needed to be stimulated somehow to bring out their effect.

The problem was that he didn't know if he was able to do it without ruining the vat, and Kenzie was a long way down the mountain. Zac looked the pod up and down for over twenty seconds, trying to figure out a way to cut it out from the ground, but an ominous beeping from the console made him freeze.

An extremely dense cloud of medicinal aroma blasted him a moment later as the hatch on the pod opened. Zac's eyes widened in horror as he saw a storm of medicinal energy dissipate into the atmosphere.

Zac hesitated no more before he scrambled into the pod and closed the hatch behind him.

PERFECTION

Zac initially felt reckless for jumping in without thinking things through, but he had pretty much confirmed that the medicinal properties of the liquid were good for him by this point. Seeing as the console was malfunctioning and that the pod was starting up, this might be the last opportunity for him to absorb the energy within.

The glaring beeping of the consoles disappeared the moment Zac closed the hatch from within. It wasn't just the incessant sounds either, but it was like he had been cut off from the rest of the universe, placed in a small world of his own. The pod had activated the moment the hatch opened, and it was emitting some sort of low-frequency white noise on top of its excellent isolating capabilities.

The low hum didn't only help Zac shut out his surroundings, but even his mind was quickly calmed as he sank into the viscous liquid. It was like the extreme stress from the past days was just blown away, replaced with soothing tranquility. This feeling alone almost made it worth jumping into the pod, as Zac realized he had desperately needed to decompress.

It wasn't like he was being hypnotized, though. He was in full control of his faculties, and he was constantly observing everything that was going on. The first thing he noticed was that he actually didn't need to breathe inside the liquid. He was somehow getting oxygen by osmosis of the skin or something similar.

Unfortunately, the amount of medicine his body took in from the liquid around him barely trumped what he'd gained from walking around in the mist outside. Did he need some sort of method to actually absorb it, like a Body Tempering Manual? If that was the case, then he was out of luck.

But a series of lights suddenly lit up within the pod, showering Zac in a warm yellow glow from both above and below. It was like the liquid came alive a second later as torrential streams of medicinal power entered his pores, spreading through his whole body. But Zac frowned as his body was filling up more and more. A small amount of it entered his cells just like the energy in the mist, but most of it was sort of meandering around.

Even worse, a few seconds later, the energy started to move out of his body. It felt like the force had tried to do something as it moved about, but it couldn't do it alone. A sudden heartbeat caused a ripple to go through the emerald liquid around him as the **[Void Heart]** woke up. The escaping energy froze in its tracks, but it didn't actually enter his Hidden Node. It just froze like a deer in headlights, neither advancing nor retreating.

More and more energy kept pouring in, and his hidden node kept a steady beat to keep the energy inside his body. It was a relief to see that the valuable serum wasn't wasted, but Zac was quickly starting to feel bloated after just half a minute. The liquid in the pod was still a shimmering green, and Zac understood that if he didn't do something with the energy soon, he would have to leave the pod before he exploded.

The issue was that he didn't know how to use the accumulated energy to awaken his bloodline. The information he had gathered on the subject until now was somewhat sparse. Hereditary bloodlines could emerge in different ways. Some underwent the first awakening in life-threatening situations like a mid-combat epiphany, whereas others were born with it already awakened.

The less talented or those with hard-to-awaken bloodlines could use Body Tempering Manuals, and there were treasures

and arrays that could help as well. But none of the missives actually broached how to actually use those treasures or arrays, and it clearly wasn't enough to float around in the treasure water around him.

Zac could only think of one solution at the moment, and he decided to fight fire with fire. A small box appeared in his hand, and he shoved its contents into his mouth and swallowed.

It was the [**Blood Nucleus**], the most valuable treasure he had acquired in the Tower of Eternity that didn't go into the creation of [**Love's Bond**]. The small rocklike item he had just swallowed almost rivaled the Pathfinder Oracle Eye that had kicked up a storm among the elite scions of the Zecia Sector.

It was a risk to swallow a treasure when he was already over the capacity of energy in his body, but he felt this was his best opportunity to awaken his bloodline. The odds of finding another intact pod like this felt iffy, especially considering this pod was probably an elite variant compared to the things the Gemlings had access to in the outer layers.

He needed to take the shot.

A burning surge of power entered his heart a second later, his real heart and not his Hidden Node. Every beat spread the power of the [**Blood Nucleus**] through his body, from his thick aortic arteries all the way down to his minuscule capillaries. It felt like he had formed a second energy pathway for a moment, with the new one covering every single inch of his body.

The fierce power in the blood soon entered his cells, and it was like they opened their maws like voracious beasts and quickly started absorbing the medicinal energy trapped in his body. In just seconds, the feeling of being overstuffed was replaced with a sense of starvation as his body screamed for more. It was a hunger that reached all the way to the soul, endless greed that made Zac's eyes slowly turn red with want.

Almost invisible ripples were released from his body the next moment, and the liquid in the pod started to rapidly lose

its color. Soon it was completely transparent, even more so than the leaked liquid on the ground.

Zac was focused inward, though he could barely concentrate over an all-consuming pain that had erupted across his body. The medicinal energy along with the force hidden in the **[Blood Nucleus]** acted like some sort of accelerant for his body, and his cells split and died over and over. It was like Zac was killed and reborn in an endless cycle, each rebirth taking him a bit closer to perfection.

But the process was slowly tapering down.

It felt like he was on the cusp of success, but Zac just needed a push to take him all the way. The problem was that he was out of bloodline treasures. Even worse, the feeling of completion was slowly getting weaker, like he had been building momentum with the pod and the **[Blood Nucleus]**, but that momentum was fading away, amounting to nothing.

He hesitated for a second, but he eventually took out a vial full of some mysterious liquid. It was something he had found in the Cosmos Sack of the second elder of the Cartava Clan. Normally, he would have waited to let Calrin or his sister analyze the thing, but his instincts told him a huge chance would slip out of his fingers if he didn't awaken his bloodline at this moment.

Perhaps it was like when one formed one's Cultivator's Core. The first attempt was the easiest, but it became exponentially harder the next time if you failed. If he failed to rouse his bloodline at this moment, it might be far harder to awaken it in the future. He was already behind schedule in a sense, since the first awakening was normally done in the F-grade.

More to the point, the hunger that reached his core told him that he needed more. He needed to feed.

So Zac pushed away the pain and put the vial to his mouth with shaky hands. He uncorked the stopper with his teeth next so as not to let the liquid mix with the water in the pod. A burning heat filled his mouth, but Zac soon recognized the feeling it emitted, and he swallowed the contents of the vial in

one go. It wasn't a Bloodline Serum, but it was rather some sort of Race-boosting Serum.

It wasn't perfect, but Race and bloodline should be interrelated, considering they shared a row on the status screen. A burning warmth spread throughout his body, and Zac felt flush with success when he felt it was helping both with the hunger and the process of improving his cells. However, while it was effective, it was like feeding a whale with a single shrimp. It definitely wasn't enough.

Zac gritted his teeth, and one vial after another was emptied, turning into a fiery inferno in his stomach. He was somewhat guessing that he was currently downing a stockpile that was meant for a whole clan, but now wasn't the time to worry about expenditure. But it was weird. It almost felt like the more he swallowed, the more energy-deprived his cells were.

It was like he was trying to feed a million little baby chicks that all screamed for sustenance, and the screams just got more and more piercing the more he fed them. For a moment, he started wondering if he was doing something akin to when he'd poisoned his body with Cosmic Water, but he soon discarded that notion.

This was definitely something different. His body was slowly being refined, with imperfections removed, and more in line with his bloodline. And he already had strong suspicions that his bloodline was related to absorption based on his Hidden Nodes. Each time his cells were reborn, they were able to swallow more energy before they split apart. That alone felt like proof that Zac was heading in the right direction.

As long as he ate enough, he would become perfect.

The bottom of the pod was soon littered with vials, and the white liquid had turned into a weird brown sludge. Part of it was because of Zac's body expelling large amounts of impurities, both through his pores and through Zac cutting open some wounds to bleed them out. Not everything he

fished out of his Spatial Rings or Cosmos Sack was suitable for the situation.

Some were healing serums, and others were materials that Zac suspected to be raw ingredients meant for blacksmithing or something else. But it almost felt like anything that contained nonpoisonous energy was happily swallowed by his cells. Of course, that meant that his **[Void Heart]** first had to make the energies extractable, and Zac only had so much blood he could exsanguinate to rid himself of dangerous impurities.

He was shocked at how much energy his body had swallowed. It was like every cell in his body was turning into nodes, a vast subdimension seemingly capable of storing an untold amount of energy. But even after gobbling up almost everything in the Cartava Clan's Cosmos Sacks that seemed beneficial, it still wasn't enough.

Zac was delirious with hunger still, and he eventually took out the intricate box housing his spiritual **[Four Gates Pill]**. He had held on to this magical node-opening pill for so long, but it looked like it was time to take a chance. His body was screaming for more, and this should be the most energy-dense item in his possession.

A huge pulse rippled out from his body as a golden warmth erupted like a sun in his stomach, causing the mists outside the pod to churn with even greater ferocity. The power hidden in that unassuming pill was simply shocking, and it shot toward a node in his arm. However, another thump from **[Void Heart]** stopped the medicinal force in its tracks, and it was instead ripped apart and absorbed by the greedy cells all over his body.

It was like his cells had gained a golden hue, and Zac's eyes were turning bloodshot as he kept going, feeling he was getting ever closer to perfection. Everything was soon turning muddled except one undeniable truth that shone in the darkness of Zac's mind: he needed more. Pills, crystals, raw materials. Everything became yet another sacrificial tribute to the altar of his bloodline.

Just as his absorption increased, so did the chaotic ripples that spread out of his body. Zac was quickly losing grip on reality, and it felt like he was being controlled by a hidden hand as he bit into a branch from the bush with yellow berries he'd harvested just a few minutes ago.

Finally, there was a change. It was like everything suddenly clicked into place, and Zac slowly started to push away the clouds muddling his mind. Sweat poured down his back as he realized what he had just done. What was that? That insatiable hunger just now had almost turned him insane. His mouth was full of the taste of iron from the countless wounds he had gained from chowing down on everything from lumps of metal to whole plants.

There was no time to cleanse his stomach from what was no doubt an extremely dangerous mix of treasures, as his voracious feast had yielded results. Something was happening, and his body erupted with a foreign and terrifying power. The medicinal pod was turned to scrap metal from the explosion, but the clouds in the lab were still swallowed into his body rather than pushed away.

Zac tried to get to his feet, but he was shocked to realize he was completely unable to move. He lay frozen in place as the whole room was drained of every morsel of energy, but he could still see his surroundings. And it was with mounting horror he saw an enormous vortex emerge from his body.

The whole mountain wall was ripped apart and swallowed a second later, exposing him to the outside.

Zac felt a wave of pleasure entering him as the Memorysteel was disintegrated into its base elements and turned into nourishment, and the flame of hunger woke up again. He was rapidly losing grip, but he could still see the familiar faces appearing some distance away. He wanted to tell the shocked spectators to run, but his mouth didn't work.

The world around soon turned hazy apart from glowing blobs of sustenance, and they were all inexorably dragged toward the vortex behind his back. The more he absorbed, the

better he would be, and when all existence was swallowed, he would become the Heavens themselves.

He had become the Void.

TO EAT

Carl rushed into the cave with glee, not forgetting to flip off that goddamn demoness who had stolen two caves right in front of him over the last hours by using her movement skills to get ahead. It felt like his legs were about to buckle under him up here in the tenth layer, and all his organs hurt like he was getting constantly punched. But the lower layers were just too cramped.

He'd be lucky to get one cave every two to three hours in the seventh layer, and few of them held any life-changing opportunities. Up here, there were just around a hundred people to compete with, which wasn't too bad considering how wide each layer was. Still, there were a few who had the same idea as himself: run right at the edge of the ninth layer while scanning for opportunities in the tenth.

That way, you would avoid the terrifying increase in pressure from passing the halfway point most of the time, while still enjoying the benefits that came from the upper half of the mountain. The items from there were clearly better, and Carl had made more money over the past ten hours compared to the past six months.

Not only that, he had gotten his hands on some rare treasures, which couldn't really be measured in Nexus Coins. They would allow him to trade for similarly rare items he needed for his cultivation.

He was extremely lucky to have broken through mid-battle against those deranged lizard people, pushing his Seed of Lightness to High stage. It seemed that this particular seed was

extra effective at combatting this pressure as well, since Logan had similar attributes and a High Seed, but he was still unable to properly hunt any higher than the eighth layer.

Carl activated [**Energy Trace**] and breathed out when there was nothing that could match his own energy signature in the cave. Of course, that didn't mean it was safe, but his odds were pretty good since there was a distinct medicinal smell coming from within. It was doubtful any of those killer machines were hiding inside.

A high base salary, clear advancement opportunities, and access to unique encounters. That was how he had been suckered into the employ of the world's scariest boss and conscripted to enter this hellhole. But he had to admit, Void Beasts, werewolves, and collapsing space islands could definitely be classified as "unique encounters." Carl bet Zachary Atwood loved every moment of it.

A shame he had to drag the rest of them into the madness, though.

Carl had somehow made it all this way in one piece, and he breathed out in relief when he saw a small tree with six delectable-looking fruits standing in the cave. This was definitely good news; the fewer of something, the better it probably was. A singular tree with just a handful of fruits? Jackpot.

Another win for the good guys.

A sudden and tremendous explosion coming from somewhere above threw Carl off his feet, and he immediately got a bad feeling. What trouble had his crazy boss attracted this time? He knew he would soon be called to arms for some insane battle he had neither the desire nor qualifications to participate in, but at least he could die with six delicious-looking fruits in his belly.

Carl scrambled back to his feet and rushed toward the tree, but a primordial scream of exasperation erupted from his chest when he saw his final reward being somehow drained and turned into sand in front of his very eyes. What the hell was going on?!

Was it that white-haired succubus who kept appearing around him? Had she done this somehow? Did those demons have a complaint department? He doubted it. It would probably be some trial-by-combat thing where he would swiftly and publicly get his ass handed to him.

But no, this had the mark of his boss all over him. First an explosion, then this?

“Are you planning on hiding in here?” a teasing voice drifted into the cave from the outside, making Carl’s hair stand on end. “Want me to call the insect enforcers for a motivational speech?”

“Shit,” Carl swore as he ran out with his bow at the ready, donning the practiced determined expression of a career hero. “Where are the enemies?!”

“It’s the Lord,” the demoness said, but it wasn’t like her explanation was necessary.

“Of course it is,” Carl muttered, his warrior face quickly becoming strained.

It looked like the end of the world one layer above their current location. A massive crater hundreds of meters across had appeared out of nowhere, like a terrifying giant had taken a bite out of the Memorysteel.

But of course, there was no mythological creature that had decided it needed more iron in its diet before moving on. It was something much more terrifying; it was their boss, who was up to something again.

He hovered in the sky, arms and legs spread wide like some sort of lunatic possessed by a creature of the night. He was even emitting an extremely eerie deep humming sound, but that might be the thing behind his back. A huge vortex slowly rotated like a halo, and it somehow looked even darker than the Void outside the mountain.

It was like everything could be sucked inside, and Carl even felt his mind shudder as he looked into it, like his soul was about to be ripped out of his body. Streams of Memorysteel were dragged from the mountain, entering the

terrifying vortex that seemed completely insatiable. Even the energy in the atmosphere was being drained, and Carl had already seen what Lord Atwood had done to his poor treasure tree.

Who knew how many treasures had been turned into trash by this point?

But at least it didn't look like their boss was going to gobble them up as well. That shifty sidekick of his stood much closer to the crater, and he was fine, as was the golden-haired giant. The boss did swallow quite a few of those drones his sister owned, but he seemed mostly focused on draining the Memorysteel and its hidden riches.

"Looks like he's trying to eat the mountain," the demoness commented when it looked like they were safe and didn't need to ready themselves for battle.

"Of course he is."

The meteor hurtled through the vast cosmos once more, taking Zac and the mysterious predecessor on their journey. Zac didn't know whether this scene was taking place before or after the previous two visions, but it was clear that it wasn't directly connected in time with them.

This part of space looked completely different as Zac looked around, and there were no suns or stars no matter where he looked. Instead, there were endless rivers of lightning streaking across the darkness like elemental dragons. Zac's first instinct was that they were the tribulation lightning or something wrought by the System, but he quickly discarded that thought. While these lightning rivers were vast beyond comprehension, they didn't have any sense of a will like the purple Tribulation Lightning did.

They were just pure energy.

Some of them just looked like thin streaks, but going by the shockingly large beam right next to them, they were most

likely just extremely far away. There were whole continents with their own atmospheres far in the distance, using the endlessly wide lightning river as a source of warmth and energy. As for the ancestor, he seemed to be studying it for inspiration.

Small streams of lightning swirled about in his hands, but he seemed to be having problems. The small beams were powerful enough to turn a Hegemon into ash, but the mysterious man's control over them was lacking. The arcs were wild and untamed, and it looked like he was trying to impose order on them.

Time passed, and the hooded man eventually waved and dissipated the small lightning bolts. He didn't seem ready to give up, though. The man made a pulling motion toward the endlessly vast river of lightning, and a small thread of extremely pure lightning was dragged out from its depths.

Just like with the sun, the mysterious man took the lightning into his body, and crackling arcs powerful enough to turn Zac to nothingness lit up the surroundings for a while until the chaos subsided. It looked like it had been quite arduous for the man to absorb the high-grade lightning, but he eventually stirred and once more summoned the small arcs in his hands.

Zac didn't understand what he was up to, but he realized something. Weren't the bolts moving a bit smoother compared to before?

The two kept soaring through the lightning-infested part of the cosmos, and the man kept up a cycle of rest, absorption, and experimentation, slowly improving his control over the small arcs. But a sudden thump made the vision just freeze before it slowly distorted.

Zac's own heart beat an extra time out of worry, as this looked very different from when the visions upon opening his hidden nodes had ended. Space shuddered like it tried to resist what was happening, but it soon cracked into a million pieces like a mirror.

To eat was to live.

The taste of the ten-legged critter was rancid, and it gave him the runs, but Karz looked at it like it was a treasure. He pushed his thumb into the soft spot right beneath its head, and it stopped moving after a short frantic struggle. Karz took a deep breath and started munching away, only occasionally stopping to keep himself from throwing up.

Energy-rich critters like these were rare, and he couldn't waste a speck of it if he wanted a chance to ever get out of this place. Karz sat under the cover of what probably was once some sort of vessel as he gazed up at the sky, the only sound of him forcibly biting through the shell and sinewy meat.

One day, he would get up there.

A huge mountain floated in the sky, surrounded by an everchanging shroud of mysterious ether. Sometimes grand vessels would emerge from it for a few seconds before they turned into streaks of light. Just looking at it made every part of Karz's body twitch with hunger for some reason, like it held the most delicious things in the world.

Old Vek said it was a sect, a place where important people went to become stronger. Karz didn't understand the allure at first, but apparently, your life got better the stronger you were. You didn't have to eat things that almost made you puke or that made you see terrifying visions at night, and you didn't have to fear getting swept up in the refinement light like Old Vek finally was a year ago.

In fact, the treasure land he and the others scavenged for sustenance was actually just a garbage pile, according to Old Vek, and everything he ate was just discarded scraps. So Karz needed to eat to get stronger so that one day he could live up there. His stomach was cramping up from the poisonous beetle, but it wasn't nearly as bad as the first ones he ate.

More importantly, that odd warmth spread all over his body, the warmth that Old Vek believed to be related to those

in the sky. The ability to cultivate. Neither of them could know for sure, but it looked like not everyone had that gift since no one else in this garbage mountain ever seemed to understand what he was talking about.

The bug was a good first catch of the day, but he couldn't stop here. Today was the great cleanse, and nothing new would arrive for days. He scurried between the already searched mounds as he rushed toward the center. It was a risk, but the competition wasn't as fierce in there since the cleanse could always start early.

A weak shimmering suddenly caught his eye, and Karz's eyes lit up as he rushed forward. It was definitely a cultivator stone, this one shining an alluring red. It was broken and had lost almost all of its light, but it was still better than most things that could be found in this place.

Karz took out a mortar and pestle from his backpack, and he started hitting the crystal, turning it into red crystalline sand. A wave of heat spread in the area, and Karz quickly took off his shirt, knowing that the effect would soon dissipate. His thin torso was covered in sores and scars, but Karz wasn't worried. Most people died from illness after getting these kinds of sores, but Karz got better extremely fast.

Old Vek had always believed it was because he had a blessed body, one meant for cultivation. What were some mortal afflictions to such a marvelous thing? Karz poured a bit of refiltered oil into the bowl, turning the sand into a paste that he spread all over his body. Smearing the compound into his wound hurt extremely bad, but Karz gritted his teeth as he covered his whole body in a thin layer.

A small flame of heat swept through his limbs after a few minutes, and the compound eventually dried and turned into clay that fell off his body. Karz nodded in satisfaction and put on his clothes again before resuming his search. He soon found another treasure whose energy was absorbed as well, and he kept going from mound to mound, using over a dozen methods to absorb all kinds of things, each method perfected after tens of painful experiments.

Karz didn't know if the garbage piles were getting better or if he was getting luckier, but he was finding more and more good things as of late. One day of scavenging almost provided as much loot as a whole week before. Part of it was definitely because his body was becoming stronger from the constant absorption, but strength was almost only useful in this place when used to fight off competitors.

And when running for one's life.

A fluctuation in the air told Karz it was time to go, and he sped back toward the edge of the garbage-filled platform as quickly as his feet could carry him. He spotted both treasures and critters on his way back, but he followed Old Vek's old scavenger rules and ignored them all.

He finally reached the edge of the platform and jumped off, his lungs working like bellows by this point. However, he didn't return to his burrow, but he rather stayed for a few minutes until the weird signs on the platform lit up, and the whole garbage heap turned into a sea of mesmerizing fire.

This was the power of the "cultivators." They were not only able to make the garbage appear out of nowhere, but they were also able to incinerate kilometers of it in an instant. In a few days, only be ash left behind, which would be collected by the stonemen and used where the cultivators grew their high-quality food.

Karz looked at the spectacle for a while longer before he started his trek back. The trip took an hour until he reached the inconspicuous stones in the middle of the forest, and he made three rounds to make sure no one had come close. Only then did he open the hidden hatch beneath one of the smaller stones and crawled inside.

The world turned pitch-black as Karz closed the entrance to his sanctuary. He grasped around in the darkness for a few seconds until he found what he was looking for, a small crystal ball with a small crack on its bottom. It was the greatest item that Old Vek had found over his long forty years of scavenging, and he had bequeathed it to Karz when he saw his potential.

Karz concentrated for a few seconds, and the ball suddenly lit up. It provided even more warmth and red light today, no doubt thanks to the cultivator stone he'd found before. Old Vek had said that only those who could make the ball light up had a chance to be accepted in the sect, but the more light it gave off, the better one's chances were.

The light right now was barely enough to illuminate the small shell, a far cry from the burning sun that Karz imagined himself releasing when he one day finally climbed up to that mountain. But it was also a lot better compared to just a few months ago.

The more he ate, the more perfect he would become.

FORCE OF THE VOID

Zac woke up with a start and was greeted by a throbbing pain all over his body. His skull had become two sizes too small, and it felt like his mouth was full of gravel. He coughed and got up on his feet, realizing he was not in the pod or even the lab any longer. He vaguely remembered the whole room exploding, but everything was still a hazy blur.

“Are you okay? How do you feel?” His sister’s voice reached him from some distance, and Zac turned his bleary eyes toward the source.

He saw almost fifty people standing on a cliff, peering down at him, with expressions varying from confusion to fear. Zac didn’t understand why they were over a hundred meters above him, so he looked around, only to realize he was standing in an enormous hole. He made a quick scan of his body, and nothing seemed to be wrong except for a sense of weakness.

“I’m fine. Just a bit hungry,” Zac shouted back up as he took out one of his spatial flasks. “And thirsty.”

“How the hell is that possible? Eating half the mountain wasn’t enough?” Ogras spat as he appeared next to him in a flash of shadows.

“Wh—” Zac said as he looked around again, and the memories suddenly came rushing back.

The feeling of a monstrous hunger, of how an enormous vortex had appeared behind his back. How the whole mountain was being absorbed until everything turned black.

“I’m sorry. I had a breakthrough,” Zac muttered. “Didn’t expect that to happen, though.”

“You need to get your mood swings under control,” Ogras snorted. “Murder, hungry... It all ends in a huge mess. I’d better pray you never get raunchy while I’m in the vicinity.”

Zac could only weakly smile in response. “I’ll try some meditation. Is anyone hurt?”

“Everyone is fine, and it doesn’t look like your antics attracted any of our enemies. Then again, who in their right mind would run toward a world-eating vortex?” Ogras said before he turned to Kenzie, who was floating down the cliffside along with some of the Valkyries.

“It’s good you’re fine.” Kenzie breathed in relief as she landed. “Can you move? The protective film was weakened over this side of the mountain. We probably want to get out of here before any Void Beasts realize it.”

“I can move just fine,” Zac said. “I will have to bother one of the Anointed to carry me while I consolidate my breakthrough, though. Shame I can’t keep looting the caves.”

“It’s not just you,” Joanna said with a wry smile. “That black hole of yours picked the whole mountain clean. The caves are drained all the way down to the first layer.”

“What?!” Zac exclaimed, his mind blank with incomprehension that turned to stupefaction as Joanna explained what had happened.

He had already swallowed a terrifying amount of treasures in his frenzied feast inside the pod, but it sounded like that was just the appetizer. The question was, where did all the energy go? He didn’t feel all that much stronger, and he almost felt drained of energy rather than overstuffed. Zac remembered his cells greedily swallowing everything they could get their hands on, but was his body really voracious to the point that he could swallow enough treasures to nurture a whole elite army without leaving any trace?

“Well, at least some good came of you hogging all the valuables.” Ogras shrugged, making Zac look over with

interest. “Whatever you did pulled a lot of Spatial Energy from the depths of the mountain. Our people gained over fifteen hundred seals in ten minutes.”

“What?” Zac exclaimed.

He quickly opened his quest screen, and it was just as Ogras had said. His quest had already disappeared, meaning he had completed it while being possessed. However, the quest didn't need him to provide everyone with a seal, so there were probably people still without.

“How many are still in need of seals?” Zac asked.

“Around a thousand,” Kenzie said. “Pretty much everyone should be able to get one before the time limit unless something unexpected happens.”

“Like someone draining the rest of the mountain like a netherblasted Devourer Rat King,” Ogras muttered, drawing an angry look from Kenzie and a couple of Valkyries.

“What do you want to do?” Kenzie asked as she turned back to Zac.

“Let's move,” Zac said, pushing away the exhaustion. “I'll go with you a while longer.”

He actually needed to rest, but he couldn't put everyone out like that if the protective film in this area had been weakened because of him. The group departed, and they kept an even greater speed than before. Part of it was because of the looming threat of a Void Beast invasion, and part of it was simply because all the caves in the area had apparently been sucked clean of both seals and treasures.

Zac himself borrowed the shoulder of an Anointed again, and one massive slab of meat after another went down his gullet as he started inspecting his situation while trying to make sense of what had just happened.

The situation was quite odd. He had been completely swept up by that limitless hunger, and his mind was spotty at best. He had never read that anything that weird would happen when unlocking one's bloodline. He had also been shown two separate visions, which was pretty odd as well. He had a

theory as to why, but his hopes were immediately dashed when he realized that the third Hidden Node in his spine wasn't actually opened.

He had figured that the first vision, the one with the ancestor on the meteor, was a vision of his node, while the second vision was one brought forward from his bloodline awakening. But that didn't seem to be the case, and Zac thoughtfully went over what he had witnessed.

When thinking of it, both the visions seemed to show the same thing, though the settings were vastly different. One was a great powerhouse, and one was a mortal who hadn't even embarked on the road of cultivation. But they were doing the same thing in the visions, and the implication made Zac's heart gallop from excitement.

They were absorbing energy to improve their affinities.

The mysterious predecessor had endured the bolts of lightning to slowly increase his control of the element. Meanwhile, the youth named Karz was doing everything from eating bugs to smearing his body in broken Nexus Crystals, slowly improving his affinity. At least that was Zac's takeaway of the vision, considering how similar the small crystal ball toward the end was to the item Alyn used to test the talent of students.

Something like continuously improving one's affinities was absolutely heaven-defying. Certainly, some rare treasures could help cultivators with things like that, and you would normally increase your affinities a bit when you evolved and leveled up. But to continuously improve one's Dao Affinities just by doing things like absorbing Attuned Crystals was unheard of.

It would also explain why he had such a shitty constitution. His body simply had no affinities, which should technically be impossible. Yet he could connect to the Dao. Perhaps it was because he hadn't awakened his bloodline yet. Now that he had, he might be able to turn himself from trash into a genius.

He might even be able to cultivate.

Zac looked inward and started to manipulate his Dao a bit as he circulated it through his body. He had swallowed a mountain of treasures, so his affinities should have improved quite a bit going by the situation of Karz. A single broken Nexus Crystal had a measurable effect that early in cultivation, so surely Zac should have made large strides.

But there was absolutely no effect. Nothing at all.

He was still just as clumsy as before, and his Dao Fragments resisted any attempt to create a Dao Braid. Zac frowned a second before he took out a Divine Crystal and started absorbing it, which only caused his frown to grow deeper.

The second vision, in particular, had been extremely vivid, and Zac had felt everything Karz did as the youth absorbed the scraps on the trash mountain. Zac could even remember the rotten taste of the weird bugs he forcibly ate. The energies of the Divine Crystal spread out through Zac's body and nourished it, but his cells definitely didn't swallow and fuse with the energy like Karz's body did with the remnant fire-attuned energies.

"What the hell," Zac muttered, causing the large Zhix to freeze and look over.

"Is everything alright, Warmaster?" the Anointed hesitantly asked.

"Oh, sorry, it's nothing," Zac said before he opened his status screen to see how things looked.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 88

Class: [E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

Race: [D] Human – Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord

Titles: [...] Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select, Frontrunner, Pathstrider

Limited Titles: Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star – 14th

Dao: Fragment of the Axe – High, Fragment of the Coffin – Middle, Fragment of the Bodhi – Middle

Core: [E] Duplicity

Strength: 2,957 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 228%]

Dexterity: 1,403 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance: 2,408 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 218%]

Vitality: 1,693 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 218%]

Intelligence: 642 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom: 1,131 [Increase: 70%. Efficiency: 187%]

Luck: 359 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points: 30

Nexus Coins: [F] 1,839,804,598

Zac blankly looked at the status screen for a few seconds, not sure what to think about the situation. There was both good news and bad news, from the looks of it. The good news was that not only had he gained three levels somehow, but he had also boosted his Race to D-grade while simultaneously awakening his bloodline.

It looked like swallowing half a mountain had some benefits after all.

A small point of regret was that he didn't get the title for awakening a bloodline. It had been mentioned in the missives, but he was too slow. You needed to awaken it before turning sixteen for the good title, and before evolving for the normal one. But more importantly, the ominous "Corrupted" designation remaining next to his bloodline. He had hoped that the corruption was something like the bloodline would be harder to awaken, but it looked like he wasn't so lucky.

Zac gave another mental command, and an entirely new screen popped up a moment later.

Bloodline: [F – Corrupted] Void Emperor

Talent: Force of the Void – 18%

Bloodline Nodes: [E] Void Heart, [E] Spiritual Void

It was the Bloodline Screen that became available upon activating his bloodline, just like the Dao Screen or Skill Screen. Zac hadn't read anything about the "Bloodline Nodes" being added to the screen, but he wasn't too surprised either. It was probably simply not something that the basic missives he'd bought covered. The fact that they were graded was a bit odd, but Zac had no way to get to the bottom of that either.

The line called "talent" in his case didn't necessarily explain all the benefits of a bloodline, but it showcased the main part. Common talents were things such as "Combat Boost – Fire" or "Increased Energy Absorption." One bloodline could have multiple talents, but that was a lot less common, from what Zac understood. It was more likely that new talents would awaken as one evolved the bloodline itself.

The number of talents wasn't really indicative of a bloodline's quality, though. There were no doubt supreme bloodlines that pushed a singular talent to the very limits, turning it disgustingly powerful.

In Zac's case, it said [**Force of the Void**], something that sounded like a combat-oriented talent to Zac. That really didn't seem to match with his visions at all. The Void Emperor Bloodline should clearly be an almost cheat-like cultivation-related bloodline, from what he had been shown. This, added with his inability to improve his affinity with the Divine Crystal, made Zac think of a troubling possibility.

Was this the effect of the corruption? Had he lost the ability to improve his affinities?

It was a shame that he didn't have the time to properly test things out right now, but he wasn't ready to give up just yet. Zac once more started looking inward, testing one thing after another to get a sense of what was going on. But nothing seemed to point toward increased talent in any of the Daos.

But he finally found something else. It somehow felt like the energy in his body was moving faster. Zac tried to figure

out if that was related to affinities, but he could quickly pinpoint that it was made possible by something else. His pathways had become thicker compared to before awakening his bloodline.

It was very minute, like a thin string having been swapped out by a slightly thicker string, but it was definitely there. His pathways, including his skill fractals, had been somewhat widened. But even such a minute increase had allowed Cosmic Energy to more freely flow through his body. The talent screen said eighteen percent, and that number seemed to somewhat match what he was experiencing right now.

Was this really it? Zac couldn't help but feel shortchanged and confused. It didn't make sense. This type of talent wasn't anything uncommon, and it presented itself as "Increased Energy Absorption" or "Increased Energy Circulation." Why was his talent named something completely different when it provided the same effect? But it was hard to focus on the issue at all when thinking of what he had lost.

He was supposed to have a bloodline where he could improve his affinities through absorption but instead was given something that improved his Cosmic Energy circulation. The latter was obviously better than nothing, but a far cry from the ability to become a cultivator. After all, the utility of such a talent felt a bit limited considering it was just one of the many natural advantages of cultivators.

Increased circulation didn't really mean increased combat power. After all, a fractal edge from [**Chop**] only took a fraction of his Cosmic Energy to activate, and the ability to push more energy into the skill fractal wouldn't do much.

The boost would help with some things. Higher-power skills took longer to activate, and being able to force Cosmic Energy into the fractals quicker would give him an edge in battle. It would also allow him to absorb energies faster, which might prove to have amazing synergy with his [**Void Heart**] down the road.

Of course, there was still the possibility that he had completely misunderstood the situation. Furthermore, it might

be possible to heal or fix his corrupted bloodline in the future, and the road to becoming a cultivator suddenly felt a lot more tangible compared to before. Zac wanted to go through what else he could do with his new pathways until that happened, but the Anointed suddenly stopped in their tracks, and Zac soon felt a pressure bearing down on him from above.

Something was trying to push through the spatial film.

FROM THE VOID

Zac still hadn't recovered to his perfect state, but there was no helping it. There was a sense of foreboding in his heart as he saw the thick film slowly bulge inward, and he quickly put his free points into Dexterity before he closed his Status Screen. Only then did he jump down from the Anointed's shoulder and run over to the leaders, who all stood gazing toward the sky.

His inadvertent actions before had weakened the spatial barriers in this area, but they were still quite thick compared to the ones on the islands. Any Void Beast that managed to force its way through a barrier this powerful was probably stronger than the two they had fought off until now, most likely even a proper D-grade being.

That wasn't something they could handle even if the beast was suppressed by space. His eyes quickly scanned his people, trying to figure out what they could do. Killing such a beast was impossible, but he might be able to lure it in the opposite direction long enough until it was finally killed off by the hostile environment.

"Have people rush toward the lowest layer, then move away from this place," Zac slowly said.

"Wait. Something is wrong," Kenzie said as she looked down at her terminal. "I'm picking up Technocrat signals."

"What?" Zac exclaimed. "Have the creators of this place returned?"

"Perhaps," Kenzie muttered, and Zac noticed a hint of excitement on her face.

Zac knew what his sister was thinking, but he didn't share the sentiment. Zac wasn't as thrilled at the prospect of meeting the family, especially not in a pressed situation like they found themselves in now. Their mother might solve the situation with a wave of her hands, but she might also just kill everyone before taking him and his sister away. Or it might be his mother's enemies.

However, both Zac and Kenzie soon realized that their guess was way off when the presumptive Technocrat vessels suddenly became visible as though they appeared out of thin air. There was no way that a peak Technocrat faction would be responsible for building the weird bulky ships that tried to push through the film in the sky.

There were three of them, and Zac and the others were actually able to see them even when they were still outside in the Void. All three of them looked different, like they had been soldered together by random components scavenged from the base. But the shields that surrounded the metal hulls looked extremely powerful, and even Zac wasn't confident in breaking through those layers. Then again, their main goal was no doubt to keep the Void at bay.

Unfortunately, it looked like one of the ships was at the end of its rope. Its shields were extremely weak, like they had turned down its energy consumption to the bare minimum. Zac guessed that the vessel was running out of fuel, and they chose to focus what they had left on breaking through the film.

"What should we do?" Joanna asked as the other elites turned to Zac for a decision.

"Let's wait a bit," Zac slowly said. "I think this should be the True Sky Faction."

Kenzie nodded in agreement. It was the only thing that made sense. It looked like the native faction with the most Datamancers had managed to build some sort of vessels that could traverse the Void by putting together different pieces of technology from the base. That was the only way he could explain why the vessels looked so different, and it also explained why they appeared here.

They were no doubt the first victims of the zealots' scheme, but they had managed to find one final path to survival through these ships. There only being three of them meant that the Church of Everlasting Dao probably managed to kill tens of thousands of people through their wanton destruction.

"They're sitting ducks right now. I bet they're screwed if we break the shields holding off the Void. If we want to strike, now's the best chance," Ogras said, and a few others nodded in agreement.

"The True Sky Faction is probably the faction that poses the least threat to us," Zac said with a shake of his head. "And those vessels shouldn't be able to hold more than sixty to eighty people each. Besides, they might even hold earthlings considering they had an alliance with the New World Government."

"All the more reason to blow them up," Ogras muttered, but he didn't press the issue further.

"Get ready for battle just in case," Zac said as he cracked his neck.

However, a sudden change made Zac's eyes widen in horror, and he quickly changed his orders as he roared at the top of his lungs, "EVERYONE BENEATH E-GRADE, RUN!"

What had changed his tune so quickly was the appearance of an all-too-familiar tentacle that quickly grabbed the vessel with the weakened shield just as it was about to break through the barrier to the Memorysteel mountain. The shields protecting the vessel started to flicker, and a moment of weakness was apparently all it took.

The second the barrier was down, the vessel simply disappeared, like it was swallowed by the Void.

"Aaah—" Billy exclaimed with wide eyes to the side, and Zac could only agree.

It was hard to say what looked more horrifying, the monstrous tentacle of the Collector or the fact that it somehow

made the whole vessel suddenly wink out of existence.

The other two ships didn't have any obvious response apart from releasing even more energy as they tried to force their way through the film that was now pushed tens of meters toward the mountain. But Zac honestly didn't hold out much hope for them. As expected, both of them were soon grabbed by a tentacle each.

"What should we do? What is that thing?!" Kenzie gasped with wide eyes from the side.

"It's the Collector." Zac sighed as he gazed at the situation above. "Get away from this place. I'll try to help them."

He didn't know whether the True Sky Faction were enemies or friends, but he knew that he couldn't leave them to the Collector with a clean conscience. The scene of the torsos stuck to its main body still haunted Zac's dreams, and he wouldn't wish a fate like that even upon his worst enemies.

Kenzie nodded and flickered away, following the stream of soldiers who were desperately running away from this area. Zac looked around and saw Thea in the distance, and he nodded at her before she set off as well. The pressure even in the middle layers had caused her wounds to reopen, and rather than forcing it, she had decided to stay in the lower layers to keep things organized.

That was a lucky break that put her out of harm's way. The protective film was the weakest close to the area where Zac had rampaged, and the True Sky Faction had chosen to break through right in front of them. Perhaps it was even premeditated, in hopes of eliciting help from Zac and his army.

The tentacles emitted a shocking pressure, and hundreds of people had blood running from their noses just from being in their presence. The shields on the two vessels were luckily a lot stronger compared to the first one, and they held even though the eerie hands sewn onto the tentacles tried to claw their way through.

The ships eventually managed to push their noses through the defensive film, and Zac was surprised to see that the thick

shields only appeared in the void. He realized that this was the opportunity they needed, and his response was immediate. Two black chains shot upward with extreme force, while another two dug into the hard Memorysteel beneath.

The durable fetters of [**Love's Bond**] dug themselves into the hull, and Zac started to pull.

"Help me out," Zac grunted when he saw he wasn't gaining much headway on his own, and Billy and the Zhix started pulling on the ships.

It was a tough struggle even with all their combined power, but the ships slowly started to enter the atmosphere. The question was whether they would be fast enough, as the shields on the two remaining vessels were rapidly depleting because of the Collector's constant attacks. Even worse, a third tentacle suddenly appeared, punching straight through the barrier as it aimed for Zac.

Had it recognized him?

Zac was unable to flee because he was connected to the chains, but he wasn't alone in facing the Collector this time. There were still a few hundred elites staying behind, and they together should be able to keep the arm busy. Zac knew he wouldn't be able to cut the tentacle with [**Chop**], but perhaps he could push it back a bit with the force of a barrage.

But he barely had time to activate the skill before five thick murderous fractal edges appeared in front of [**Verun's Bite**].

What the hell just happened? It was almost like the fractal edges had exploded into being rather than him conjuring them by pushing Cosmic Energy into the skill fractal. This wasn't a matter of being 18% faster; this was a whole new tier of speed. It wouldn't even take a second to conjure a full set of fractal edges before, but now it was essentially instantaneous. And without him moving any Cosmic Energy at all, they had simply appeared.

Not only that, but the edges even emitted a mysterious ancient aura, though Zac could confirm they didn't seem to

contain any more power compared to before. Now was not the time to ponder about this weird change, and he launched the set of fractal edges at the Collector.

His arm was a blur thanks to his ungodly pool of Dexterity, and it looked like the weird situation with his skill wasn't a onetime thing. The moment he finished the fifth swing, another set of fractal edges simply appeared with a shudder, and Zac didn't even need to pause as he kept launching blade after blade.

It almost looked like a mental illusion as an endless series of blades caused a band in the sky until they slammed into the tentacle with tremendous force. Of course, the Collector's tentacle wasn't even wounded after Zac imbued the fractal edges with the Fragment of the Axe.

"It's indestructible; just keep it away!" Zac shouted as he kept attacking, and the air was lit up with an endless number of attacks.

Some launched concussive attacks like Zac while others formed shields. Those who could do neither threw powerful talismans at the tentacle, and together it turned the whole area chaotic. But the Collector was simply too powerful. It endured the endless series of attacks as it gradually made its way forward, only losing some of its attached hands during its advance.

They thankfully managed to slow it down at least, and the ships were soon enough a few meters inside the protective hull, exposing thick doors to the inner space. Both the doors opened the moment they were inside the barrier, and a flood of refugees came tumbling down.

The tentacles trying to drag the vessels back into the Void reacted instantaneously, and one person after another was snatched up and dragged away. But over a hundred people of over ten different races managed to survive, and they urgently created some distance while attacking the tentacles that tried to snatch them up.

Seeing that they had accomplished their goal, there was no point in staying behind, and Zac dislodged his chains from the

vessels the moment people stopped falling out of them. The ships were quickly pushed out by the spatial film, and they disappeared one by one.

“Retreat!” Zac shouted, and the army quickly started running north while pushing down toward the lower layers to increase their speed.

Zac himself shored up the rear, and he had essentially turned into a turret thanks to his newfound ability to conjure fractal blades instantaneously. **[Chop]** alone wasn’t enough, and he had to flash forward to physically slam the tentacles away just as they were about to snatch up one of his people.

The Collector was smart, though, and it realized that Zac was the biggest hindrance to increasing its collection. All three tentacles suddenly gained a significant boost in speed as they shot forward, turning into three eldritch spears aimed straight at him.

Zac had expected something like this to happen, and he had an idea.

The tentacles had enough speed to break through the sound barrier, but a wooden fist appeared out of nowhere, snatching all three tentacles up in its grip. It was **[Nature’s Punishment]**, but the hand was a bit larger and darker than before. Just like his fractal blades, it had been somehow changed, and it now carried a hint of antiquity to it.

More importantly, summoning the hand had been instantaneous and without any Cosmic Energy infusion into the skill fractal, which was almost absurd for such a powerful skill. However, he felt a sense of hollowness the moment he activated the skill, and he thoughtfully looked down at the fractal as he ran away while the wooden hand kept the tentacles locked in a vise.

The wooden fist only managed to delay the tentacles two seconds before it was crushed, but that was enough to create a comforting gap between himself and the breach. It looked like the Collector still wasn’t willing to go all out, but it was clear that the beast was annoyed. The three tentacles slammed into

the mountain a few times before they slithered back toward the void, causing huge chunks of Memorysteel to fly all over.

Zac breathed out in relief when he saw that they were safe, and he instead turned his gaze inward.

The short battle had allowed him to realize that he had severely underestimated his bloodline, and one piece of the puzzle after another came together in his mind. He had been too preoccupied with what he had lost, to the point that he hadn't properly bothered to understand what he had gained. In fact, now that the haze in his mind had lifted, he wasn't even sure that the increased thickness of his pathways was due to his bloodline.

It might rather simply be a natural result of pushing his Race to D-grade. After all, the D-grade was where you gained a massive pool of Cosmic Energy from your Cultivator's Core, and one's pathways needed to be able to endure those volumes. Or it might just be a secondary boost from awakening his bloodline.

But the real prize was clearly something else, something much greater hidden in the depths of his body.

INFIGHTING AND FINISHERS

Zac pieced together the puzzle of his Bloodline Talent as he ran behind the Anointed and the demons in their mad dash away from the section with a weakened spatial barrier. The battle just now had given him a crash course on the effect of **[Force of the Void]**; it appeared to be some sort of energy reserve hidden in the Void, one that allowed for instantaneous attacks.

It somewhat answered one of the big question marks in his mind. He had absorbed thousands of tons of Memorysteel along with the energy from a huge number of treasure caves, yet there was relatively little to show for it. Now Zac was rather suspecting that all that energy went into setting up this hidden pocket in his body.

At least he suspected that it was a hidden pocket. He still didn't have any control over his new bloodline, but it didn't feel like the energy was inside his body. He should have sensed it if that was the case, more than just the slight sense of hollowness after activating **[Nature's Punishment]**.

That feeling was also a clear indication that this effect was limited. Zac guessed that this hidden energy source had a certain amount of energy reserves, and he would go back to normal Cosmic Energy consumption after that reserve was exhausted. He wasn't exactly sure how to refill that source, though. His body was still full of energy since he hadn't wasted any of his own during the battle, but he didn't feel any drain or absorption where the **[Force of the Void]** was restocked.

Did it perhaps need some specific energy source to be refilled? It shouldn't, since the skills he'd activated felt pretty much the same as before except for the ancient aura that his skills emitted.

Another possibility was that it wasn't an actual energy pocket, but rather him connecting to the energy of the Void. The sense of hollowness would then be exhaustion from forming the bridge to the other realm. He was still fuzzy about how it actually worked, but what was more important right now was what kind of benefits it could provide.

And it was huge.

The more he thought about it, the more excited Zac became. Instantaneous skill activation was massive, especially at higher grades. He had tried to improve his battle techniques lately after his disappointing battle with Void's Disciple, though the events in the Mystic Realm had generally taken precedence.

However, he remembered one short exposition on battle theory he had bought through Calrin. It was written by a D-grade pugilist, and Zac had hoped it would give him insights into dealing with Void's Disciple. The D-grade Hegemon hadn't covered how to deal with pugilists, but he had still provided a lot of insight. The master essentially divided his fighting style into two types of actions: infighting and finishers.

He argued that F-grade battles were just children launching finishers at each other, with no skill or technique. But such a battle style wouldn't work as people rose through the ranks. People at D-grade would be able to move miles in an instant and launch a dozen attacks in the blink of an eye. They were also a lot more sensitive to Cosmic Energy, and would usually be able to sense skill activations and instantaneously react. Ultimate skills that required preparation and charging would create lethal openings if you activated them without thought.

Infighting and cheap skills weren't meant to break through the defenses and kill your enemies, but rather to whittle them down and tire them out so that you could create an opening.

Only then would you unleash your ultimate skills. Overwhelm the opposition, seize the rhythm, finish them in one move. That was the optimal combat tactic, according to the pugilist.

Zac could easily understand the theory. For example, at lower levels, his skill **[Deforestation]** was pretty overpowering, causing wide swathes of destruction. However, a skill like that would quickly lose its efficacy at higher levels, and not only because of limited energy.

Someone at late or Peak E-grade wouldn't just stand around and watch that wave of destruction come washing over them. Someone that powerful would be able to move hundreds of meters in a second even without a movement skill, and they would simply move out of the way. Or rather, they might launch a counterstrike during the short instant when Zac gathered the energy to summon the enormous axes.

Doing something like that at F-grade was nigh impossible, but a Peak E-grade warrior definitely had the skill and insight to launch a quick precision strike that could disrupt the skill activation.

This theory of infighting and finishers pretty much held true for most combat classes, not just melee fighters such as himself. First, get the upper hand one way or another, force the opponent into a passive state, and then finish them off. There were of course a million ways to create an opening. Take the second elder of the Cartava Clan, for example.

He had first restrained Zac with an array, then hid his true move by conjuring ten clones. He had seized the rhythm and made it impossible for Zac to counter while he prepared his finisher while hidden underground. Zac had thankfully been able to ruin the schemes with sheer force and some shamelessness, but he wouldn't always be so lucky in the future.

But his bloodline seemed to turn the fundamental idea of infighting and finishers on its head.

Even an energy-hungry skill like **[Nature's Punishment]** had been activated without warning in an instant. There were not even any energy traces in his body from the activation; the

hand had just suddenly appeared out of the crack in space. It had grabbed the three tentacles almost before Zac had finished his mental command.

What if that had been a pitched melee battle? Zac and his enemy could be standing in a lock with their weapons, only for the poor bastard to be smashed by a five-meter fist out of nowhere. A Bloodline Talent like this opened a whole new world of possibilities for him. It might even be more valuable than becoming a cultivator provided he learned to make the most of this ability.

Certainly, there were some limitations to the talent. Zac guessed that he could draw an amount equivalent to 18% of his normal Cosmic Energy stores, based on the number in the bloodline panel. That would track with his experiences as well. **[Chop]** barely cost any Cosmic Energy at all, but **[Nature's Punishment]** cost him around 8 to 9% of his Cosmic Energy by this point.

Another fractal blade appeared out of nowhere, confirming that the ability remained even with the sense of hollowness. He conjured and discarded a dozen edges in rapid succession, at which point he could confirm that the sense of emptiness got a bit stronger. Figuring out how to remove that feeling would require some time and experimentation though.

There were a lot of other questions that needed to be solved as well, but Zac sighed when he saw that reality was quickly catching up to him. He had been running for over ten minutes by now, and it was clear that the Collector had given up by this point. The others had realized the same thing, but that didn't mean the situation was resolved.

There was still the issue of the strangers who had escaped from the two vessels. They had all rushed in the same direction as the people of Port Atwood, and they currently found themselves surrounded by his army. They didn't try to break out though, but rather just stood their ground in somber silence.

Zac wasn't too surprised the natives seemed fine with being surrounded considering that they had actively chosen to

run together with his people. Perhaps it was because he saved them, or perhaps because they wanted to look for sanctuary. After all, there were just over one hundred left of them, and they probably had no idea about the situation on the mountain.

A furry beastkin turned toward Zac as he approached, and Zac realized that he was actually a monkeyman with silver fur. He reminded Zac of the almost humanlike Stone Monkey Ogras had thrown through the incursion, but the cultivator in front of him was obviously a lot stronger. However, his Late E-grade aura was quite weak and unstable, and he was missing large spots of fur where nasty burns could be seen.

He wasn't the only one; most of the more powerful warriors seemed to sport these kinds of wounds. The injuries were at least a day old, so it looked like these people had been in pitched battle even before reaching the Memorysteel mountain. Zac couldn't sense any Dao from the wounds, though, no matter if he used **[Cosmic Gaze]** or **[Primal Polyglot]** for clues.

“The True Sky Faction is extremely grateful for your saving grace, Lord Atwood. Without your aid, we wouldn't be standing here right now,” the monkeyman said with a bow, his voice deep and gravelly. “I am Hekruv Vira of the True Sky Council.”

“You know me?” Zac asked with some surprise.

“We have seen reports on you provided by the New World Government of your planet.” The monkeyman nodded.

“Speaking of, where are they? The officials of the New World Government,” Zac said as he looked across the group.

Almost a third of the group were humans, but Zac didn't recognize a single one of them. More importantly, almost all of them were at the E-grade, confirming that they weren't part of Earth.

“Many of them are back on Earth. Some were killed when the islands collapsed. Some... were killed by us,” the monkeyman said, causing a few of the refugees to look over at the speaker with some shock.

However, the monkeyman along with the dozen emitting the strongest auras were unfazed, proving they had already decided to divulge that information. Seeing that Zac didn't interrupt, Hekruv Vira kept talking.

"We told them that the world was ending, and they entered an agreement with us. We would help them battle their enemies in this realm and assist them in scouting for the Spatial Treasure. They would in return allow our people to leave before the realm collapsed. We upheld our part of the bargain; they did not," Hekruv Vira said. "We tried to force our way out, but it failed. They closed the tunnel and unleashed a taboo weapon. That might even be what drew the attention of the System to this place."

Zac was surprised about how candid the monkeyman was, though there was no way to confirm the truth until they left this place. But Zac leaned toward his explanation being mostly true, since it matched pretty well with what he had heard and how the Cartava Clan had acted.

He guessed that the few survivors of the True Sky Faction felt the need to take a chance, not only for their immediate survival but also for the future beyond the Mystic Realm. There were only a hundred twenty or so of them left, and they would be stuck with Zac for a century on the outside even if they survived this place. Lying right now would just put them in a dangerous situation as soon as they got out.

"I'm not an enemy of the New World Government... But I am not an ally either. I won't involve myself in your dealings with them," Zac slowly said, making the survivors relax somewhat. "However, that only goes for this place. I will incorporate the New World Government after leaving this place if there's anything left to incorporate. More importantly, why did you follow my people after escaping the Collector?"

That was the most pressing matter. These people were exhausted and wounded, but they were elites every one of them. There were a few who had weak auras, but Zac guessed they were expert Datamancers based on their attire. Leaving them to their own devices might come back to bite him in his

ass, like if they decided to attack his people after he had left for the sphere in the sky.

“We wish to follow you,” Hekruv Vira said without hesitation.

“Having a bunch of powerful strangers in one’s midst is a good way to get a dagger in one’s back,” Ogras said as he walked over to Zac. “Sometimes it’s easier to nip a problem in the bud.”

“We simply wish to follow behind your faction for protection, and we will not fight you for seals. We are too exhausted and wounded to deal with the threats of the rival factions, let alone yours. Besides, we can pay for ourselves. Ten million Nexus Coins per person,” Hekruv Vira said. “But what I really meant was that we wish to join your force upon leaving this place.”

“Join Port Atwood,” Zac slowly said. “Why?”

“The True Sky Faction is gone, and only a few of us remain. Even if we settled and started a new faction, we would just be a small group of foreigners in a world under your control. We have already deduced that you are a supreme Progenitor, and we understand what that means all too well, far better than the officials of the New World Government,” Hekruv Vira said. “The Boundless Heavens follow the law of the strongest. I don’t wish for us to become fertilizer for your cultivation path.”

“We can also see that your force has already taken in all kinds of races, just like we of the True Sky Faction did inside this prison. We also believe that we can get stronger by banding together and sharing insights and experiences,” a large-headed humanoid added.

Zac looked at the group, deep in thought. Having these people around would definitely help since they would add over a dozen peak warriors to Port Atwood’s roster, which was something he desperately needed. However, these warriors were all much higher levels than himself, making it impossible to sign the kind of contracts that external elders sometimes did in the Multiverse.

He would have to solely rely on trust or suppression. It worked out fine with Ogras in the end, but these people were all old schemers who had lived for centuries. Would he be able to leave Earth without worries in the future with these people staying behind?

“We also have this and are ready to hand it over upon joining your faction,” Hekruv Vira said. “After all, it would be in our best interest to strengthen our allies as much as possible.”

People tensed up as the monkeyman reached for a worn-out Cosmos Sack, but they visibly relaxed when they realized he just took out a tablet.

“What’s that?” Zac asked curiously, and Kenzie looked over with interest as well.

“It is the database on all the bloodline research we have collected over the past millennia. Our own experiences during cultivation, the experimental data of the Tsarun Clan who captured us and brought us here. Even some notes and insights from the ancient and powerful creators of this place. A lot of warriors on your world seem to carry our bloodlines for some reason. With this database, you will be able to unlock their potential. Perhaps even your own.”

Zac looked at the tablet for roughly half a second before he turned toward the monkeyman with a smile.

“Welcome aboard.”

WRESTING CONTROL

Zac perused the contents of the tablet he'd gained from Hekruv Vira while walking north with the army, and he gained far more in an hour than he had from all the missives he'd bought until now. And that was even when just scratching the surface. The Bloodline Codex, as they called the database, was essentially True Sky Faction's holy scripture, the accumulation of millennia of effort.

Being stuck in a Technocrat prison took its toll, and many in the True Sky Faction had turned to academia to not go insane from the passage of time. The burly monkeyman was one of these people, and Zac had found over thirty theses on cultivation and bloodlines in the database penned by him, totaling over forty thousand pages altogether. And Hekruv Vira was far from the most verbose author.

It looked like the Atwood Academy would gain a few new professors soon enough.

A lot of the content was completely theoretical in nature and often untested, but there was also all kinds of in-depth and practical information. For example, there was information on dozens of different bloodlines, including those of the natives.

It turned out that the bloodline of the Cartava Clan was actually just called "Gaze of Cartava." There were some differences between members, with them awakening different talents, likely depending on the purity of the bloodline. The most common talent was called **[Lord's Eyes]**, but a few talented individuals instead gained **[King's Eyes]**, both of which empowered ocular skills and classes.

Even Leviala's unique eyes were listed, and the tablet called them [**Heaven's Eyes**]. There were no details on this talent, but it did list a suspicion that it allowed the cultivator to harness the power of time. It even mentioned that they suspected Leviala to be in possession of it, though it wasn't confirmed.

The Lunar Tribe was also a subject of intense study. Their bloodline was called "Lunar Light," and it was indeed based on a common ancestor to the Lunar Wolves. The Tsarun Clan had tried purifying their bloodlines with the help of the normal wolves, making it regain the power of some wolf ancestor, which apparently was insanely powerful and nigh unkillable.

Apart from that, there were dozens of other bloodlines Zac had never heard of, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. There was actually a whopping thirty Body Tempering Manuals as well, though all of them had various requirements for the user. Furthermore, only eight of them were complete, with the others missing one or multiple sections. Some of the elders had tried fixing them, but it was clear that the effect wasn't quite at a satisfactory level even after centuries of experiments.

There was also all kinds of general information along with tips and insights into refining and awakening bloodlines and constitutions.

Unfortunately, there was no information on corrupted bloodlines, but Zac honestly wasn't too surprised. Zac had a feeling his situation was the result of something extreme his mother and her clan had done. They perhaps had tried to fuse that affinity-boosting bloodline with the Void Energy talent he had, getting the best of both worlds. But they might have gotten too greedy and reached beyond their abilities.

Perhaps he was a failed experiment.

The thought was pretty depressing, but Zac knew he couldn't complain. After all, his situation was pretty good, and his newfound ability might even be more useful than being a cultivator in some scenarios. And he could confirm that his bloodline was definitely something extremely high grade, at

least when comparing it to the bloodlines listed in the Bloodline Codex.

First of all, it didn't seem to pigeonhole Zac in a certain direction. It simply gave him a hidden energy boost and possibly slightly thicker energy pathways. It didn't negatively affect his classes at all, and it didn't require him to retrain or change his path. You could say that his bloodline was lacking any attunement, something that appeared to be extremely rare.

All of the bloodlines listed in the compendium restricted the cultivator in return for a specific type of power. They required certain types of classes to provide any benefits, and they even worsened one's progress and affinities in unrelated Daos.

Secondly, only three of the listed bloodlines had Bloodline Nodes. Furthermore, these bloodlines had only swapped a single Hidden Node while the others were still the normal racial nodes. Not one of the three "top-tier" bloodlines had graded nodes either, but their existence was mentioned in the database. That meant it wasn't something unique to Zac, but rather something that normally might not appear in a frontier sector like Zecia.

The codex didn't explain any more than that, but after reading the information on the Bloodline Nodes, Zac started to form a hypothesis of his own. There wasn't necessarily a big difference at the beginning between normal and graded nodes, but the difference lay in potential. Apparently, the benefits Hidden Nodes provided gradually tapered off on the road of cultivation, a bit like low-tiered titles.

They would often be extremely useful during the E-grade and no doubt help when preparing to break through to D-grade. But by the point one reached C-grade, most Hidden Nodes would provide limited help. Graded Hidden Nodes shouldn't have that limitation, and they could continue to provide benefits even if you reached extremely high cultivation levels, just like high-tiered titles did.

The vast compendium of information was extremely useful, but it would take months, perhaps years, to digest

everything. But there was one final part that was even more valuable to Zac right now, the six general Bloodline Methods.

Bloodline Methods were similar to cultivation manuals in the sense that they helped a warrior use their bloodline as efficiently as possible. For example, having his bloodline constantly run would be both wasteful and stupid, almost like when Zac had simply pushed Cosmic Energy around in his body during the early days of the integration.

Besides, the biggest value of his Bloodline Talent was the element of surprise, the ability to suddenly launch a deadly strike out of nowhere.

If his normal attacks all appeared without any energy fluctuations or buildup, even the dumbest enemy would quickly realize something was up. So Zac wanted to turn off his bloodline until he went in for the kill. That was exactly what Bloodline Methods were made for. They had the ability to control, and to a certain degree, empower bloodlines.

In an optimal world, Zac would have a method tailored for his bloodline, one that would make the most of his Hidden Nodes and his talent. But Zac's instincts told him that such a thing didn't even exist considering his bloodline was corrupted. He would have to create one by himself, but he had no idea how to go about doing something like that.

A lot of people were in the same situation, though, in the sense that they somehow had managed to awaken a bloodline but didn't have a Heritage to go with it. That was where general Bloodline Methods came into the picture. They were pretty average, but they worked with a large number of bloodlines.

As long as Zac found one that somewhat worked, it would be fine. Bloodline Methods were just ways to rouse one's hidden talents, and they didn't alter one's pathways like a cultivation manual did. He could simply swap the method out if he found a better one, or he could start to modify the one he used to better suit his particular bloodline.

Zac didn't want to waste even a second since it would be a huge boon if he learned how to turn his Bloodline Talent on

and off before he set out for the sphere at the top. He still hadn't gotten the eighth part of the quest in any case, so he went with his gut. He needed some time to get things in order, and they were closing in on their destination.

A few hours and they would reach the northern side of the mountain, and there would hopefully be enough seals both for his own people and the True Sky refugees. They had tentatively joined his faction, but Zac wouldn't take their word for it. The odds of them trying to pull something at the last minute would decrease by a fair bit if they had seals by the time Zac left.

He had talked with Hekruv Vira for a bit after setting out, and Zac was shocked to learn that the taboo weapon the monkey-man had mentioned was a freaking nuclear warhead. Anyone who could take a blast like that and walk around with some minor burns the next day wasn't someone to scoff at. Of course, atomic bombs completely lacked any Dao empowerment, and the Technocrat shields were apparently extremely good at dispersing normal kinetic force. They had only taken a few percent of the blast head-on.

It would take around eight hours for his army to reach the northern side, giving Zac ample time to experiment with the Bloodline Methods. There were six of them to test, and Zac started with the one called **[Wargod Tactics]**. Its name was a huge exaggeration, but it did have good compatibility with many combat-oriented bloodlines. Zac opened the file containing the method, and he was shocked to see how much information it held.

Zac was about to borrow the shoulder of one of the Anointed again, but he changed his mind, realizing that most of the content was just personal insights and anecdotes from practitioners. The actual method was just a few pages.

The first and most important step of getting control of your bloodline was to form a mental connection to it, but that was easier said than done. It was like taking charge of your organs. They were there and part of your body, but they were doing their thing without any active input.

The method that the **[Wargod Tactics]** provided was to activate one's body with a series of stances while rousing one's body by releasing killing intent.

Zac tsked in annoyance as he memorized the eighteen stances. Where were the Skill Crystals when you needed them? One burst of information and you were done. It was a reminder of how extensive the changes the System brought to cultivation were.

These Bloodline Methods felt a lot like something the ancient cultivators would practice and seemed only partly integrated with the System's "software." This wasn't something unique to bloodline cultivation. The same thing held true when it came to Soul Cultivation and refining a constitution with Body Tempering Manuals. Then there were the beast-rearing methods, and god knows what else.

All were valid paths to power, but not something that the System directly got involved with.

Perhaps the future generations would have it better. The last Apostate had added the whole Mercantile System, so perhaps another Apostate would add some sort of side-cultivation functionality that encompassed all these different methods. For now, Zac had to rely on himself, and he needed to try the yoga poses that the **[Wargod Tactics]** provided.

"I need to try something out," Zac said to the others, who glanced at him curiously. "Keep going. I'll catch up in half an hour or something."

Zac flashed away and found a hidden crevasse where he could practice undisturbed. He started to perform the stances in order, making sure to rouse his killing intent as instructed by the manual. The whole area was awash with his murderous force as Zac completed the stances over and over.

However, absolutely nothing happened even after spending half an hour. Zac sighed in annoyance as he rushed forward to keep up with his army. The guide said it might take a few minutes, but if you didn't even sense anything after half an hour, the method wasn't compatible. He tried another ten

minutes just to be safe, but he eventually had to turn to the next method.

Reality was cruel. The hours passed as one method after another proved unable to rouse his bloodline. Zac even started to suspect that the True Sky Faction had fed him false methods, but that suspicion was quickly dispelled when four different people in the refugee party showed Zac that [**Wargod Tactics**] worked just fine.

Zac sighed as he looked at the last method. It was called [**Bloodline Resonance**], and Zac's face scrunched up when he read the description. The strong point of [**Bloodline Resonance**] was its shocking compatibility, making it work with pretty much every single bloodline out there.

The weak point was everything else. It was essentially the equivalent of a cultivation manual called [**Cultivation Manual**]. It was as basic as they came, and it didn't provide an iota of enhancement. Even [**Wargod Tactics**] improved the effect of a Bloodline Talent by between 5 to 10%.

The method required one to form mental ripples with one's soul that spread through his body like some sort of sonar. Zac pushed away his anxiety as he sat down, and he quickly grasped the method. It was thankfully pretty straightforward and didn't require any adroit control or even usage of Dao. It just needed him to push out a little bit of his Mental Energy in specific intervals.

The minutes passed as one ripple after another spread out through his body, and Zac stopped them from leaving his body, just like the method told him to. They kept increasing in number until his body was almost like a raging sea of Mental Energy. The anxiety from before started to creep back as Zac realized something wasn't right. Just fifteen minutes was supposed to be enough to complete the first step, but he had already doubled that without any response.

But Zac refused to give up on this one. It was his last chance to control his bloodline until he found a proper method, and who knew how long that would take? He could only

persevere, adhering to the method that usually solved his issues.

If things didn't go your way, apply more force.

BLOODLINE RESONANCE

Zac refused to believe that even the universal Bloodline Method wouldn't work on his body, so he kept squeezing out more and more Mental Energy. The churning ripples of **[Bloodline Resonance]** were quickly descending into a chaotic storm. His whole body felt like it was under assault, and blood started leaking from his nose.

The Bloodline Method should normally not be dangerous, but Zac had long exceeded the recommended usage. Following the manual, one would create a new ripple every second, which meant that after fifteen minutes, there would be 900 ripples bouncing back and forth. These ripples in turn tried to create a resonance with the bloodline hidden deep in his cells through weak collisions.

Most bloodlines would respond after just a minute or two, but the more stubborn or impure bloodlines could take a bit longer. However, Zac was already approaching forty-five minutes by this point, and the number of ripples was over 2,500. And not only that, but Zac had also started cranking up the force in each ripple.

If a normal ripple used one unit of Mental Energy, the ones in his body had been amplified to five units each by this point. The normal ripple collisions were like gentle nudges at his body aimed to elicit a response, but Zac's method was essentially akin to slapping his organs to shake his bloodline awake.

He understood why the manual had said to stop after fifteen minutes. The danger started to increase exponentially

as the number of ripples increased. The increased density of ripples created a far higher number of collisions, and each collision impacted his body. Each collision by itself could barely be felt, but when there were thousands every second? It quickly started to stack up, especially with him also increasing the power.

Zac knew he was being foolhardy, but his eyes were already bloodshot as he kept going, increasing the intensity every second. His whole body screamed for mercy, but there was none to be had. It was lucky that his soul had undergone so much tempering up to this point, as he would already have passed out from soul exhaustion otherwise.

Finally, after a full hour, the raging storm had turned into a world-ending cataclysm in his body, and even Zac couldn't withstand it any longer. Even his pathways and skill fractals were starting to get damaged. If he didn't dispel the ripples now, he would get some serious internal wounds, the kind that you simply couldn't fix with **[Surging Vitality]**.

There was too much at stake over the following days, and he couldn't take that risk.

But just as Zac was about to give up, he felt an extremely weak response from the depths of his body. Zac almost lost control over the chaotic storm of ripples in his body from his extreme relief, but he quickly refocused since he knew his job wasn't over. The pain was intense, but he kept the ripples going as he focused his attention on the resonance of his bloodline.

It gave off the same sensation of antiquity as the skills he'd unleashed with the Void Energy, like there was something billions of years old hidden in the depths of his cells. It felt like he was rousing something ancient and reluctant from its slumber, but Zac refused to let the resonance recede into his cells.

Rousing that response was the first step of **[Bloodline Resonance]**, and the second was quite straightforward as well. He was supposed to take charge of the Mental Energy that coursed through the body and merge it with that resonance to

form a lasting bond. The problem was that Zac had gone overboard with his energy expenditure, and there was no way that he could control that much Mental Energy in one go.

Zac figured that he could only do it piecemeal, and he took roughly five percent of the rampant energies and crammed it into the resonance. His energy disappeared like Cosmic Energy entering a node, and Zac quickly fed it another chunk. More and more energy entered the resonance over the next minutes without any change, but Zac didn't worry.

As expected, he felt a new sensation in his mind the moment all the accumulated Mental Energy was exhausted. There was a direct correlation between the number of ripples you needed to form and the amount of Mental Energy needed to form the spiritual connection. It looked like that balance still held even after Zac had started painting outside the lines.

He had succeeded, and Zac marveled at the unique feeling in his body. It was extremely odd, like he had grown a new limb that he could instinctively control just like his arms and legs. But it was actually his bloodline that he had connected with, allowing him to rouse and suppress it at will. There was no circulation or enhancement provided by **[Bloodline Resonance]**, but just some rudimentary control was a huge step forward.

Zac was about to start experimenting with his skills, but a wave of exhaustion hit him the moment he relaxed. He had forgotten the state of his soul from the excitement. Over eighty percent of his Mental Energy was exhausted from forming the ripples, though he hadn't been completely full when he began.

Running around on Memorysteel Mountain with his soul exhausted was extremely foolhardy, so he took out two Soul Crystals as he ate a top-quality healing pill. There were some minor wounds all over his body from the ripples, but he had thankfully completed his goal before getting completely in over his head.

Of course, if he didn't have his Remnant-refined soul and unnaturally durable body, he would have died long before

[Bloodline Resonance] had managed to find a connection to his Void Emperor Bloodline.

Thick streams of pure Mental Energy poured into his mind from the Soul Crystals, and the exhaustion was quickly washed away along with his splitting headache. However, he only had time to fill the tank up to half before his communication crystal vibrated. Zac sighed and reluctantly stopped, knowing that his people wouldn't contact him unless it was urgent.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to disturb you, but I think you need to come here," his sister's voice echoed out through the communication crystal.

Zac grunted in affirmation before he got back to his feet. People talked about spending centuries in secluded cultivation, but he somehow couldn't even find a few hours. He thought he would have another hour or two, considering the army's speed had slowed down the moment treasures started appearing in caves again a few hours ago.

At least he had managed to make the connection, which was the most important part. From now on, he would just need to get used to it.

It took a few tries, but he eventually managed to disable the Bloodline Talent so that he could use **[Loamwalker]** without burning his remaining Void Energy. It was still half-empty, though Zac had already found at least one way to refill it already: Attuned Crystals. He had been looking for the wrong thing back when he'd absorbed the Divine Crystal, and had missed that a part of the energy disappeared and never entered his normal reserves.

Zac also suspected he would be able to find some way to use **[Void Heart]** to fill up on Void Energy, either from eating random things or from draining the Beast Cores of the Void Beast. Zac really hoped the former would work since those kinds of Beast Cores were no doubt hard to get a hold of outside of this place.

The world turned into a blur around him as he pushed his movement skill to the limit, and it actually felt a bit

cumbersome to suddenly have to move his Cosmic Energy into the fractals on his feet. But **[Force of the Void]** didn't actually provide many benefits to that particular skill in either case, since its usage was still restricted by him taking an actual step forward.

He knew that there would be some cases where the talent worked better than others, but getting a better grasp would require some hands-on experimentation. And it seemed like he would get that opportunity sooner rather than later. Because the reason his sister was calling him was simple: the advance scouts had spotted activity, and it was a full-blown war.

It was like the restrictions of the sixth layer didn't exist as Zac flashed forward, each step with **[Loamwalker]** taking him over a hundred meters forward. It took him just over ten minutes to reach the rear of his army, and he signaled Hekruv Vira to join him before he made his way past the vanguard.

He had already confirmed the situation with his sister while catching up, and he made his way toward a large cliff in the seventh layer. It provided a good vantage of the battle without exposing their location, and Zac nodded at the gathered group before he made his way to the edge to peer out across the northern slopes.

Huge swathes of the mountain were ablaze as a chaotic war raged. At first appearance, it looked to be a battle between cultists and a joint army of Zhix and a few hundred odd creatures that Zac had never seen before. They were no doubt the Gemlings that he had heard about.

The native race was roughly one meter in height and looked a bit like stone turtles, as they had rocky gray scales instead of skin. He had heard from Leviala they weren't golems, but rather a "normal" species.

They were bipedal with two short, stubby legs, and they had a set of muscular arms with oversized hands. They had a shell covering their backs, and their wide and flat faces lacked any nose or external ears. The most attention-grabbing aspect of them was the luminous crystals that covered their bodies,

and each of them emitted a mysterious power that made Zac's mind slightly shudder.

Most of the crystals shone in a sanguine red as their owners fought tooth and nail, but Zac spotted a few other colors as well. Most of the Gemlings had less than five shimmering crystals, but Zac also spotted a handful of natives with over a dozen attached to their bodies. These individuals were unsurprisingly the most powerful Gemlings he could spot, but even they were just at the earlier to middle stages of the E-grade.

Another interesting detail about the situation was that while the Gemlings and the Zhix seemed to be allied on the surface, the former obviously weren't happy about it. Or it might be more accurate to say that the Gemlings seemed to hate the Zhix. The insectoids almost solely focused on dealing with the small cultist army, but Zac had spotted the Gemlings launching over a dozen sneak attacks on the Zhix even though their main focus was the Church of Everlasting Dao.

It more or less confirmed their suspicions. Knowing Inevitability and Void's Disciple, there hadn't been peaceful cooperation between the two factions. The Gemlings had definitely been enslaved and suffered tremendously over the past months.

"Adcarkas and his remaining progeny aren't here," Rhubat rumbled with a frown, and Zac nodded in agreement as he backed away from the cliff.

This cultist army was small, just half the size of the one Zac had dealt with before, and it didn't seem to have a Bishop taking charge. Yet they were holding the advantage against thousands of Zhix and their unwilling companions. If Void's Disciple were there, he would have been able to quickly and effortlessly turn the tide of the battle.

It looked like the Dominators had already gone ahead, and Zac wasn't too surprised. They seemed wholly focused on accomplishing their master's task, and the normal Zhix were just a tool. They would probably be sacrificed along with everyone else when the Great Redeemer arrived. The Zhix had

probably been given an order to stay put, which put them in the crosshairs of the crazed cultists when the second squad reached this far.

As for the cultists themselves, they had probably been in charge of the same task as the main army, which would explain why there weren't any remaining islands all the way to the northern slopes.

"We will deal with the last traitors before continuing the pursuit," Rhubat said, and the Anointed started gearing up for war.

"Wait a second. Those small stonemen are like your people. They have been enslaved by the Dominators," Zac said. "If possible, I'd like to invite them to Port Atwood. But I'm afraid they would attack you as well if you just go storming down."

"It's true... They are brethren in suffering." Rhubat slowly nodded. "They are not Zhix, but they can join the crusade."

Zac nodded as he looked at the Gemlings. If there was one native faction he really wanted to integrate into Port Atwood, it was the Gemlings. He had a decent Heritage left behind by Brazla himself and boatloads of resources, but no skilled craftsmen. These Gemlings were his solution to the problem.

The problem was that they no doubt would be skeptical for various reasons. First of all, he was allied with the same type of insectoids as the ones that had caused so much suffering. Secondly, they had already been enslaved once for their gems by an outside force. They would probably be extremely cautious around strange factions on the outside.

Luckily, he had an in with these people in the form of a half-roasted monkeyman who had caught up to Zac by now. It was time for Hekruv Vira to prove he had the wide connections and diplomacy skills that he claimed.

SEVER KARMA

Hekruv Vira had already arrived, and he stood waiting a few dozen meters behind. However, he came over and looked over the cliffside after getting waved over by Zac.

“What a mess,” the monkeyman muttered as he looked down at the battlefield.

“Can you make the Gemlings back away?” Zac asked.

“Are the insectoid warriors your people?” the monkeyman hesitantly asked. “If so... I think they may attack you as well. The Gemlings of Clan Volor don't like to fight. But when they do, they go all the way. They'll fight until there are none left standing. That's why they're still around even though they were technically the weakest race for combat in this realm.”

“Heart of a warrior.” Rhubat nodded with appreciation, and a few of the Anointed gave the diminutive rockmen a second look.

“Those Zhix are a big reason why we came here. Not a single one can be left alive,” Zac said, which made the monkeyman's eyes widen in surprise. “I'll deal with the cultists as well. We simply don't want the innocent to be caught up in the crosshairs.”

“Alright...” Hekruv said with a nod. “I'll notify them of the situation. I should at least be able to have them not attack you. Give me a few minutes.”

Something about the aura of Hekruv Vira changed the next moment. He stood just two meters away from him, but it was like he wasn't there. It wasn't just that he no longer emitted

the slightest morsel of energy. There had to be some skill or Dao that made people discard his presence. Zac guessed it was some sort of stealth skill that the True Sky cultivator possessed, and Zac looked on with interest as Hekruv Vira jumped down and started running toward the battlefield without rousing any response.

“You heard him,” Zac eventually said as he turned to Rhubat. “Do you need assistance?”

“With the Dominators missing, the traitors are just rudderless children. We will perform the rites ourselves. Can your army deal with the fire lizards?” Rhubat asked.

“We’ll deal with them.” Zac nodded. “Hopefully, that’s the last of the cultists in this place.”

“Right,” Ogras agreed from the side. “One quick genocide and then we’ll get to the real good stuff.”

The two made their way back, and the army was already mobilized by the time they arrived. Since Zac’s people only needed to deal with a few hundred cultists, their army was only comprised of less than one hundred elites and roughly three hundred regular soldiers.

The elites included Zac, Billy, Ogras, Verana, four support squads, and one elite squad of twenty of the strongest warriors, making it an extremely powerful unit. As for the three hundred regular soldiers, they were the remaining people without any Spatial Seals, and they were just along for the ride to pick up a ticket back to Earth.

The other seven hundred people without seals were Zhix, and they would hopefully get theirs by taking out the thousands of traitors. Zac had already learned about the rules for Spatial Seals from Joanna. It was possible to take the seals of a fallen soldier, but those seals lasted for an even shorter duration than they did in the caves. Also, the one who seized the seal needed to have at least some contribution to the kill.

Thankfully, that was easily circumvented by setting up War Arrays that provided weak but large-scale buffs. That essentially “tagged” the weak cultivators for all the kills. It

would barely provide them Cosmic Energy from kills, but it was enough to seize the seals. Everything came together in just a minute.

The warring sides had clearly been at it for a while, and Port Atwood just needed to clean things up. The Zhix army and the elites of Port Atwood split up before they rolled over the hills like a tide, storming toward the combatants like a wave of death.

The battlefield was a perfect opportunity for Zac to consolidate his bloodline control through **[Bloodline Resonance]**, and a ten-meter fractal blade rapidly grew in front of his axe. It shot toward the closest pack of cultists, but how could they not have spotted the army running toward them? A series of flaming barriers had already sprung up, which was barely enough to protect the lizardmen from the initial salvo.

However, a second blade, this one conjured by the void, shot forward the next moment, passing straight through the weakened shields, and reaped the lives of three zealots. Zac flashed forward, and with a thought, let his aura explode outward, quenching the fires for over a hundred meters around him as he killed another two cultists with a ruthless swing.

He didn't set out toward the next target, but he rather looked on as five warriors scurried forward, each of them jumping toward one of the fallen zealots. Three of them soon stood up with disappointment, but two warriors had wide grins plastered on their faces as they looked at the palms of their hands.

"Move back and let others take your places," Zac said, and the two cultivators quickly retreated after giving thanks.

A few new faces took their place, and Zac moved toward the next group of cultists. He kept a relaxed pace as he moved, partly because he wanted to get used to the feeling of fighting with his bloodline, and partly to allow the normal soldiers to keep up.

Four zealots saw his approach, and they launched a desperate and suicidal pincer attack in an attempt to drag him

down to hell with them. The first two lizardmen were cut in two by Zac through a swift horizontal swing of his axe, but some problems occurred immediately after.

The remaining two warriors were spear users, and two flaming lances shot toward Zac's torso. Such an attack would normally never hit him, but Zac looked down in surprise when he suddenly felt two spears stab into his chest. They didn't manage to pierce deeper than two centimeters, but it still hurt like hell. Zac growled in annoyance as a fractal blade appeared out of nowhere, decapitating the two warriors before they had a chance to react.

There was a problem with his bloodline, or rather his control over it. Turning it on or off wasn't very hard, but there was a small delay when rapidly swapping back and forth. He had tried discarding the normally conjured blade and instantaneously summoning a new one, but his commands had been too rapid, which resulted in nothing happening.

That led to Zac holding out his axe in some sort of victory pose while letting the two spears gore him.

The injuries were just shallow flesh wounds, though, and Zac quickly moved from pack to pack, and the people following in his wake kept changing as one warrior after another got their hands on a seal. Zac was making one discovery after another as well, and his battle style was rapidly incorporating **[Force of the Void]**.

The second surprise after getting himself stabbed was that he wasn't able to activate **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** with the skill even after trying multiple times. First, he couldn't understand what was going on, but he eventually had an idea and tried to activate a humongous fractal edge. Nothing happened this time either, but Zac kept trying until a fifty-meter blade appeared out of nowhere.

It was range.

His **[Force of the Void]** was somehow connected to his body, and it couldn't conjure things too far away from where he stood. Fifty meters seemed to be the limit at the moment, which was neither far nor short. It would still allow ambushes

in a one-on-one battle, but it wouldn't work with a maxed-out **[Rapturous Divide]** or large-scale skills like **[Profane Seal]**. **[Deforestation]** would probably work since the summoned axes would appear right above his head, but he didn't want to waste that skill on some cannon-fodder cultists.

His next insight was that he needed free space even within those fifty meters to use Void Energy. For example, Zac tried conjuring a fractal edge that would pierce the head of a cultist. That was an ambush tactic that worked fine when activating **[Chop]** the normal way, but the skill wouldn't activate with Void Energy when it would occupy the same space as the lizardman's body.

Zac's best guess was that the skills were conjured in an instant or conjured in the void and then teleported over. In either case, it wouldn't work when the skills would occupy the space of something else. Only after slightly moving his axe could Zac have the blade appear right next to the cultist's head, allowing Zac to quickly lop it off.

The final insight was that it actually was possible to start a skill the normal way and boost the speed by activating his bloodline. For example, he could conjure half a fractal blade, only to have the second half appear in an instant. It didn't save much time, but it might be possible to catch someone off guard using that trick.

There were only so many enemies to test things out on, though, and the battle was dwindling after just ten minutes. The Zhix and Gemlings was the weaker side even if they had an advantage in numbers, but they had made up for it in ferocity. The cultists were simply exhausted by the point Port Atwood arrived, making their bloody work extremely effortless.

Furthermore, Billy once more showcased his prowess as he summoned a massive golden hammer. It had to be one of his level 75 skills, and even Zac felt some pressure from the insane weight it emitted. As for the cultists that got hit by its slam, they were turned to a disgusting mush. Zac couldn't understand why the skill was so powerful at first, but he soon realized that the hammer resonated with the Memorysteel

mountain somehow, borrowing some of its nigh-endless weight.

The skill probably wouldn't be as powerful in a non-mountainous environment, just like how **[Nature's Punishment]** needed something to draw from to work. With Billy smashing over thirty cultists to bits, the fight was essentially over since over two hundred of them had already been killed by that point. The rest started to self-immolate in a final act of defiance, but Zac and Ogras unleashed a furious offense to kill them before they could suicide so as not to lose any of the remaining seals.

The situation was similar on the Anointed's side. The traitor Zhix were completely trashed, but not one of them tried to flee. They fought to the last man, allowing them to at least die in battle. The Gemlings hadn't actually backed away either, just like Hekruv Vira guessed. With the cultists occupied, the Gemlings jumped at the Zhix with maniacal fervor, but they thankfully didn't extend their hatred to the Anointed and their army.

The battle was completely lopsided, and the losses of Zac's forces were minimal. Left were roughly five hundred Gemlings, who looked in Zac's direction hesitantly. Zac swung his axe once to rid it of the blood and viscera that covered it before he stowed it away.

"What now?" Ogras asked as he walked over. "Is it time?"

Zac didn't immediately answer, but he rather looked out into the empty air for a few seconds. As expected, a prompt appeared the next moment, showing him the way. He felt that there was nothing else to do down here, and it looked like the System agreed.

Sever Karma (Training (8/9)): Sever the final Karmic Ties to Vوريدis A'Heliophos. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)

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

Zac looked at the quest with a sense of purpose. It was finally time to end things once and for all. The threat of the Great Redeemer had loomed above his head for almost a year by now, but it would finally be all over by the time this quest was completed. At least that was his takeaway.

After all, the quest itself provided an extremely important clue. The task was to sever the last Karmic Ties, which meant that the moment the quest was complete, the Great Redeemer shouldn't be able to find Earth any longer. Before this Zac had worried about hidden safeguards in place, but this quest shouldn't be worded like this if there were more hidden beacons on Earth or something similar.

As to where the quest wanted him to go, it was obvious. The Dominators had already abandoned their followers and captives, instead heading for the heart of the Mystic Realm.

It was up there the real treasures waited, and up there the fate of Earth would be decided.

CLAN VOLOR

“We’re climbing the mountain. It’s time to deal with the Dominators for real,” Zac said, and two sets of ruthless eyes turned to the planet in the sky.

“Finally. This wound of mine has been itching for a while now,” Ogras muttered.

Part of Zac just wanted to rush up, guns blazing, but he knew some things had to be dealt with first. So he walked over toward the group of Gemlings who hesitantly stood a few hundred meters away from Port Atwood’s armies.

Their attention was mostly placed on the large army of Zhix, who were already consecrating and burning the corpses of the traitor Zhix, but they slowly turned toward Zac as he approached. Hekruv Vira and a few of the True Sky elders were already there talking with them in low volume, likely introducing him to them.

“Thank you for your assistance, human,” the Gemling said. “Without your aid, our clan would likely be lost to the rivers of time.”

“You’re welcome.” Zac nodded. “They were a common enemy to Earth. Those Zhix were traitors who needed to be hunted down, and the cultists were foreign invaders. I’m sorry we couldn’t get here earlier.”

“I am Helo. I guess I am the leader of Clan Volor now that the last of the Masons have fallen,” Helo said with a sigh. “Vira says you are the leader of the outside world?”

There was an undeniable tinge of confusion and skepticism as he looked Zac up and down, and Zac understood what was going on. This Helo had witnessed the terror of Void's Disciple firsthand, while Zac hadn't really displayed any especially great feats while trying out his Void Energy during the last battle. He'd even gotten himself wounded a few times while figuring things out.

Perhaps even the Anointed with their hulking frames seemed more impressive than he was in the eyes of the Gemlings.

Zac thought a moment, and an earth-shattering aura suddenly burst out from his body. He let loose all his killing intent, along with a Dao Field powered by his High-mastery Fragment of the Axe. Zac even went so far as to push the Dao Field forward with the help of **[Spiritual Void]**.

His killing intent and his Dao that focused on battle and conflict almost merged, and the area once more gave off the bloody aura of a pitched war. The pressure made the Memorysteel under their feet groan and twist, and even Hekruv Vira with his Late E-grade cultivation took a step back as he looked at Zac with wide eyes.

The monkeyman had called Zac a supreme Progenitor, but it looked like he had only been thinking in terms of potential rather than current power. It was good to give the True Sky Faction a small reminder as well before he left. Of course, Zac wasn't planning on forcing the Gemlings to bend the knee, and the aura disappeared after just a few seconds.

"What's with this planet outside?" Helo muttered as he released a shaky breath. "Didn't you get integrated just a year ago? Why are there so many monsters?"

"Well, we were a bit unlucky to get an unusually tough challenge when the System sent over multiple top-tier Invaders, but those who survived probably grew a bit stronger than normal?" Zac smiled.

"Well, your power is a good thing," Helo said. "I have spoken with those of the True Sky Faction, and Clan Volor

wishes to follow in their steps. We are willing to join the Atwood Empire if you will have us.”

Zac was surprised and relieved at how easily the Gemlings, or rather Clan Volor, joined his faction, but it saved him a lot of effort. It was also a bit odd to hear the term “Atwood Empire,” but he guessed it was the most apt description. His faction couldn’t be considered a town any longer, and it was neither a sect nor a clan. A budding single-planet empire was probably correct, though it was definitely a bit weird to be called an emperor, especially considering Earth’s cultural norms.

“Port Atwood would be happy to have you. We have both great craftsman Heritages and almost endless materials, but we are lacking talents who can make use of them,” Zac said enthusiastically, and the eyes of the Gemlings lit up with excitement.

However, Helo and a few of the elites with a large number of crystals across their bodies looked a bit troubled.

“You should understand, embedding our gems into weapons hurts our souls, and we cannot do so freely,” Helo said.

“I will not force anyone to use their gems,” Zac said. “Port Atwood runs on contribution. If you decide to use your gems to create supreme equipment, you will be rewarded with a generous amount of Contribution Points, which can be traded for anything from perusing the Heritages to getting unique and valuable materials.”

Zac had never planned on setting some sort of quota on these Gemlings for producing crystals since he knew that they would likely use them even if he didn’t ask. These craftsmen all had hybrid classes or pure craftsman classes, and their method to evolve was essentially to create precious Spirit Tools.

They could both gain a breakthrough and a massive number of resources by temporarily damaging their souls. Zac would personally make that trade in a heartbeat, and he was confident that a lot of these Gemlings would as well. Helo

nodded in relief when he heard there would be no forced harvesting, and things got a lot more harmonious from there on out.

The two talked a bit longer, and Zac learned about the experiences of the Gemlings. It turned out that Void's Disciple had appeared even earlier than Zac expected, first making contact with the Gemlings even before the Hunt. From then on he had spent most of his time in here, only occasionally venturing outside to Earth.

Adcarkas had disappeared almost half a day before the upheavals, taking Inevitability with him. Speaking of, Zac felt a pang of worry upon hearing that Inevitability had spent almost all of her time after the Hunt cultivating inside Clan Volor's bloodline vats. Who knew what kind of power-ups she had since last time? Still, the real threat to Zac was Void's Disciple, as far as he was concerned.

As for the Gemlings, they had arduously managed to convince their Zhix captors to head to the mountain, somewhat going against their orders to "stay put." They had reached the mountain around five hours ago and soon became aware of the approaching cultist army. Not wanting to deal with them, the allied group set course southeast, snatching up Spatial Seals along the way.

However, they quickly backpedaled when they realized that their old dreaded enemy the Lunar Tribe was spread out across the slopes on the eastern side, wantonly looting the caves there. Caught between a rock and a hard place, they soon decided to deal with the cultists rather than the much larger group of werewolves, which brought them to the present situation.

Zac sighed when learning that the werewolves had made it as well. He had almost hoped that they would somehow run into some problem that got them stuck on the islands, but it turned out he had no such luck. Even worse, Helo had no idea exactly how many of them there were since they had spread out just like his own army did. But he said that their scouts had easily spotted hundreds before fleeing.

Zac asked for some more details before he decided to take his leave. He had gotten the next quest already, and he was afraid that wasting any time would end badly.

“Alright, we’ll have more chances to get to know each other in the future, but I need to prepare a few things right now. The worst of the bunch are still alive. I need to deal with them,” Zac said.

“Wait,” Helo said after some hesitation. “Take this thing.”

He took out a crystal from his Cosmos Sack the next moment, and Zac looked at it curiously. It was clearly the same type of crystal that covered the bodies of the Gemlings, but it was pitch-black. It was also covered in extremely intricate inscriptions, which showcased skill that far eclipsed his sister’s.

But Zac frowned when he looked at the thing since it gave him an extremely bad feeling. It was a curse, an extremely sinister one according to **[Primal Polyglot]**. It gave off an even nastier aura than those fractals in Leviala’s eyes, like it contained the accumulated hatred of the whole Gemling clan.

“Those two you hunt killed most of our Masons and harvested their gems. Their goal was to create a taboo item using hundreds of thousands of souls of their own kind,” Helo said. “We were forced to help with its construction.”

“Taboo item?” Zac said with a frown. “What kind?”

Zac had gained a lot since his last battle with Void’s Disciple, and if Adcarkas maintained the same power as back then, Zac felt confident in taking him out. But if Adcarkas had managed to create some extremely dangerous taboo weapon, things once more became murky.

“We don’t know, but it has something to do with the Dao of Space, the Dao of Karma, and Soul Manipulation,” Helo said with a shake of his head. “Those two Daos are not something we are well-versed in, so we could only follow the provided blueprint without much understanding.”

Zac slowly nodded, but he couldn’t draw any direct conclusions from those three clues alone. Adcarkas was a

Spatial Cultivator, and he no doubt had some sort of Karmic Heritage from his master. It could either be a final piece in the Great Redeemer's puzzle, or some sort of powerful weapon.

"What's this thing, then?" Zac asked.

"A fault line," Helo said, his mouth widening in a hate-filled grimace. "The treasure we made him was perfect on the surface, but he had the audacity to use the souls of our Masons in its construction. We do not know much about the Daos incorporated, but we have our means when it comes to souls, so I hid some traps in the depths of its construction. Crush this near the ones you call the Dominators, and the traps will be sprung. I was hoping to use it myself, but I don't think I can get up there."

Zac looked at the Gemling leader with surprise. It sounded like an extremely risky endeavor to embed something like that in the Taboo Treasure, knowing Inevitability and Void's Disciple. If they even got a hint of someone messing with their plan, they'd unleash a wave of death and carnage on the Gemlings.

"What will happen?" Zac asked as he gingerly took the ominous crystal.

"It's hard to say since we don't know what kind of treasure it is," Helo said. "But it will definitely be destabilized at the least, and probably break altogether."

"Thank you." Zac nodded as he turned to Rhubat. "Have you selected your people?"

"We are ready whenever you are, Warmaster. The final crusade beckons," Rhubat rumbled as a group of hulking Anointed stood behind them.

A few of them actually looked even bigger than before, and Rhubat himself was even approaching six meters. It was like they had been stuck at the peak of the F-grade because of that elixir of theirs, but all that excess energy from kills kept making their bodies grow.

"Alright." Zac nodded. "Let's rest up an hour before we get going. The people we encounter from now on will be the

strongest warriors left in this world.”

Rhubat nodded, and the Anointed walked away to rest up as well. Zac wasn't in a big need of rest because of his wounds, but rather from the need to recharge his Void Energy. But he first walked over to Joanna, who was making rounds in the army.

“I'll leave the army in your, Havath's, and Verana's hands while I go up there,” Zac said with a low voice. “Try to get everyone a seal, but don't go too far toward the eastern side if you can help it.”

“The Zhix seem to be almost completely sealed up after the battle, so we only need something like 120 seals for our own. The True Sky Faction only needs around twenty, I think. All our elites already have seals, so the refugees had almost free rein in the middle layers after they joined.” Joanna nodded.

“Another thing. The Gemlings have joined Port Atwood, but I think it was mostly out of necessity,” Zac said.

“And you need a hype-man?” Joanna smiled. “Don't worry, I have the flags and speeches all ready.”

“Just make them feel happy about joining,” Zac snorted. “Try to get to know them and figure out a way to settle them back on Earth. Perhaps they want to live in the underworld? We have a lot of valuable land there that's just sitting empty.”

“I'll have an integration plan ready by the time we leave this place,” Joanna said.

Zac nodded before he walked over to Thea, who stood in the distance. They hadn't actually met since the upheavals, since Thea stayed in the lower layers while he trained in the upper ones. He had just called her through the communication crystal to say that he was fine before.

He knew he could have gone down to talk with her, but the situation was a bit weird. Neither of them was good with words, and Memorysteel mountain wasn't really the place to figure out their feelings. So Zac had somewhat avoided her

until they could have a proper talk, which would be outside the Mystic Realm.

But he also knew he couldn't just leave for the sphere in the sky without saying something.

"You look different," Thea said with interest as he walked over. "Very dashing."

"What?" Zac blurted as he looked down at his blood-splattered body before he looked up at Thea with a raised brow.

"Not that, stupid. Your face. Did you evolve your Race before?" she asked.

"Oh, that. I changed?" Zac muttered as he took out a mirror.

It was true. His face was better, though barely. His features had once more undergone some subtle changes, but they were less pronounced compared to the time he'd reached an E-grade body. It looked like the upgrades were mostly internal this time, though he did gain a small touch-up.

"Who knows, I might be a real looker by the time I become an Apostate," Zac said with a wry smile. "What are your plans?"

"I'm a bit better, but staying down here." Thea sighed. "We need some people to look after our soldiers in case the werewolves show up. Besides, there are a lot of caves in the upper layers to loot, so it's not really a loss to stay down here. I've kept track of the layers our elites searched all this time, and where there should be unsearched caves left behind. I think I can make a killing up there even if I rest up a day."

Zac nodded, somewhat relieved. He had been prepared to argue for her to stay at the mountain because of her injuries, but it looked like she knew her own situation best. Unfortunately, not everyone was as reasonable.

"I'm going up there," Kenzie resolutely said as she walked over. "With or without you."

WEIGHT OF SIN

“This isn’t a game, you know.” Zac sighed as he turned to his sister.

“Just look,” Kenzie said as she tapped a button on her tablet.

Zac frowned with confusion, but his eyes widened in shock when a meter-thick Memorysteel wall suddenly sprang up in front of Kenzie, completely shielding her. Even he would have some trouble getting through a wall that thick provided it had a constant source of Base Power.

“It took some time, but I managed to figure out a way to activate both a protective algorithm and to trigger the attacks. The sphere up there is overflowing with Memorysteel too. I might actually be stronger than you when we get there,” Kenzie said with a triumphant smile. “Add to that my ability to deal with all kinds of tech-related issues... You can’t leave me here.”

“Alright, fine.” Zac relented. “But the moment we encounter people, you run away and hide within the Memorysteel, okay? I’ll deal with the people; you deal with the machines.”

“Fine,” Kenzie said with a roll of her eyes before she ran away, perhaps afraid that Zac would change his mind.

Thea wryly smiled as she watched the encounter. Zac could only shrug as he sat down and started working on refilling his Void Energy. He’d had an idea since a while ago, and he took out one of his two Beast Cores from the Void

Beasts. A torrent of energy once more entered his body, prompting his **[Void Heart]** to wake up. Beat after beat echoed out, and Zac's eyes lit up as he felt the sense of hollowness quickly dissipate.

But there was something that didn't make sense. Either his **[Void Heart]** had an atrocious efficiency, losing most of the energy it swallowed, or only a small part of the energy went into restoring his reserves.

The hidden node refused to continue running after just a few minutes, and prodding it with his Bloodline Method did nothing to help. Zac wasn't surprised, since that basic manual never mentioned anything about controlling Bloodline Nodes at all. He would have to find another way to do that.

His Void Energy didn't feel completely restored even after having absorbed energy from a Half-Step D-grade beast. That pointed toward the fact that restoring energy for **[Force of the Void]** wasn't the main purpose for **[Void Heart]**, at least not when absorbing energy from Beast Cores. It was likely that the rest of the energy either worked on improving the bloodline or the node itself.

The minutes eventually turned into an hour, and Zac was ready to head out. The final group was Zac, Ogras, Billy, Kenzie, and a group of thirty Anointed led by Rhubat. That still left many of the elites down below in case something came up, while also providing Zac with some support.

Zac initially hadn't planned on bringing Billy along, but Kenzie would be able to provide him with backup through her drones and Memorysteel manipulation. Besides, the Titan had formed a very fluent battle cooperation with the Anointed, which had even allowed them to restrain the Grand Elder of the Cartava Clan. Zac hoped they could do the same to Inevitability while he dealt with Void's Disciple.

Billy was also one of those who had the easiest time dealing with the pressure stemming from the Memorysteel mountain for some reason. He didn't feel a thing in the middle layers, from the looks of it, completely ignoring pressure that even impacted Zac. Such an ability would give him a huge

advantage in the sphere as well, since Zac could only assume the suppression would be even stronger up there.

The group didn't waste any time, and they set course for the peak after saying their goodbyes. The army would remain on the slopes, recuperating and getting their hands on the last sets of Spatial Seals required.

The Anointed weren't interested in looting the caves on the way, but Zac, Ogras, and Billy worked hard enough for the rest combined as they rushed back and forth along the cliffs. Unfortunately, the caves holding treasures actually grew increasingly sparse after they reached the thirteenth layer, and Zac only managed to find a scant few even after climbing for hours.

Billy was finally feeling the pressure by this point, but Zac shook his head with a wry smile upon seeing him grow to four meters tall and gain his signature golden hair. Activating his bloodline seemed to weaken the suppressive effect on him even further, and there almost seemed to be some sort of resonance between him and the mountain itself.

One person who was weirdly unbothered was Kenzie. She tried to explain how she used her four Dao Seeds to form alternating ripples and interlocking layers that negated the pressure, creating some sort of void chamber around herself. Zac tried to follow her explanation a few times, but there was simply no way that he could control his energy emission with the kind of precision that she mentioned.

At least it looked like Ogras wasn't faring any better, judging by the disgusted look the demon shot Kenzie before he started forcibly hunting for treasures again with gritted teeth and blood-tinted eyes.

The value of every single cave was quite extraordinary, and one impressive item after another entered Zac's Spatial Ring. He was currently standing in a cave in the sixteenth layer, looking down at a dozen unknown plants that emitted an extremely dense and bloody fragrance. Zac's body clearly wanted to eat the tomato-like fruits, but he wasn't the only one.

Even [Verun's Bite] woke up and growled with desire in his mind, prompting Zac to cut up a few and have the axe drink the juices.

The fruits weren't enough to evolve the axe in one go, but they did seem to help the axe push forward toward the next stage a bit while also filling the runes on the handle to the brim. Zac had planned on feeding some of his leftover dragon blood to Verun before they reached the peak, but it looked like he had saved on that expenditure.

Zac left the cave and kept climbing, but the search for treasures rapidly lost steam. The pressure kept getting worse, and by the time the group reached the seventeenth layer, Ogras didn't have the energy to look at all. Zac was losing Cosmic Energy with every step as well, and he tried to avoid any large detours. It felt like someone had reached inside his body and was squeezing his organs by this point, which was a wholly godawful feeling.

Each step forward was getting as taxing as a harsh duel, and he didn't want to arrive at the peak completely exhausted from searching for some random valuables. The weaker of the Anointed were forced to almost crawl as they arduously pushed forward, but they ascended without a word of complaint. Zac knew that they would rather burn their life force than turn back at this point.

No one else really had the energy to hunt for treasures any longer either, but the group did stumble into a cave at the peak of the seventeenth layer. The one who made a killing that time was Kenzie. It was a lab, and considering how high up the mountain it was, it must have been right at the edge of the core layer before the world changed. It housed just four black cubes that didn't look all too impressive, but Kenzie's eyes lit up in excitement after connecting her tablet to the machines.

It turned out that they were some sort of Technocrat supercomputers. They didn't contain any data, but one could use them to run calculations and simulations, pushing the power of Jeeves to even greater heights. Kenzie quickly stowed them away with a burning look in her eyes, and Zac

could only helplessly look on as his sister fell deeper and deeper into taboo territory.

Should he take the computers and smash them?

He eventually shook his head and refocused on the task at hand. He had bigger fish to worry about right now. They exited the cave and passed the last milestone, finally experiencing the full extent of the suppression that the System had arranged. The progression slowed to a crawl, and the last layer took as much time as the last three did together even if they didn't spend any time looking for treasure.

Even Zac's legs were shaking by the end, though he was probably the one who mainly relied on his physical body to withstand the pressure. But they were all powerhouses, and they moved quickly even when it felt like a mountain was weighing down on their shoulders. Finally, they reached the peak, but they all froze at the same moment as a screen appeared in front of Zac.

[Weight of Sin: Ascend Taboo Mountain and feel the weight of sin. Reward: Base Attributes +2%.]

Zac was extremely shocked to see a title appear in front of him, and by the looks of it, everyone had got it. A quick check proved it was a Limited Title, and Zac didn't complain even if the reward was pretty low. After all, it was a lot better than his slots being empty.

"Did you guys get the title as well?" Zac asked.

"Four percent Base Attributes," Rhubat said, whereas Kenzie said she got five.

Zac looked over at Ogras, who once more looked nauseated.

"Two." The demon sighed, and Zac nodded in understanding.

It turned out that the title was different depending on your level. It was not too surprising, considering that it was a lot more impressive for his sister to make her way up here compared to him doing it. He could only lament at the fact that

the golden window of collecting titles had passed for him, and instead turn his attention to the mountaintop.

Zac didn't know exactly what to expect when they finally reached the peak, but he suddenly felt a bit dizzy the moment they stepped onto the summit. The peak had looked extremely sharp when they gazed at it from below or back when he still was on top of the islands, but when they actually got there, it was massive.

"Space is going haywire in this place," Ogras muttered, his face barely visible beneath the layers of shadows he had clad himself in to deal with the enormous suppression.

"Let's go," Zac said, and everyone understood what he was thinking.

The distance to the sphere in the sky was well over a thousand meters, and getting there was impossible by shooting out chains or jumping. There had to be another way there. However, the whole plateau was empty except for a small mound in the middle that radiated a weak light. If the answer was anywhere, it was there.

The pressure kept increasing as they got closer, and by the time they reached the halfway point, a few of the Anointed couldn't take it any longer and were forced to start burning life force. Billy and Kenzie could barely take it as well, and judging from the deafening silence coming from Ogras, he was desperately fighting against the pressure as well.

"Should we turn back?" Zac hesitated as he felt his body creak under the shocking pressure.

"No way... this pressure... up there," Ogras said with a hoarse voice through gritted teeth. "Get up there... we're fine."

Zac nodded, understanding what the demon was trying to say. Zac was fine for now, but after an hour under this pressure, he would be completely drained. A few hours and he would probably die. He wasn't necessarily the strongest person in the Mystic Realm, but he believed he had the most

resilience. If he couldn't take the pressure, then neither should Void's Disciple and Inevitability.

Considering they probably reached this place half a day ago, then they would be long dead if the pressure was this bad at the heart of the Mystic Realm. So provided the beam held the means to get to the sphere in the sky, then they were fine. They just needed to get to the center.

Each step felt like a herculean tribulation as the group made their way further and further toward the center of the plateau. Billy's face was beet-red by the end, and Zac had been forced to help him and Kenzie by dragging them forward with his chains.

The distance from the edge to the shining mound in the center was just a few hundred meters, but it felt like more of a struggle than the whole climb until this point. Even the Memorysteel beneath their feet couldn't take the pressure, and deep indents were left after every step they took.

But finally, they made it, and they saw that a mysterious rune was imprinted in the middle of the mound. The source of the light was the rune itself, and Zac guessed it contained the Dao of Space. However, he couldn't be sure because while the rune emitted fierce energy and visible light, his **[Cosmic Gaze]** couldn't actually see anything. The energy was probably too high-grade for an F-grade ocular skill, even if it was a top-tiered one.

There was no time to waste, as the pressure was almost lethal even to Zac this close to the rune, but he still threw a cultist corpse onto the middle of the rune, only to see it turn into a stream of light that shot up toward the planet above.

"Alright, I'm going," Zac grunted as he took out **[Verun's Bite]** and jumped on top of the rune.

A white flash filled his vision, and he stumbled forward as the extreme pressure disappeared in an instant. The blinding light pervaded a few seconds longer, but Zac had already regained his sense of the surroundings thanks to the energy forest that had sprung up around him.

Activating [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] along with one of the defensive charges provided by the golden-leafed tree was the first thing Zac did upon appearing wherever the rune took him. The risk of ambush probably was the highest the moment he appeared, after all. There was not only the Dominators to worry about, but also god knows what else lurked in the heart of the Mystic Realm.

But even Zac wasn't expecting what met his gaze the moment the blinding light subsided. It was a vast grassland, with forests, rivers, and mountains in the distance. A sense of beauty and grandeur permeated the surroundings, and Zac looked around with incomprehension.

What was going on? Why did the rune on top of the Memorysteel mountain lead to paradise?

PARADISE

Zac looked around with shock and confusion, really feeling that he had arrived at paradise. He had an extremely weak perception of the Dao, but even he could feel that there was something special about the world he had appeared in. Looking at the stalks of grass gently swaying in the wind filled his mind with impressions and ideas, and the same held true for the trees in the distance.

It was like everything was filled with meaning. It wasn't to the point of the mind-bending experience when they'd cracked open the Dao Funnel back then, but it was far beyond what he had ever felt on Earth even when the Origin Dao was at its thickest.

Was that what was going on? Was this hidden world the place where all the Origin Dao of Earth had gone? They had already noticed that it was running out quicker than was normal, and Zac had even thought it was absorbed by the Mystic Realm for a while. But back then, he'd discarded the theory since the cultivation environment in the research base was much worse than it was back on Earth. Of course, it was also possible that his mother's clan had simply arranged far better living conditions for those in the core of the base.

Or was this vibrant atmosphere something created by the Dimensional Seed? A virgin world full of life. Everything pointed to the seed being a C-grade spatial treasure, which might mean that it would create a C-grade world. Was this the normal environment on the enormous C-grade continents out in the Zecia Sector? It couldn't be. If that was the case, no C-

grade force except lunatics like the cultists would bother risking their lives in incursions.

At least there was no immediate threat, and the pressure was mostly gone as well, though it did feel like the gravity on this world was at least fifty times that of Earth. However, Zac quickly realized something odd and quickly looked around him.

Where was the corpse?

The body he had thrown out before was nowhere to be seen even with the help of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], which didn't bode well for the others. But just as Zac started to believe that the rune sent people to random spots in this mysterious world, one flash of light after another appeared in the distance.

The others were teleported into the same grasslands as himself, appearing one after another. It was almost like the endpoint of the rune was moving in a straight line, dropping people off along the way.

Zac was relieved to see his sister appear in the middle of the pack, just after the Anointed who were losing life force to deal with the pressure outside, but seeing her reminded him of a troubling reality. How would her Memorysteel control help her in this place? He hadn't spotted a single Technocrat structure, let alone any amount of Memorysteel that could keep her safe.

Even worse, there was no way to send her back, by the looks of things.

There was not much to do about it, so he simply flashed over to her, and the whole group had soon assembled and were looking around in confusion.

"What is this?" Ogras muttered as he looked around with a slight frown. "It's like a cultivation haven for some supreme being. But are we inside the sphere or in a different realm?"

"The corruption in this place... almost feels holy," Rhubat mumbled with wonder, and the other Anointed nodded, clearly

having some difficulty reconciling their deep-seated beliefs and what their antennae were telling them.

“Perhaps it’s the Dimensional Treasure birthing a new world?” Kenzie ventured. “Has it become the World Core of this place? But if that’s the case, how can anyone take it?”

“It should be related to the treasure,” Zac agreed before he looked around with some helplessness. “The real question is what should we do now? How do we find the Dominators in a whole world? We already tried that on Earth for a year, and we only have two days now.”

Like an answer from the heavens themselves, a tremendous clap of energy suddenly erupted far in the distance, somewhere on the other side of a small mountain range. They couldn’t see the source of the blast, but radiating tendrils of energy swayed back and forth for a few seconds before a wave of pure Origin Dao swept across the land.

Everyone braced themselves for the ripple that expanded with a speed that far exceeded the limits of E-grade warriors, but it passed right through them without causing any harm. In fact, it was the opposite. Zac took a deep breath, feeling like his body and mind had been cleansed by the shockwave. He couldn’t imagine what kind of progress he would make if he could cultivate in a place like this for a few years.

“Uh... How about we go there?” Ogras said after everyone regained their wits, and he gave Zac a slightly incredulous look. “Why don’t you ask the Heavens for some treasures as well?”

“Let’s go,” Zac snorted. “There’s no way to figure out what’s going on here, but that place should hold at least some answers. Keep your eyes peeled for enemies.”

The source of the blast could only be one thing, the Dimensional Seed. And even if it by some chance wasn’t, it was a supreme treasure that would hopefully lure the Dominators like moths to a flame. What cultivator could say no to an item that released ripples of pure Dao? Normal Dao Treasures were trash compared to an item like that.

Judging by the distance from the mountains, it would take half a day to get there even if they ran, and that was provided that there weren't any more weird spatial zones that hindered them along the way. The group quickly passed the grasslands, only stopping every thirty minutes or so as new pulses spread out from the other side of the mountain.

Zac was making rapid progress on his Daos, especially the Fragment of the Bodhi because he was surrounded by life. Who knew, he might even make a breakthrough before this excursion was over.

Everyone else was the same. Billy was silently walking next to the Anointed with glazed eyes like he was in a dream. Furthermore, Zac had already felt the ripples of a Dao breakthrough from his sister.

The experience was almost surreal, and it caused Zac to hate the Dominators with newfound vigor. What a waste of time to be forced to hunt for those bastards when they only had a few days to stay in this magical place. He would much rather seclude himself somewhere in the forest, becoming one with nature.

But there wasn't much to do about the situation except take in as many impressions and insights as he could along the way.

Vicar Uld sighed and opened his eyes, his body abuzz after the ripple of condensed Dao that just passed through him. He had made strides forward again, further consolidating his insight into the Fragment of the Lance even though he'd gained it just a few hours ago.

But what good did it do him?

They might be in as close an embrace of the Heavens as they ever would be right now, but reality would come crashing down on them any day now. How could he have looked up at the high Cardinals as beacons of arcane knowledge that eclipsed the whole sector? It was a rude awakening, realizing

that these mythological beings who held his very life in their hands were just muddling along like everyone else.

What hiding in this pocket realm for a hundred years? They hadn't even lasted a hundred days before the thing collapsed because of the very item they were sent to collect. Even if they managed to snatch the treasure out of the hands of the monsters who all vied for the same thing, they would still be stranded on a hostile planet without any support.

After all, there was no way those pawns below would survive this place. They had been sent to destroy all the bridges leading to the mountain, but at least one of the powerful native factions should be able to reach the mountain in time. And that was not counting the Sovereign-select aboriginal of the outer world.

The best they could hope for was to seal the spatial treasure in some corner of the world and shed their mortal coils to avoid any tracking methods. Perhaps the Grand Cardinal would take pity on their souls and provide new vessels, but Uld was intimately familiar with the reluctance to impact profit margins among the upper echelons.

Inquisitor Arkensau maintained that his teacher would find a way to solve their plight before it came to that, that the ripples that were sent out into the cosmos would somehow guide them here. But Uld wasn't so sure. After seeing the world crumble around him, he had carried a strong premonition in the back of his mind, and not even forming a Dao Fragment would change that.

He would die in here.

Uld had seen space get twisted and bent, how the dimensions melded into a singular point of past, present, and the future. But there was just darkness on the horizon, just a bone-chilling nothingness.

"Someone triggered our outer array," Trovad said with some reluctance, causing Uld's heart to beat with discomposure.

The fire of the Heavens no longer burned as brightly in Trovad's eyes either. Setback after setback would do that to your convictions. He was clearly unwilling to expose the interlopers since he knew what it would lead to.

“Get ready for battle,” Arkensau said, confirming Uld's fears. “This is our chance. Erect the altar.”

“How about going into hiding, waiting for these heretics to come into contact with the other interlopers? We can follow them and strike when the time is ripe,” Uld entreated.

“Our order doesn't abide cowardice, *Vicar* Uld,” Arkensau snorted with disdain. “So many of our brothers have entered the embrace of the Heavens, and you carry doubts and hesitation?”

Easy for you to say, bastard. You're the one carrying a bunch of treasures from your master. Bastard, Uld raged in his mind.

“Besides, we would not be able to make the same preparations by following your plan. The thing I have brought needs some time to come into power,” Arkensau said as he looked down at the lantern with a weak fire burning inside.

The order was given, and their brands forced them to obey. The words of Inquisitor Arkensau might as well be the commands of the Heavens themselves as far as they were concerned. Go against them, and you'd burn in heavenly fire.

The tolls of death clangored even louder in Uld's mind, but he gritted his teeth and started helping the others prepare. No matter who it was who had arrived in this world, it was a given they weren't any weaklings unless the pressure on that mountain had dissipated. After all, they'd only managed to bring just over thirty of their soldiers even though they'd tried bringing over three hundred. The rest had been unable to bear the pressure and were forced to descend.

Then again, it wasn't all bad. There was definitely a seed of truth to what Arkensau said. The Church did have a deeper Heritage than both the aboriginals of either the outer world or the Mystic Realm, and their best chance to make use of that

fact was to set up a trap using the things they had brought along. There shouldn't be more than five parties who could make it this far, and taking out just one would drastically increase Uld's chances to survive this calamity.

The restrictive array was quickly and quietly moved so that it would coincide with the interlopers' path, and the adjustments to the altar were completed in quick order. From there, they only had to wait, hidden by the **[Heaven's Cover Array]**. The targets would reach the designated kill zone in twenty minutes, and they soon could get a visual of who they were dealing with through their sentries.

It was a group of a few humans along with the hulking insectoid miscreations. They were led by a man with a dumb smile on his face as he walked through the forest, but he was still emitting an earth-shattering aura.

"It's him," Arkensau muttered with glee. "I had hoped I'd run into that bastard again, and he's still distracted by the wonders of this world. This is perfect; using the **[Ember of Glory]** on him is a worthwhile sacrifice."

"The Sovereign-Select?" Uld muttered, not really sharing the Inquisitor's jubilant mood.

Their order's track record with this monstrous aboriginal wasn't exactly stellar, with almost every encounter ending in abject defeat. The only small success had been when they managed to destabilize the tunnel to this realm, but that obviously hadn't kept this maniac out.

Uld's emotions were frayed as he looked at the projection, but he slowly calmed his mind since his fate had already been sealed. If the ambush worked, then he wouldn't even need to lift a finger to eradicate a huge threat.

If it didn't, well, then at least his worries would be over.

EMBER OF GLORY

Zac was almost in a reverie as he led the group through the forest. Each breath brought new insights; each step was a revelation.

However, the tranquility was suddenly broken as Rhubat roared, “Attack!”

Everyone reacted instinctively, and Zac conjured his energy forest and hundreds of leaves even though he couldn't see what Rhubat was talking about. Unfortunately, by the time that the Zhix leader had sensed that something was wrong, it was already too late.

Layer upon layer of flaming barriers sprang up around them, trapping them in a fiery inferno. Altogether, a full eighteen barriers were sealing them in, with the first one being just a thin film of fire and the outermost being over a meter thick. They towered over a hundred meters into the air as well, so jumping over was probably impossible.

Zac wildly looked around for a way to break out, and he soon spotted the perpetrators through the walls of flames. It was unsurprisingly the cultists, and their cloak had been pretty much perfect. However, the camouflage was shattered the moment they sprung their trap, and Zac figured the best course of action was to start breaking barriers to reach them.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as Zac pushed forward, slamming straight into the first barrier. A wave of heat grilled his whole body, but the thin film couldn't impede his momentum and immediately cracked. But a huge flower of

flames bloomed the moment the shield collapsed, engulfing Zac before it continued toward the others.

The Anointed had thankfully already erected thick earthen defenses, which blocked out the incoming flames. However, by this point, a small smoldering ember had appeared in the sky in the middle of the entrapment, no larger than an apple. But that small flame made Zac's soul shudder and filled him with a sense of dread. He might be able to survive that thing, but the others wouldn't. Worse, it seemed to be accumulating power.

The small flame definitely couldn't be a skill, judging by its power. It had to be some sort of Spiritual Flame, and its grade was probably Half-Step D-grade, judging by the immense spirituality and force it exuded. Zac couldn't imagine the cost of bringing something like that through an incursion. Was this the ultimate treasure the Church of Everlasting Dao had brought to Earth?

Not even the Anointed would be able to withstand that flame, and Zac exploded his aura to quench the flames covering him as he shot toward the next layer. There was no time to waste. Zac's body was quickly getting covered in blisters and sears as he slammed into one barrier after another, but each of them was sturdier than the one before it. Meanwhile, the flame in the sky kept growing, and nothing the others did seemed to work.

Ogras' shadows, Rhubat's stone attacks, even the laser beams of Kenzie's drones – they all got incinerated long before they reached the growing flame in the sky. But it was also clear that it took a huge effort to control it since a storm of fiery attuned energy swirled around the leaders of the Church of Everlasting Dao. They were all standing around something on a pedestal, not even sparing Zac a glance. They seemed to barely be able to control that thing.

The others were quickly forced to give up on destroying the fire in the sky and instead joined Zac in his effort to break out. Ten seals slammed into the thick walls of flames, causing the ground to shake. However, it was getting harder and harder to break through as the barriers got thicker. Not only that, the

entrapment array was clearly designed to unleash increasingly powerful waves of flames when they collapsed.

Soon, only Zac, Rhubat, and Ogras were able to withstand the fallout from when a barrier broke apart. The others were forced to fight from a distance or rely on the three powerhouses.

Zac had easily withstood the first six barriers just by blocking the flames with **[Love's Bond]** and enduring the parts that got through, but his sister didn't have his defenses. From the seventh barrier, he had been forced to enclose himself and Kenzie in the defensive charges of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**.

Two charges out of four had already been expended by this point, but Zac wasn't sure he'd be able to use all four, as the golden leaves at the crown of the holy tree of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** were already ablaze. The ember was still well over a hundred meters in the air, but just its growing presence was enough to severely damage the core of his skill.

A sense of worry filled Zac's heart when he realized that they wouldn't make it with their current approach. There were ten more barriers to cut through, and there was nowhere to hide inside the trap. The safest spot to avoid the retaliatory waves of flame was right in the middle of the entrapment array, but that would put them in the crosshairs of the even scarier ember above.

They could either stay on course and unleash their ultimate skills to break through the barriers quicker, perhaps even in one go. As long as the others had some ultimate defensive skills, they would probably get out of it in one piece, but doing things that way would expend a huge number of their cards even before they reached their real enemies. After all, these cultists were probably the weakest party in this place.

Alternatively, they could move back and try to defend against that terrifying ball of flames and deal with the barriers and cultists afterward. But were they even able to do that? That miniature sun was already terrifying, and it kept

accumulating more power. There would definitely be casualties if they went that way. But Zac suddenly had an idea.

Was there perhaps a third option?

Zac gauged the distance between himself and the cultists, and **[Verun's Bite]** lit up in a sanguine glow as he launched a furious assault on the next barrier barring his path.

“Keep going, just a bit more!” Zac shouted, and a thick lance of shadows caused the whole barrier to shudder.

With the empowerment of the second rune of his Spirit Tool and the renewed efforts of Ogras, the barrier quickly crumbled, drenching the group in yet another shower of torrential heat. However, several floating Memorysteel eggs suddenly appeared and generated a series of barriers, protecting the group at the cost of their own safety. Molten drones rained down from the sky as the group slammed into the next one.

The luster of Verun's rune was draining fast, but Zac knew they were almost there. One more barrier fell, at which point there were only eight flame walls between them and the cultists. Zac had used his third defensive charge to tide things over, but **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** finally crumbled at that point since the whole core tree had been reduced to a ball of flames.

The remaining barriers looked extremely sturdy, but Zac had already accomplished his goal. Breaking that last roadblock had put him squarely within fifty meters of the group of cultists as long as he pushed against the wall of fire. Those fifty meters would be an unbreakable chasm to most, but was that really the case for him?

Could this array really block something coming from the Void?

There was no buildup and no warning as a huge wooden hand exuding a primordial aura appeared out of nowhere just a few meters above the cultists and their altar. It crashed straight down as it gained the empowerment of Zac's Dao, turning it into a terrifying hammer of carnage.

It was naturally [**Nature's Punishment**] activated with the help of [**Force of the Void**]. Zac hadn't actually tested this yet, but he was filled with a surge of relief when he saw that his gambit had worked. The barriers couldn't stop him from summoning the skill outside, allowing him to launch a surprise attack.

Judging by how confident the cultists had looked, they clearly believed that the shields would protect them from any attacks. And Zac already knew high-quality barriers and arrays could seal off space to prevent one from circumventing the shields. For example, how effective would Town Protection Arrays be if one could simply conjure ranged attacks inside the protective bubble?

The entrapment array the cultists had set up seemed to possess the same capabilities, but his odd Bloodline Talent had completely circumvented it somehow.

The cultists immediately noticed the massive hand appearing above their heads, but [**Nature's Punishment**] exuded a tremendous pressure. It was enough to completely immobilize Middle F-grade warriors, and even E-grade cultivators would find themselves toiling under the weight of a mountain, drastically slowing their reaction speed.

Things should have ended with the elites turning into paste then and there, but the incursion leader suddenly snatched something that had been blocked from Zac's view by the thronging cultists. It was a small glass lantern with a weak flame inside. It looked like a small gust of wind could snuff out its flames, but Zac felt a far greater fear when he looked at it compared to that descending ember behind him.

The leader desperately swung the lantern at the descending hand, and Zac gritted his teeth as he prepared to infuse [**Nature's Punishment**] with as much Dao and Cosmic Energy as needed to make sure the attack landed.

Pain.

Blinding pain made Zac fall down screaming as the skin on his left hand sizzled like it was boiling. It felt like his whole arm had been dipped in molten lead, and the torment cut all

the way to his soul. What was that flame? Zac desperately refocused his mind and pushed down the agony, only to see the enormous hand full of seemingly endless life force get reduced to ash in an instant as the small flame spread like a wildfire.

However, the cultists didn't fare much better even if their leader had managed to utterly destroy Zac's sneak attack. The weak and isolated flame in the lantern had turned into a terrifying calamity that rained down upon the zealots, as the few remaining pieces of wood from Zac's skill had turned into burning meteors.

Any cultist who was touched by that mysterious fire turned into a human torch, and not even a husk remained after just a second. There were almost thirty cultists outside the shields, but that number had been reduced to less than ten in an instant. Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing, and he figured that the effect might even be more devastating than if his own attack had landed.

However, the leader himself managed to block the raining flames thanks to a defensive treasure that conjured a shield around him. Most of the other survivors were just lucky and stood far away from the impact zone, but one other seemed to forcibly resist the flames. Zac hadn't seen that man before, but he wore a different set of robes than any other cultist he had met so far.

Perhaps he was the second-in-command to the incursion leader, considering his aura was almost as strong as the one of the man Zac had fought in the Dead Zone. In either case, while he had barely survived getting burnt by the flames, he was clearly on his last legs. One of his arms had turned into what looked like a burnt-out log, and similar burns covered most of his torso and half his face.

Zac wasn't sure if even he would survive something like that, and it almost seemed that the poor man was only hanging on through sheer willpower.

"You!" the dying warrior screamed with a guttural voice of pain and rage, but it didn't actually look like Zac was the

target of the general's ire.

Zac looked on with incomprehension as the zealot took out a golden lance and launched an extremely swift strike at his leader. The incursion leader had managed to block out the flames, but he had been right beneath the wooden hand, and he had taken the brunt of the flames. The shield managed to block out most of it, but the Spiritual Flames had caught on the hem of his robes.

He was desperately trying to stomp out the appalling flames before he turned into yet another torch, and he didn't even realize something was wrong until after the sharp tip of the golden lance pierced the back of his head. The leader arduously looked back with incredulity just in time to see the traitor spontaneously combust, not leaving even a scrap behind.

A second later, the leader collapsed as well, and the bursts of Cosmic Energy confirmed that they were both dead.

Zac looked at the turn of events with confusion, but he didn't complain. It reminded him a lot of Ogras back at the Tree of Ascension, though the outcome was mutual destruction this time around. Zac's energy gain wasn't very impressive since the cultists had essentially killed each other, but his attack had been the source of the calamitous chain of events, so he did at least get some.

The fact that most of the zealots had fallen less than a minute after the battle started didn't mean they were out of the woods just yet. The ember in the center of the array was going haywire with no one to control it, and the remaining shields didn't show any indication of collapsing any time soon. They seemed to be actual arrays rather than something conjured by the cultists themselves, and there was no time to break through them one by one, judging by how quickly the miniature sun destabilized.

There was no time to waste, and Zac transformed into his Draugr form as the Anointed desperately started digging a hole to hide in from the impending blast. **[Profane Seal]** sprang up around them, followed by **[Immutable Bulwark]** acting as a

roof for their bunker as Zac grew into his hulking form through **[Vanguard of Undeath]**.

“It’s collapsing; we probably just need to withstand it for a short moment,” Zac shouted as he rejoined the group. “Use everything you have!”

The fire in the ember was very similar to the terrifying candle that had snuffed out the lives of most of the cultists, but their chance at survival lay in the fact that it hadn’t been completely activated. The cultists had been using that Spiritual Fire as the source through the altar outside, but the ritual had been canceled midway.

Layer after layer of protection was put in place, mostly thanks to Kenzie and the Anointed. Zac’s Miasmic bulwark was reinforced by multiple walls wrought from stone, and Kenzie had actually taken out a small mountain of Memorysteel from her Cosmos Sack, quickly transforming it into a dome that the Anointed placed on top. Billy and Ogras didn’t have any skills to help in this situation, so they could only help with the digging efforts.

They kept adding more and more until the time finally ran out.

There was no explosion, but Zac suddenly felt his Miasmic cage collapsing without being able to resist at all, and a shocking heat hit them even though they were protected by tens of meters of rock and Memorysteel. The heat quickly grew unbearable, and it was like the heat was even spiritual in nature, as Zac felt a searing pain in his soul.

It wasn’t only his imagination, unfortunately, and he helplessly watched as one Anointed after another suddenly fell and combusted, their eyes turning into fiery infernos as even their souls were set ablaze.

“Hold on!” Zac could only shout.

There wasn’t anything that he could do against some terrifying invisible flame that seemed able to pass through anything. Finally, the last layers of earthen defenses shattered, exposing a sea of flames above them. Only Zac’s Miasmic

Bulwark remained, but it cost shocking amounts of Miasma every second.

Thankfully, it looked like they barely would be able to tide things over, as the flames spread outward after roiling across the bulwark's surface for half a minute, exposing the sky once more. No one dared to move for a few minutes, but the squad eventually crawled out of their bunker to look at the aftermath. The shields had unsurprisingly all collapsed, and over a kilometer in each direction had been turned into a wasteland. The forest was gone, replaced by burning husks and storms of ash.

The only things left of the cultists were the fire-resistant robes of the incursion leader and a handful of Spirit Tools. A few of the cultists had survived the fiery fallout from the lantern exploding, but Zac couldn't imagine they had survived the following blast.

It looked like the Church of Everlasting Dao was finally dealt with for good.

PRISON

“Ah, what happened to you?!” Billy exclaimed as he looked up at Zac’s hulking form. “How are you bigger than Billy?!”

Zac turned toward the Titan, and he saw that the Anointed were looking at him with hesitation as well.

“A few things happened to me in the Dead Zone.” Zac sighed, seeing no recourse but to come clean. “It’s a secret weapon of mine. I hope you can help me keep this hidden.”

“Haha! No problem, Billy has secrets too!” Billy laughed before he froze and frowned with confusion. “Huh? Why can’t Billy remember? Oh well.”

The Anointed nodded in agreement, not really caring. Their minds were clearly focused on their fallen brethren. Zac inwardly sighed in relief when his Draugr form didn’t cause any problems, and he opened his status screen for a few seconds. He didn’t look for long, though, only long enough to confirm a few things.

The fight was over, and a sharp pain in his left hand made itself remembered the moment he relaxed. It was the damage transferred over when **[Nature’s Punishment]** had been incinerated by the small Spiritual Flame. Zac grimaced when he looked down at the blisters, and he could feel that this wasn’t something that would be fixed with **[Surging Vitality]**.

There was a pervasive Dao lodged in his arm, and he could only gradually expel it from his body. At least it wasn’t his main arm, and it wouldn’t affect his combat strength much. He ate one of his better healing pills to keep the effect under

wraps while fixing the large number of weaker burns that covered his body.

He ate a Soldier Pill next, rapidly restoring a large chunk of his missing Miasma. Zac didn't want to stay this way too long, though, so he reverted to his human form as soon as the pill had been absorbed.

Eating these Soldier Pills willy-nilly wasn't really good for his body, but he didn't want to keep his undead form exposed for too long in this place. As for what he had checked on his status screen before, it was his bloodline. He had confirmed a few things with his transformation. First, his Void Emperor bloodline had awakened in his Draugr form as well.

Second, his undead Race was still at the E-grade, and it felt like he hadn't really made any improvements at all, as he had hoped. His Bloodline Nodes were there as well, and Zac wondered how that would impact him as one of the "five noble Races." Part of their superiority compared to normal Revenants and Corpse Lords had to be related to bloodlines and racial nodes, and who knew how his situation changed that.

The Draugr normally boasted supreme Miasmatic control along with extremely durable bodies, but what if he got neither because his odd bloodline took precedence over both? And would real Draugr be able to notice the difference?

He regained his human form after a few seconds, and Zac was relatively certain that no outsider should have been able to notice his transformation. The towering flame barriers had hidden his skills, and enormous clouds of ash and smoke swirled around them right now, completely covering their group.

A deep sigh echoed out from his side, and Zac looked over to see Rhubat placing one of the fallen in his Cosmos Sack. Eight of the Anointed had succumbed to the invisible wave of heat, and the rest sported various degrees of burns. However, they had done it. They had finally taken out the last of these lunatics, snuffing out another threat to Earth.

"We need to move," Ogras said with a hoarse voice, his face all black with soot. "Everyone within a hundred

kilometers must have spotted this battle.”

“Right.” Zac nodded as he stilled the tremors in his burned hand.

Everyone ate some healing pills to tide them over as they removed any hints of their involvement as best they could. Zac flashed over and pocketed several treasures where the cultists had stood before. Most things had been incinerated, leaving not even the Cosmos Sacks unscathed, but some items had survived.

The golden lance looked quite powerful, but the greatest gain was no doubt the Spatial Ring he found next to the incursion leader’s fire-resistant robes. He also picked up the now-empty lantern and stashed it away. One of the glass panels was cracked, but Zac figured it should be a treasure considering it could trap such a powerful flame.

Altogether, the squad only remained a minute longer before leaving, taking advantage of the thick clouds of ash to avoid detection. They didn’t take a direct route toward the source of the ripples out of fear that they would be spotted though.

It wasn’t like there was any particular target they wanted to hide from, but rather that they didn’t want to walk into yet another trap just as they barely escaped the last one. Besides, even if their arrival had been exposed, they didn’t need to make it worse. So everyone tried to stay under the radar as Zac led them through the still-burning forest, using either his aura or a forceful swing to clear a path.

The group set a diagonal course through the forest, somewhat running in a circle around the source of the powerful ripples. The idea was to hit it from a slightly different angle, which would hopefully allow them to cross the mountains unnoticed. A few minutes later, they were out of the raging flames, and there thankfully wasn’t anyone lying in wait for them.

The group reached the foot of the mountains after another two hours, at which point they finally slowed down. Everyone used various means to scan their surroundings for enemies, but

it really looked like there wasn't anyone on their tail. Only then did they find a secluded cave large enough for them all, and they sat down to rest after having erected an illusion array.

"Eight crusaders have fallen even before we reached our target," Rhubat rumbled with sorrow in their eyes, and Zac could only sigh.

It was pretty bad luck that the cultists had zeroed in on them rather than the Dominators. Was it too much to ask for those two factions to take each other out?

"Rest up for an hour," Zac said as he distributed some more Soul Crystals and healing pills. "We'll cross the mountain next."

"So what's the plan?" Ogras asked. "There's no way that those two bastards think they're alone in this place after that inferno."

"Adcarkas is no fool," Rhubat said with a shake of their head. "The Sage of the Basin no doubt understood that we would be coming for them even without the earlier battle."

Zac nodded in agreement. He was more worried about having exposed his hidden class than having exposed that he was here. He could only pray that the lure of the Dimensional Seed held a strong enough draw for Void's Disciple to risk everything to get it, either for his master or for himself.

After all, such an item must hold an almost fatal attraction to a Spatial Cultivator like him, even if to simply observe its energy fluctuations.

No one had any great ideas of how to deal with what came next, mainly because they didn't really understand the situation. Why did this realm exist? Why was the Dimensional Seed releasing those ripples? Why hadn't anyone snatched it yet?

They eventually simply decided to stay hidden as best they could, which wasn't all that easy with over twenty giants who were almost as tall as some of the trees, while they scouted out the Dimensional Seed on the other side of the mountain.

Thankfully, apart from other factions, the hidden world was extremely safe. In fact, they hadn't encountered a single animal or beast as they crossed the forest and the mountain. It was an odd sensation, seeing nature both so vibrant and so devoid of life.

It took seven hours to cross the mountain, but one of those hours was spent on breaks because people were making breakthroughs left and right. Kenzie, Billy, over half of the Anointed. All of them made some gains from walking between the mountains and feeling the pulse of Earth.

Zac himself didn't manage to make any Dao breakthroughs like the others, but his level was already a lot higher. That wasn't to say he was without gains of his own. He had made a shocking amount of improvements in his skill department instead.

He had already noticed that [**Immutable Bulwark**] and [**Profane Seal**] reached Peak mastery right after the battle, and one skill after another took a step forward over the following hours. [**Loamwalker**] was next, finally reaching Peak, and it was soon followed by [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] reaching Late mastery and both [**Conformation of Supremacy**] and [**Surging Vitality**] stepping into Middle grade.

The most shocking thing was that he even evolved [**Deforestation**] to Late mastery just as they passed the mountain, even though he hadn't actually used the skill at all during the battle before. He soon realized what was going on though.

The cultivation environment of the Mystic Realm had been pretty wretched, which might not have only impacted his Dao, but also his skills. After all, he hadn't improved a single skill in the research base even though he had fought so many desperate battles. Now it was like all those accumulated experiences had crystallized into a cascade of breakthroughs when he was flooded with Origin Dao.

He hadn't tested the change of [**Deforestation**] because of the cooldown, but the evolution of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] resulted in the forest almost doubling in radius while the

defensive charges gained some strength. The attribute bonus to Strength and Vitality was still at 10%, but one couldn't complain considering that buff came with literally no downsides.

The improvement wasn't too impressive, but it wasn't bad either. This way, he would be able to cover almost a whole army with his energy forest, and there wasn't much his enemies could do about it except target the core tree. The amount of information the enormous forest crammed into his brain was a bit jarring at first, but he quickly got the hang of it.

The evolution to Peak mastery of **[Loamwalker]** was more interesting. The largest detriment to that skill was how it was bound to earth, but that rule was finally being loosened at Peak. The upgrade didn't give him the power of flight, but he was actually able to take one step in the air with the skill. True to its name, the skill still needed loam to walk, and **[Loamwalker]**'s solution was actually to form a small patch of floating grass beneath his feet.

It was a magical feeling to jump twenty meters into the air and then suddenly flash forward without gathering any momentum. It was almost like getting a double-jump in a video game, and it would make Zac's fighting a lot more flexible where he wouldn't have to rely on his chains to move while in the air. Unsurprisingly, the downside of the newfound ability of his movement skill was the cost of Cosmic Energy. Air-walking once cost more than ten times the amount compared to taking a step on solid ground.

Zac wanted nothing more than to walk around these mountains for a while longer and squeeze out all the gains from his accumulated experiences, but time waited for no man. The group finally reached the other side, and it didn't take a genius to figure out where they needed to go.

A massive basin was hidden on the other side of the mountain range, and there was only one thing placed there, an almost impossibly large structure. It was definitely of Technocrat origin. And even from a great distance, it was clear that it was created with a lot more care and attention to detail

compared to the desolate corridors in the outer sectors of the research base.

It seemed to be made of Memorysteel, but it had a different bluish hue. Also, Zac could feel the emanations of endless Base Power even when they hid a few kilometers away. The structure was completely covered in the same type of script that lined the walls of the base. The building itself looked like an enormous dome, and it had to be at least five kilometers tall, almost towering over the mountains around it.

The dome itself was surrounded by nine towers that looked like spikes, and they too were constructed with the special Memorysteel and covered in dense scripts.

However, even with the clearly high-quality construction, the building was suffering extensive damage. Thick cracks covered parts of the dome, and it almost looked like the cracks were alive as they wiggled in an endless loop of being damaged and trying to heal.

“What is this?” Zac muttered as he turned to his sister to see if she had any ideas.

“It’s a prison for the Dimensional Seed!” Kenzie exclaimed. “The Administrator must have built it to protect the base from the energy emanations. I don’t understand why it’s in this hidden world, though...”

“It looks like the treasure is trying to break out,” Ogras commented from the side as he glanced at Kenzie. “Meanwhile, our target is probably trying to break in, no? With your technical skills, we might actually be the first to make it to the Dimensional Seed.”

OVERBEARING TRUTH

“We might have an advantage, but there are a lot of variables at play. There’s something odd going on with this place,” Kenzie said, and there was hesitation on her face. “There are items meant to deal with spatial anomalies in the labs, and this isolation chamber has somehow followed the seed into this world. It’s like we’re missing something.”

Zac nodded in agreement. There were some things that they hadn’t figured out yet. Why was an item like the Spatial Drill built inside a bloodline research base? Why had the energies of the base merged with the spatial anomalies to the point that they seamlessly entered and exited from the barriers?

“Is that computer bastard trying to take the treasure for itself?” Ogras ventured, echoing Zac’s thoughts. “We can’t compete with the base itself. Those weapons it uses...”

“I don’t think it should have any desires like that, right?” Zac said. “It’s a machine, not a cultivator. The goals of the base Administrator should simply be to maintain operations and protect against threats. I don’t see what would make it try to absorb the treasure. It’s more likely that it realized how dangerous the item was, and tried to seal it up to protect the base.”

In fact, Zac knew from his talk with Jaol back on the Technocrat ship that there were AIs that had intellects advanced enough that they essentially could be considered living. However, these types of high-tiered AIs still couldn’t

cultivate, and they were pretty rare since they needed extremely expensive components to work.

Also, these types of living AIs were a lot like Tool Spirits, meaning they could degrade mentally.

There was no way that even a rich Technocrat family would put an AI like that in charge of routine maintenance on some research base. It was not only a huge waste of resources, but it might actually result in a worse outcome compared to using a normal AI that ran more like a computer. Just imagine, what if an AI who slowly went insane like Brazla took charge of this place?

Nothing they had seen indicated it was that kind of AI, though. If it was, it wouldn't have been possible for the Tsarun Clan to gain access, and especially impossible for the native Datamancers to trick it. The AI would instantly have realized the research subjects were manipulating its programs and taken action.

“In either case, what do we do?” Ogras asked, and both he and the Anointed turned to Zac. “Our Illusion Array Disks aren't perfect. We'll be spotted sooner or later if we just loiter around here.”

Zac hesitated a few seconds as he looked down at the building. The enormous construction actually did have a few gates, but could they really just waltz into the place like this? He was a bit hesitant about asking his sister to use Jeeves here, in case it would cause a reaction. However, it also seemed extremely dangerous to sneak inside through the wriggling scars covering the dome's surface.

“How about we observe for a while and, if nothing changes, just walk right in?” Zac eventually said, unable to come up with anything else.

“That's your plan?” the demon said with a scrunched-up face.

“Do you have any better ideas?” Zac muttered. “We don't know where the Dominators are, and we don't know how long this place will last. We can lay a trap out here in hopes

Adcarkas will appear, but if we do that, we might miss our opportunity. If I were him, I would already have headed inside.”

“Agreed.” Rhubat nodded. “Adcarkas has nigh-perfect energy-masking abilities, and they are capable of teleportation. It is unlikely we would spot them in the mountains even if we stay outside. Besides, with our frames, we’re bound to be spotted before we spot them.”

“Fine,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes, but Zac could hear him mutter “bunch of meatheads” beneath his voice.

They didn’t blindly rush toward the containment dome, but instead inched closer until they reached a spot with better vantage a few kilometers away. The group kept a lookout for any activity while they made their final preparations, but there was nothing at all happening.

Suddenly, the runes on the building lit up with a blue shimmering radiance as it started emitting an extremely odd aura. It was like the whole dome was shifting out of reality, like it was both there and somewhere else. The odd phenomenon subsided after a minute, but the nine towers lit up at that moment.

The very same tendrils they had seen from the other side of the mountain radiated out from their peaks, and a ball of condensed energy was quickly forming right above the dome. It only lasted for a second before it destabilized and exploded, and the group felt the ripple pass through them a second later.

“It’s like reverse lightning rods,” Kenzie said. “Discharging excess energy into the surroundings.”

“At least it doesn’t seem to get dangerous even at close proximity,” Zac muttered. “Alright, this should be the best opportunity to head inside. We have a while before the next ripple hits, just in case.”

The Anointed nodded, and the group departed. There was no way to cover their approach, so they could only rely on speed and hope that no one was keeping watch. The group rushed toward the closest gate, keeping a wide berth of the

kilometer-tall pillar that still radiated some leftover energies after the initial outburst.

There were thankfully no automated defenses in place, and Zac breathed out in relief when the large gate completely ignored them. There was a console on this structure as well, and Zac and his sister walked over. He was obviously not there to deal with the security protocols, but rather to block any attack in case something went wrong.

Kenzie connected her tablet, but she stopped tapping on it after just a few seconds.

“Is something wrong?” Zac asked. “Isn’t your clearance enough?”

“This place is different,” Kenzie muttered, but Zac felt she almost looked a bit excited.

He looked on with confusion as she put her hand against the console. The door slid open a few seconds later, making Zac a bit confused about what was so exciting. It looked like any other time one used those consoles to open a gate.

“What’s going on?” Zac finally asked as he saw his sister look down at her hand with a small smile.

“Genetic lock,” Kenzie whispered. “Really strong one. I don’t think the Datamancers can hack their way through these restrictions. Apart from the two of us, the rest would have to enter through the cracks.”

Zac finally understood why his sister looked so happy. They had been in this realm for weeks now, and this was the first time they’d found any tangible proof of their connection to their mother’s clan. He knew that his sister had hoped to find out more about their Technocrat ancestors in this place, but they hadn’t found anything at all. This gate at least confirmed her bloodline.

Part of Zac wanted to reach out and touch the console as well just to make sure, but fear and doubt held him back. There were some theories hidden in the back of his mind, theories he wasn’t ready to confront just yet. He didn’t want to do anything that might rock the status quo right now.

Instead, he just moved [**Love's Bond**] to block his front as he advanced through the gate. The rest followed in tow, their eyes darting back and forth in search of any threats. However, the insides were pretty austere, with no dangers in sight.

Zac had somewhat expected to enter a corridor similar to the ones in the research base, but it wasn't anything like that. Instead, it looked like the outer wall was just the first of multiple shells, with the next one starting roughly a hundred meters further inside. The space they stood in was sectioned off, with Memorysteel walls making it impossible to walk in a circle around the whole building.

"It really looks like a containment chamber," Kenzie muttered as she looked around curiously. "Multiple layers to isolate the Dimensional Seed inside."

Zac nodded in agreement. It almost felt like one of those places built to contain nuclear waste back on old Earth.

"Are you sure this place isn't dangerous?" Ogras muttered as he looked around. "It feels like we have stepped into a refinement cauldron. Some high-level emissions can kill weak punks like us without notice."

"Look over there," Zac said as he pointed to the left. "Those buildings shouldn't be there if this place was dangerous, right?"

The thing he pointed toward was the only thing of note except the gate in the second-layer wall. It was a series of buildings that looked extremely small compared to the kilometer-high ceiling, but they were actually large enough to house hundreds of people. The buildings stood against the wall a few hundred meters away from the gate.

"That doesn't prove anything," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "I doubt anyone has ever lived in there. This heretic computer might have built this place following some blueprint in its memory, just adding buildings for personnel without understanding why."

"Well, it's impossible to be certain, but I still think the ripples are beneficial if anything. At least I haven't felt

anything wrong with my body,” Zac said. “My danger sense has been completely quiet all this while as well.”

“Our constitutions have been improved as well,” Rhubat added. “I had already exceeded my limits some time ago, hurting my core, but now I feel fine. There is even some room for me to grow yet again.”

“Improving potential?” Ogras muttered with gleaming eyes as he looked up and down the Anointed.

“Let’s go check out the buildings first,” Zac decided. “We shouldn’t delay in case this place really is dangerous.”

The group moved over, but they didn’t find anything even after a thorough search. Ogras was right about one thing; no one had ever lived in this place, further proving that the Tsarun Clan had never reached the core of the research base.

Some of the rooms looked like some science fiction prefab solutions that still hadn’t been decorated. There were kitchens, recreational rooms, cultivation chambers, and living quarters along with some sparse metal furnishings. One room housed what looked like a command center, but the computers were empty of data, and they weren’t even connected to anything.

“I think this place was built in case the creator of this research base ever returned,” Ogras eventually said as he gave Zac a pointed look.

“No point in lingering here,” Zac nodded. “Let’s head for the core.”

The others agreed, and they walked over to the next gate. This one was also made from the bluish Memorysteel, but there seemed to be something else added to it. There were also thin streaks of some golden metal covering its surface, and Zac guessed it was some higher quality alloy compared to Memorysteel.

Kenzie had no problems opening this gate either, and the hundred-ton doors soundlessly slid open after she placed her hand against the console. The group walked through, and Zac almost felt like he had been caught in an illusion loop just like the corridor inside during the Eastern Trigram Hunt. The

environment looked almost identical after they walked through the twenty-meter-thick wall, with the exception that there were no buildings inside this layer.

The group kept moving forward, passing one gate after another. Eventually, they reached the ninth layer, this one solely made from the golden metal they had seen more and more of inside the walls. By this point, they could feel extremely powerful emissions on the other side, and it almost felt like a god was trapped inside.

It wasn't just a matter of intensity, but also quality. It the fluctuations hinted at something vast, something far beyond their understanding. It was just like when Zac had witnessed the corner of the Chaos Pattern. It gave the impression that the very air around him held the answers to all his questions about cultivation, but the information was too esoteric for Zac to gain anything at all.

Zac was pretty confident this was the last layer judging by the quality of materials and the power of the emanations. The layer was a lot smaller by now as well. The insides couldn't be more than five hundred meters high, and thrice that across – a tenth the size of the outermost dome.

There was also another set of buildings next to the gate, but they actually couldn't get inside, according to Kenzie. There were a huge number of security protocols guarding it, and not even their genetic code could help them unlock those rooms. Zac didn't want his sister to use Jeeves to force its way inside at this juncture, so they instead turned to the final gate, which thankfully didn't have the same sort of defenses.

“Here I go,” Kenzie said as she placed her hand against the console.

This time, it took almost a minute, but the doors eventually slid open, which increased those mysterious fluctuations by multiple orders of magnitude.

It still didn't feel dangerous or detrimental, except for the mental pressure that stemmed from the energy. It almost made Zac question everything he had learned about cultivation and the Dao so far, like he was just a child making stuff up while

playing in the mud. The energy around him was the real truth, and if he didn't give up on his wayward ways, he'd never reach the peak of cultivation.

Zac quickly activated [**Soul Guardian**], the sixth and final skill he'd learned in the Dao Repository. A small golden avatar appeared above the soul in his mind as an inscrutable pattern appeared on his forehead. The skill had taken the spot of [**Mental Fortress**] and acted as a dummy to take on all kinds of mental attacks, but even his E-grade mental defense skill couldn't provide any protection against something like this.

However, Zac gradually stabilized his mind, discarding those poisonous thoughts. He knew his path wasn't a lie, but it was simply a matter of grade. The concepts hidden in the air around them were clearly far beyond anything he or anyone else in the group could fathom, but so what? They were not of his path, and his own insights would be able to match these by the time he approached C-grade as well.

That conviction gave him a sense of tranquility that he hadn't really felt since entering the odd isolation building, and it felt like it had somehow solidified his own path even further.

Kenzie had adapted quickly as well, and the Anointed were extremely stoic. Zac had to give it to them. Their power wasn't a match to his own, but their mental fortitude and conviction were extremely strong. They had the makings of powerful cultivators, provided Ibtép's mission was a success.

Billy looked fine as well, seemingly even enjoying the atmosphere. The one who had the worst of it was clearly Ogras, and his face kept undergoing rapid and erratic changes. One second, he looked ecstatic, only to be plunged to the depths of despair the next moment. Sweat was pouring down his face, and his hands twitched. Zac frowned at the scene, but his sister was quicker, and she walked over to him.

"Hey," she said with a soft voice as she placed a hand on his chest. "Don't think too much."

It seemed to work, as his facial expressions gradually calmed down. He exhaled a deep breath he had been holding in before he nodded at Kenzie with gratitude in his eyes. Only

then did Zac relax and turn toward the mysterious object in the center of the room.

The Dimensional Seed.

INNER CHAMBERS

The Dimensional Seed had been the ultimate goal for so many people since its existence was discovered, and Zac was finally standing right in front of it. Just looking in its general direction made Zac's mind scatter again, forcing him to turn his head away. The treasure might not be actively dangerous to interact with, but there was still a vast chasm in terms of grades between them.

It was just like with himself; if he completely unleashed his aura next to someone at level 1, they would most likely die from the pressure. And the difference between him and someone who hadn't started cultivating was probably a lot smaller than the difference between him and the object hovering two hundred meters in the air.

Zac didn't know what he expected the spatial treasure to look like, but he did realize that taking this thing away might have been a fool's dream. First of all, he wasn't even sure he would be able to even get close considering how intense its energy fluctuations were. Secondly, it was pretty big, much too big for the box he had spent an exorbitant amount of money on.

The Dimensional Seed looked like a pulsating black hole, whose oscillations contained the breath of pure Dao in a way that made Zac's brain almost short-circuit when he tried to understand what he was looking at. Its diameter fluctuated between ten and thirty meters, so unless there was some sort of smaller core in the heart of that anomaly, there was no way it'd

fit inside the box. Not that snatching this thing was his main goal.

Besides, it felt all too apparent after seeing this treasure that it would bring more problems than it was worth. Something emitting spatial fluctuations this powerful probably couldn't be stowed away in a Spatial Ring, and it was only a matter of time before some old monster learned of it and became greedy.

A treasure like the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]** was extremely rare and had amazing effects, but its use was ultimately limited to E-grade juniors. Yet it had caused Yrial endless troubles when it was exposed. The thing in the heart of the chamber was clearly meant for higher-grade cultivators, and Zac couldn't even imagine what kind of storm such an item would elicit.

Zac shook his head and instead started to inspect the rest of the enormous chamber. There seemed to be a thousand pillars rising from the ground, all of them pointing toward the Dimensional Seed in the air. They were roughly five meters across at their base, but they turned to thin spears at the end. It was the same with the domed walls and ceiling, with spikes hundreds of meters long all pointing toward the heart of the room. There was even one twenty meters above their heads, angled upward.

The spikes weren't placed completely uniformly, though, and Zac almost got lost in thought as he looked at them. It felt like there was some hidden meaning to the pattern they created, like they formed some sort of array. The meaning was far beyond his understanding, but Zac had an idea what they were there for: to suspend and seal the Dimensional Seed.

The pulsating anomaly was trapped inside a sphere seemingly made from thousands of different Daos. Each pulse made the barrier flutter, but it was clear that the containment shield was stopping most of the energies from escaping. Perhaps it would have been impossible for them to stand in this place without the pillars keeping the treasure sealed up.

One thing that made the thousands of spears stand out compared to normal Technocrat machines was that they seemed to run on something other than Base Power or that plasma energy that the *Little Bean* used. It was rather Dao that ran through the metallic spears. It wasn't Spatial Dao like the Dimensional Seed emitted, but rather all kinds of mysterious energies.

It made Zac realize that it might not actually be the Dimensional Seed that was the source of those ripples before, at least not the sole source.

"This..." Kenzie whispered as she looked around with shock in her eyes. "It's so similar..."

"Similar to what?" Zac asked with confusion since he had never seen anything like this.

"Ah? Nothing." Kenzie shrugged.

Zac slowly nodded before turning to Rhubat.

"Can you sense something? Are they here?" Zac asked.

With hundreds of thick pillars covering the ground, visibility was even worse than in a forest, and Zac couldn't see further than a hundred meters on the ground. A whole army could be loitering on the other side of the innermost chamber without them having any idea of it.

Not only that, but the spears also gave off a weird humming white noise that made it hard to just hear each other. Zac would probably be able to scream at the top of his lungs without exposing their location.

"We can't sense anything. Between these pillars and the treasure itself, our senses are almost completely blinded," Rhubat said with a shake of their head. "It's like standing in the middle of a sandstorm."

Zac hesitantly looked around the chamber once more, not sure what they should do next.

"Let's scout out the room, make sure we're the only ones here. Perhaps we can set up a trap if we can figure out where the others will come from," Zac eventually said.

The group didn't spread out in case there really were others in this place, rather opting to stay together as they walked between the spears. A few of them emitted Daos that were completely foreign to Zac, while others felt a bit more familiar. Zac gazed at the thousands of spears, and he couldn't help but wonder if all the main branches of the Dao under the System were represented in this chamber.

Was it perhaps possible to find the pillars that were related to his own path and use them to progress further?

"They are powered by Origin Dao," Kenzie murmured. "It's not true insight, but rather a forced mimicry... Still..."

"What!" Rhubat suddenly exclaimed, startling Kenzie out of her musings. "There is someone inside the anomaly!"

"Impossible," Ogras blurted as his eyes darted up, but he was immediately forced to look away again.

Zac tried to forcibly peer into the Dimensional Seed with [Cosmic Gaze] to see what Rhubat was talking about, but it was even worse than staring straight into the sun. Kenzie summoned a handful of drones, and a video feed appeared on her screen as she tapped away. The image kept shifting like she was adding various filters, and Zac's eyes widened when he could see a vague outline of a person for a moment.

Someone was really sitting on top of the Dimensional Seed and was hidden by the powerful emanations.

"It's true!" Kenzie exclaimed. "They are even inside that inner shield! How can anyone withstand that?!"

"Their auras are converging," Rhubat said with a frown, and a few other Anointed nodded after they closed their eyes. "I barely sensed it. I think the person inside is trying to fuse with the item, or at least form a connection to it. It has to be Adcarkas. Who else has that kind of capability?"

"Is the bad guy eating that ball?" Billy muttered with wide eyes. "Scary."

"More like suicidal," Ogras muttered with disbelief. "But if he somehow succeeds..."

“We can’t let that happen,” Zac said with gritted teeth as his gaze moved to one of the pillars sticking out from the wall. “Get ready for battle; there is no time to lose.”

“Those are the eyes of someone about to do something foolish,” Ogras said. “Don’t act hastily.”

“Void’s Disciple is probably in a trance at the moment since he sits there unmoving, but he might wake up if we start experimenting with ways of dragging him down. I’ll have to go all out from the start,” Zac said as he turned to his sister. “That Dao shield, can I pass through it?”

“What? You want to enter that thing? The barrier seems to only restrain the energies the seed emits, but that means the aura is far stronger inside. You might die just from the atmosphere alone if you jump through,” Kenzie said with worry.

“I don’t believe I’ll instantly die if that guy can comfortably sit up there,” Zac muttered. “I should at least be able to drag him down. There’s no time to waste. Be ready to unleash some powerful strikes. Perhaps we can kill him in one go.”

“I still think—” Kenzie tried to interject, but Zac just shook his head as he readied his axe and shield.

“We will not fail you, Warmaster,” Rhubat rumbled, and the auras of all the Anointed started to rise, a telltale sign of them activating their life-burning method.

Billy prepared himself as well, as his usually silly expression was replaced with steely determination. Even Ogras had discarded his lackadaisical demeanor as he slowly melded with the surroundings, his spear already in his hand.

Zac took a last steadying breath before he disappeared, and a deep indent appeared on one of the long spikes a moment later as he used it as a launching pad to shoot into the air. However, he didn’t fly straight toward the Dimensional Seed, but rather made it look like he would miss it by fifty meters just in case Void’s Disciple was actually observing their moves.

However, just as it looked like he would shoot straight past the floating treasure, a barely noticeable patch of grass appeared under his right foot, and he suddenly disappeared. Space constricted as he took a step through shrunken space, and he pushed straight through the Dao barrier and toward the barely visible figure inside the black energy emanations.

The halo of [**Conformation of Supremacy**] had already appeared behind him, filling him with a sense of power as the Everlasting Shield radiated a world-crushing weight. If it really was Adcarkas sitting inside, then Zac had already cut this guy in two once without much success. So he figured he'd try to crush him instead this time around. If it failed, the force should at least be powerful enough to knock him down from the Dimensional Seed.

However, Zac completely lost control of his skill the moment he entered the anomaly, and it felt like his whole body was disintegrating as immensely powerful Spatial Energies threatened to rip him apart. Zac's perception of reality was being put through the wringer, and his whole body was being expanded to the size of a galaxy one moment, only for it to be shrunk into the size of an atom the next.

This was way beyond what he had endured when the Mystic Realm underwent those spatial upheavals, over ten times worse. Even his soul was unable to maintain its integrity and was being bent and twisted like a piece of clay. Zac was completely helpless as he shot forward. The containment shield was just fifty meters across, but that short journey felt even longer than flying to the moon.

Alien energies threatened to completely rip his body apart, but the welcome beat of his hidden node suddenly echoed out in the darkness. This was why Zac had some confidence in attempting this. His [**Void Heart**] had even dared to eat the tribulation lightning of the Heavens themselves, so what was some energy runoff from a C-grade treasure? The hidden node happily gobbled up mouthfuls of the spatial energies, which gave Zac back some of his presence of mind.

Zac's plan had already failed, but he thankfully had a backup. He hurriedly infused [**Love's Bond**] with the

Fragment of the Coffin to toughen it up even further. A shudder went through Zac's body as he felt a collision, which was followed by a startled roar of anger before the world turned back to normal.

[Loamwalker] was not an actual teleportation skill like Ogras' shadow-walk, which had both positives and negatives. In this case, it was an asset, as his momentum was real when he shot forward from the floating patch of grass. Zac had lost all sense of his surroundings for a while there, but he was moving straight toward the meditating person, and his shield was pretty bulky.

His momentum had made him not only knock the person off the Dimensional Seed but also pushed both of them out of the containment shield. His senses were still all messed up even if **[Void Heart]** had swallowed most of the terrifying Spatial Energies, and he couldn't make sense of the twisting scenes around him. Zac tried to grab his target, but he only grasped empty air for a few seconds until he slammed down onto the hard metal floor.

Thankfully, Zac was not alone. Someone dragged a nigh-delirious Zac away just in time before twenty enormous seals slammed down as one, causing even the extremely sturdy golden alloy to dent. It was immediately followed by a hulking smash by a roaring Billy, who had already grown to ten meters.

The Titan started charging a second strike to follow up on the first, and the moment the massive club was lifted from the ground, over fifty drones shot at the same spot, the combined force of their lasers almost tearing a hole in space itself.

An endless barrage of shadow spears kept up the pressure on the spot until a meter-thick lance of pure darkness shot the target, swallowing everything whole. An even more powerful follow-up swing from Billy kept the combo going, and the echoes of metallic clangor echoed out. The Anointed kept attacking the unmoving body as well, unleashing millennia of pent-up fury.

Zac could finally tell left from right as he stumbled back on his feet, and he realized that he had been dragged right next to his sister. He nodded at her before he looked over at the carnage with a frown.

Something was wrong.

The target hadn't even moved or so much as activated a defense, as far as Zac could tell, but why didn't they die? Even Zac wouldn't survive an onslaught like that unless he blocked it somehow. A piercing scream of danger forced Zac into action, and he desperately flashed out of the way while dragging his sister with him.

It was just in time as well, as a hand appeared out of nowhere, grabbing straight for his throat with enough force to make the air twist.

“Back away,” Zac whispered to his sister as he stared at the attacker with confusion and some trepidation. “Why is it you?!”

MAD AMBITION

Zac had been completely convinced that it was Void's Disciple he'd tackled and pushed down from the Dimensional Seed. Who else would be able to withstand the intense fluctuations except for a Spatial Cultivator? But it turned out he was wrong. The aura of the one he'd tackled was identical to the one who had attacked him just now, and it wasn't Adcarkas.

The person standing in front of him with an expression rife with killing intent was still someone he knew, though; it was Inevitability.

He hadn't seen the second Dominator since they met in the Eastern Trigram Hunt. The battle back then had been completely lopsided with Zac only escaping with his life because Thea had used her ultimate escape skill. However, Zac had left for the Tower of Eternity and evolved into E-grade since then. Zac had believed that he had not only caught up but far surpassed the murderous chain-wielding Zhix by now, but it was clear that Zac wasn't the only one who had made tremendous steps forward.

The aura Inevitability emitted gave Zac some palpitations, like he was once more standing in front of a blood-drenched level 100 warrior while still muddling along as a level 60 human. She had gained a lot of levels thanks to her killing points during the Hunt, but that alone couldn't account for the enormous transformation of her aura.

The Inevitability of back then had first seemed like a curious child before she turned into a monstrosity full of unbridled bloodlust. But the Inevitability in front of him had

already reined in her killing intent and now gazed at him with a calculating look, like a coldhearted killer observing its prey.

Zac also didn't know how she was almost unscathed after all those attacks. The only one who seemed to have managed to hit her was actually Ogras, judging by the shadowy aura in a small wound on her left shoulder. That meant that she really had been there when the other attacks landed, but it was like they never actually hit her.

The people Zac had brought here weren't fools who would hit empty air, and he had seen for himself them slam down on the unmoving body of the target. Zac glanced over to the spot Inevitability had landed. As expected, the body had simply disappeared, and the Anointed had instead turned to Inevitability with solemn expressions.

Also, where the hell was Void's Disciple? Adcarkas was neither the one cultivating on top of the Dimensional Seed nor the one who attacked him. But surely he wouldn't stay back and let Inevitability fight all of them? Nothing was like how Zac had planned things out, and it made him hesitate.

"So Karma has finally brought you here. I hoped that this building would delay you for another day. Well, searching for perfection is a fool's errand." Inevitability sighed as she looked Zac up and down. "The threads of fate surrounding you just keep growing. I have to say I am a bit jealous. But cultivation is ultimately a struggle against the Heavens. If fate does not choose you, then you simply need to subvert fate. That by itself might lead to greater things."

Zac's brows furrowed even further when he heard Inevitability speak, and the sense of wrongness just increased. This was definitely not how Inevitability spoke back then.

"Adcarkas!" Rhubat exclaimed with shock, making Zac look over with confusion. "How is this possible?! Why do you look like Kirath?!"

"Oh? I guess I can't hide from your senses, Chainbreaker," Inevitability snorted.

Or perhaps it was more apt to say “Void’s Disciple.” Zac finally understood what was going on, why the Inevitability of his memories was so different from the one in front of him. However, the realization only created more questions than answers.

“Possession,” Zac muttered, looking at the Zhix with disgust. “You said Inevitability was like a child to you when we met the first time, yet you steal her body?”

“Kirath wanted to contribute, to help me on my journey to the peak. What better way than to provide her body and to give me a chance to escape the chains of Karma?” Adcarkas smiled. “The fetters to my old body were too great, and it had long missed the prime window for building momentum strong enough to reach the peak.”

A wave of repulsion filled Zac’s heart as he looked at Void’s Disciple. His actions were so far into taboo territory that he would never be able to follow the normal path to power. Possessing one’s family; who’d do something like that? Anyone with even a sliver of conscience would get a mental demon from an action like that, and their cultivation road would be fraught with danger and missteps.

Furthermore, possession was definitely marred with problems. If it wasn’t, then old cultivators would just pick a new body and retrain from the start. Levels came easy, but insight did not. Imagine being a Peak C-grade cultivator stepping into the F-grade again? You would turn into a monster far greater than Zac ever was.

And what was that about chains of fate? Zac had until now operated under the assumption that Void’s Disciple was a devout follower of the Great Redeemer, but it didn’t sound like it from that expression.

“You’re not here to give your master this treasure?” Zac asked.

Void’s Disciple looked at Zac with a teasing smile before he looked up at the sky.

“Not all is as it seems. Hm, I guess there’s no harm in telling you; the embryo will not be able to break out for over a day. This Dimensional Seed is a divine treasure for someone at the peak of the D-grade. Incorporating it into your core can open the road to Monarchy. But why would I waste such a rare treasure on Voridis A’Heliophos when it is perfectly suited for me?”

“Is that why you killed Inevitability?” Zac asked as he circulated his energy while trying to come up with a plan.

There were too many variables at the moment. The aura of this merged Dominator was too weird, too powerful, making Zac a bit unsure he had what it took to succeed. Besides, he was clearly far more affected by the emanations of the Dimensional Seed than Adcarkas, and any second, he could stall to regain his wits would increase his odds of victory.

“Kirath lives on through me. She will never die as long as I keep walking down my path.” Adcarkas smiled. “Luckily, part of our master’s Heritage was a Body Tempering Method to turn our bodies into suitable vessels for possession. I guess Master desired a fallback in case his experiment failed. I simply made some adjustments to better suit my purposes.

“This body was then reforged with the energy of the seed, and my soul has already been suffused with the Dao of Space. It will allow a nigh-perfect fusion, and the next step is to infuse the seed itself into my body. That will be my foundation for my Immortal Path. A Spatial Constitution with a Seed of Origin, a miracle that has never appeared in this sector.” Adcarkas smiled.

“Why are you telling all of us this?” Zac frowned.

“Isn’t it too sad? To have stumbled onto this earth-shattering opportunity and survived the almost-certain demise of putting thoughts to action, yet have no one to tell of your exploits? The moment I step out into the cosmos, I will have to hide my true power, but at least here I can speak freely.” Adcarkas laughed before his eyes locked onto Zac’s. “Now I just need to tie up a few loose ends. With the death of this world and your soul extracted, I will have closed this ancient

chapter of Karma. The ties will be cut, and I'll be free to pursue my truth."

"Attack!" Zac roared, knowing his window to recuperate was up.

He was still a bit woozy, but there was not much he could do other than fight. It was unfortunately clear that Adcarkas had the home-field advantage, as the Dimensional Seed suddenly flashed, and thousands of spatial tears appeared all through the chamber. As for Adcarkas himself, he activated the skill that created a huge number of stars around him.

Zac shot forward after making sure that his sister was safe. It looked like she could control the golden alloy like she could the Memorysteel, and it swam up around her to form a small dome. Billy and the remaining Anointed quickly grouped up in five small squads as they formed an encirclement led by Rhubat, and their auras rose as the air itself congealed.

Zac hadn't seen this method used before, and he guessed it was something they had gotten their hands on to deal with Void's Disciple's spatial abilities. Of course, whether it would be able to prevent him from escaping was still up for debate. There wasn't much else the Anointed could do against someone like Adcarkas, though, but they could perhaps skew victory in their favor by stabilizing space itself in an arena.

Zac saw that their plan wasn't completely without merit, as not a single one of the endless spatial tears had opened up within a hundred-meter radius.

The alloy floor gave off creaks of pain as Zac pushed [**Loamwalker**] to the limits, and he moved between the stars like a ghost. A few of them exploded just as he passed, but reaching Peak mastery in the skill had improved the speed even further, allowing Zac to push through the minefield with only minor wounds.

He was suddenly in melee range of the target, and [**Verun's Bite**] keened as Zac tried to strike the Dominator with a series of probing attacks. The Dominator's confidence was a bit disconcerting, and Zac felt he was missing something. After all, he had barely escaped with his life last

time, even getting himself cut in two. Yet now he felt confident enough to start monologuing like a TV villain; something was definitely up.

Something like possession should also cause all kinds of trouble, like lacking compatibility between soul and body. Perhaps even rejection like a transplant. Yet he was leisurely talking like he had everything under control. It might be bluster, but Zac didn't want to burn his aces from the get-go before getting a better understanding of the situation.

The only one who had managed to harm Adcarkas until now was Ogras, and Zac figured it was thanks to the demon's shadow-related Dao Fragment. That might be the key to killing him, so each of Zac's swings was imbued with the Fragment of the Coffin, giving them a hint of putrefaction and extra force. His Fragment of the Axe was even stronger, but Zac wanted to hold off on it a while longer since Adcarkas still shouldn't know he had evolved it, and that might create an opening sooner or later.

The Anointed weren't actually attacking, only focusing on restraining the space around him, which no doubt was a herculean task considering the Dimensional Seed radiated immense energies right above their heads. Their life force was rapidly being expended just to weaken Adcarkas' advantage.

Ogras wasn't as limited considering his versatile combat style, and shadow spears kept appearing to strike at the Zhix as well. Even the stars cast weak shadows, allowing the demon to turn the Dominator's skill against him. It was the same with Kenzie, who had over a hundred drones flying around to hopefully distract the target. Laser beams suddenly shot toward the Zhix without warning from unexpected angles as drones appeared from behind spatial tears or the pillars.

However, the shadow spears didn't manage to cause any real harm to the Dominator, and there was something odd happening with the laser strikes. Zac knew all too well Jeeves' calculation capabilities, and he knew that it shouldn't keep making mistakes. But it was like his sister kept getting unlucky as the slowly moving stars somehow managed to block the shots over and over without seemingly speeding up

at all. The stars formed some sort of elusive pattern that protected the Zhix when it looked like there were a lot of openings.

Adcarkas didn't seem to be in a hurry to end the fight, and he happily started to exchange strikes with Zac, just like how the two had fought back on Earth. The situation was extremely odd, though, as Zac felt himself under tremendous pressure. Zac was fighting tooth and nail, his swings almost creating a blur as he tried to make the Zhix slip up by keeping up a relentless barrage. If he could somehow cause Adcarkas to lose his concentration, Zac might be able to hit him with a surprise slam from **[Nature's Punishment]**.

But Zac felt a growing sense of inability as he exchanged strike after strike. No matter what he tried or how much he pushed himself, there was always a palm waiting. If anything, it felt like Adcarkas moved slower compared to their last fight, yet he was even more impervious.

Zac soon understood what was going on; everything Adcarkas did was imbued with the Dao of Space. The suns moved, following some hidden rules that created an absolute defense, and his own movements created a great effect with minimal effort thanks to his high command of the Dao.

It was an eye-opening experience to see someone fight so in tune with his path, and Zac would be in awe of Adcarkas if the man weren't trying to extract his soul. This was exactly the state Zac needed to reach for himself. He had created his path based on his trinity of Daos, but he still didn't have much to show for it. Adcarkas had gone much further on this path and was already infusing it with every single movement he took.

Zac didn't understand the concepts that were the basis of Adcarkas' altered combat style, but the battle was still a huge revelation to him. It felt like a flood of inspiration washed over him as he fought, and Zac finally understood what his next step should be in improving how he fought. Unfortunately, Zac soon realized that just as he was gaining a lot from the battle, so was Adcarkas.

The Dominator was actually using him as a whetstone to consolidate his gains.

It might be possible that he was getting used to his new body as well, but in either case, it wasn't a good feeling to be disregarded to the point he was just considered a training tool rather than a deadly foe. It almost felt like Adcarkas believed he could end the battle at any moment if he wished to.

And just as Zac feared, things suddenly changed. Zac had attacked the Dominator's head with two of his chains, trying to force him to use his arms to block. And just as the Zhix lifted his hand to intercept, Zac's axe flashed forward with enough speed to almost break space. Zac wanted to cut off one of the Dominator's hands, but he would be content if he just managed to wound it.

Zac's eyes widened in surprise when the axe actually passed right through the wrist, but surprise turned to confusion when only a shallow wound appeared. His mind screamed of danger the next moment as the Zhix launched a lightning-quick counterstrike aimed straight at his head, forcing Zac to hurriedly block with two chains of **[Love's Bond]**.

Fist and metal clashed with huge force, but the chains suddenly slipped straight through his arm the moment Zac tried to ensnare him.

"He's shifting his body in and out of space," Kenzie's voice echoed out from a drone. "Just like the werewolves turning into light, but instead using the Dao of Space."

"Oh?" Void's Disciple said as he looked at the golden alloy bubble with interest as he effortlessly kept blocking Zac's strikes. "So you're the sister, the genius? I am guessing you are the reason you all managed to interrupt my cultivation so quickly. Well, I did promise Kirath revenge for her brother. You could say this would be poetic justice."

Space started to crack the next moment as a rift opened up. It looked like the array the Anointed maintained was resisting its emergence, but Adcarkas was simply too powerful if he put his mind to it. A flame of fury ignited in Zac's heart when he realized what the Zhix was doing, and his aura veritably

exploded as any thought of probing was thrown out the window.

Adcarkas was crazy if he thought he could hurt Kenzie right in front of him.

OVERPOWERING

Adrenaline and fear coursed through Zac's body as he saw the spatial tear in front of Adcarkas widen. It wasn't because of the ability itself, but rather what he saw through the rip in space. It was his sister surrounded by multiple monitors. The tear was somehow completely bypassing the golden alloy to allow the Dominator to strike straight at Kenzie.

In fact, the reason that Adcarkas seemed to be struggling so hard to open the tear might actually not be due to the Anointed's efforts, but rather the alloy itself. It was also possible the alloy lost its isolating properties the moment Kenzie started fiddling with it. There was no time or point to starting to analyze the situation though, and Zac unhesitantly unleashed [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and the surge of power perfectly blended with his true fury as he shot forward.

"Hmph," Adcarkas snorted as he glanced in Zac's direction.

The Dominator punched out toward him, and the swing generated a small sphere that almost looked like a black hole. Zac didn't recognize the skill or what threat it posed, but he didn't care. A fractal blade had already appeared on [**Verun's Bite**], and two clouds were released in quick succession. The spatial ball greedily swallowed the energies Zac released with [**Rapturous Divide**] for a second before it detonated, decimating everything in its path with a wave of spatial tears aimed straight at Zac.

Zac gritted his teeth and pushed straight into the storm, and bleeding gashes appeared all over his body as he forced his

way through the chaos. Thankfully, the path was suddenly clear as the divide between heaven and hell was formed in the chaos, paving a road for Zac to pass through. Adcarkas stood on the other side, clearly surprised that Zac had managed to cut through his manmade spatial storm so quickly.

The Dominator's arm had already reached into the tear. Kenzie desperately tried to keep him at bay, but her elemental attacks were completely unable to deter him. No matter how skilled her control of her Dao was, it simply couldn't compete with raw power. A terrifying pressure suddenly burst out from Zac as the halo of **[Conformation of Supremacy]** reappeared behind his back. He roared in rage as he swung his axe in a wide horizontal arc, and space itself buckled inward as the weight of the Eternal Shield was added to the swing.

Adcarkas moved his free palm as a swirling vortex appeared to block, but just as the two forces clashed, a third one appeared as a huge wooden hand appeared out of nowhere. Zac still hadn't figured out exactly how Void's Disciple was avoiding attacks by his spatial shifting, but he couldn't hold back right now. Besides, with one of the Dominator's hands inside a spatial tear and the other one blocking **[Conformation of Supremacy]**, this was the best opportunity to try to end things since the beginning of the fight.

"Ogras!" Zac roared as well, and a storm of Dao-infused spears rose from the ground, almost completely swallowing the Zhix.

Another beam of pure darkness hit the Zhix from behind, and Zac added the final ingredient of his plan; he flooded the area with a Dao Field empowered by **[Spiritual Void]**. There was no way that Adcarkas' spatial shift was infallible. Dao restrained Dao, and if Ogras could wound Adcarkas, then this maxed-out Dao Field would hopefully be able to interfere with his ability to avoid getting hit.

The hand pushed down toward the ground with earth-shattering force. Adcarkas' reaction time was shocking, and his body grew just like during the end toward the last battle. Zac inwardly swore in disappointment upon realizing his skills

seemed to have been passed along as well. He had hoped that some things would get lost when swapping bodies, but he had already used three of his old skills, so it didn't look hopeful.

The Zhix ripped out his arm from the spatial tear, dragging a huge chunk of ice with him. It was Kenzie's attempt to lock his arm in place, but it had unfortunately failed. Still, the hand had appeared just a meter above the Dominator's head, and it was barreling down on him. A black hand slammed upward as Adcarkas roared, forcing **[Nature's Punishment]** to stop in its tracks.

A tremendous shockwave from the clash pushed Zac away, and it was powerful enough to break a few of the closest pillars clean off. Zac glanced up at the Dimensional Seed with fear, but he breathed in relief when he saw that the shield still held even after losing some of its Dao Source.

More surprisingly, it looked like Adcarkas became absolutely infuriated upon seeing the spears break off and fall onto the ground.

"You fool!" he roared as his aura exploded even further.

The Zhix had already dispelled the force of **[Conformation of Supremacy]**, so he pushed his second hand up as well to deal with the hand of **[Nature's Punishment]**. An absolute storm of pure spatial chaos erupted the next moment, and Zac realized he wouldn't be able to withstand the force for long even when infusing the attack with Fragment of the Bodhi.

But the fire of fury in his chest had still not abated after seeing the Zhix targeting his sister, and he pushed through the spatial tears around Adcarkas, ignoring the second set of cuts that sprouted across his body. He emerged through the turbulence like an angry bull, and he resummoned **[Conformation of Supremacy]** while dispelling **[Nature's Punishment]** half a second before it would break by itself.

Adcarkas tried to move his hands down again to block, but Zac's attack, summoned by the Void and empowered by a towering fury, was too quick, and his strike crashed straight into Adcarkas' chest. It first looked like the Dominator tried to

phase out of reality to avoid the strike, but the area was suffused with too many high-grade concepts.

Instead, he could only hastily activate a skill to block, but Zac's momentum was far beyond what he could impede. **[Verun's Bite]** tore through a wall of condensed space, and cracking sounds echoed out as Adcarkas was flung over a hundred meters away. It worked! Zac wanted to roar in triumph at finally harming this monster, but he didn't even get a chance to celebrate before the situation turned for the worse.

It first looked like Adcarkas would collide with yet another of the pillars, hopefully getting hurt even further from the impact. But a Space Gate suddenly appeared right in his trajectory, swallowing the Dominator whole. A sudden scream of danger made Zac hurriedly turn around, but he was too slow.

Another gate had appeared right behind him, and a red-eyed Void's Disciple had already launched a strike. A world-ending punch hit Zac right back, and the impact caused the air to crack. Zac felt like his organs had been crushed, and he spat out a mouthful of blood as he was flung away. He didn't have the means of Void's Disciple, but he did manage to stop his flight with the help of his chains just before slamming into one of the five squads.

The Anointed quickly backed away while maintaining the array, and Zac could only push away the pain while shooting forward again. There was not much else the Anointed could do to help except stay out of the way. The original plan had been for them to stall one of the Dominators long enough for Zac and Ogras to kill the other, at which point Zac would deal with the second one as well.

Now they could only do what they could to support Zac from a distance since there was no point in them throwing away their lives.

The initial attempt at finishing off the Dominator had failed, but Zac refused to give up. At least they had managed to wound him, and Zac didn't believe that the spatial energies

seeping out from the Dimensional Seed could help him heal as well. They should be able to whittle him down in this manner.

But Zac soon found himself under a relentless storm of strikes, and Void's Disciple's visage had turned into a mask of fury. Strikes with enough force to shatter mountains were launched in a relentless flurry, and they still incorporated the esoteric and unpredictable methods of space.

Zac kept [**Conformation of Supremacy**] constantly active as he tried to give as good as he got, but his body was already a bloody mess after pushing through two spatial storms. Ogras tried to help as best he could, but another galaxy had appeared, trapping Zac in a death cage, where he gradually lost the initiative.

A fist appeared out of nowhere, and Zac saw white for an instant as it landed straight on the side of his head. The punch was powerful enough to almost make it look like Zac was teleported as he slammed into the ground, and even the sturdy golden alloy gained a small dent from the impact. Anyone else at Zac's level would probably have been killed then and there.

Zac's vision swam, but he still swung his axe in a ruthless upward trajectory aimed to cripple the Dominator's legs, all while trying to figure out his next step. He simply wasn't a match in close quarters against Void's Disciple any longer. His attributes had clearly increased as much as Zac's own, and he had found a method to incorporate his Dao into his combat technique.

Furthermore, it seemed he was drawing combat strength from the Dimensional Seed itself.

Zac couldn't take the [**Rageroot Oak Seed**] either since he had already activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and changing to his undead side was impossible since Adcarkas was solely focusing on him. Destroying a few of those pillars had well and truly pissed off the Dominator, though Zac couldn't figure out why.

There was no choice; he had to take a gamble and use the crystal he'd gotten from the Gemlings. He had kept it for now since Void's Disciple hadn't taken out any items during the

fight, but he would be wounded to the point that he would be unable to keep going if he didn't turn things around. He only had less than twenty seconds remaining on [**Hatchetman's Rage**] as well, so this was his last chance to turn things around before he entered a weakened state.

But just as Zac was about to take out the crystal from his Spatial Ring, a radiant drop of pure white light emerged from one of the cracks in the domed ceiling. The drop turned into a beam of light that shot straight toward them.

Anywhere the beam passed was drenched in lunar light. Its movement was shockingly quick, and it was upon them before Adcarkas had a chance to attempt finishing Zac off. A large claw appeared the next moment, and Zac's eyes widened when he sensed the shocking might it contained. This was completely different compared to any of the werewolves he had fought until now. This single attack was definitely powerful enough to threaten Zac's life.

There was no question about it; Cervantes had arrived.

Thankfully, it looked like the werewolf leader wasn't intending to pile onto Zac's suffering, as the massive claw passed him right by, aiming for Adcarkas' throat. The Dominator growled in annoyance as he sideswiped, and his hand formed a small vortex. Palm and claw collided, and the force threw Zac away, giving him a breather.

Cervantes' surprise attack was unfortunately not enough to take out the overwhelmingly powerful Dominator, but he didn't seem reconciled with that fact as his body turned into a blur. Ten, fifty, hundreds of attacks were launched with a speed that would put both Ogras and Thea to shame. Not only that, the attacks actually contained enough force to almost match Zac's own.

Zac quickly seized the opportunity to eat a healing pill before activating his Specialty Core. A wave of Miasma spread throughout his body as he pretended to struggle to get back on his feet while Cervantes and Adcarkas duked it out a few hundred meters away. It was an extremely odd scene, as their attacks kept swiping through each other's bodies.

One shifted in and out of space while the other turned parts of his body into lunar light with pinpoint precision. It almost looked like two holograms were fighting. Still, the two actually clashed every now and then, causing huge shockwaves to spread out. Zac tried to remember the timing, as he guessed that was a clue to the limits of their defensive measures.

The two were locked in a stalemate for a few seconds, but they suddenly flashed away to create some distance.

“You barely managed to escape thanks to your kin sacrificing everything, yet you come back like a moth to the flames? Laughable,” Void’s Disciple snorted, causing Cervantes to emit a terrifying killing intent.

“Human, our tribes have our differences, but we cannot let this one leave this place alive. If we do, no one will survive for long on the outside,” the werewolf growled without taking his eyes off Void’s Disciple.

Zac frowned as he looked at the wounds covering Cervantes’ body, and he understood what had transpired without his notice. It looked like his own battle against the cultists wasn’t the only war that had taken place in this Hidden Realm. It turned out that the werewolves and Void’s Disciple had already clashed once, and Void’s Disciple had emerged victorious, from the sounds of it.

That by itself was pretty troubling, considering that Zac didn’t feel confident at all in dealing with Cervantes without using his **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**. And that was just going by what he had seen so far. An old monster like Cervantes no doubt had a bunch of aces to use when his and his tribe members’ lives were on the line.

Yet they had died, while Adcarkas lived. It was even more proof of the terrifying power Void’s Disciple had gained in this Hidden Realm.

“Let’s work together,” Zac agreed with a voice full of death as a storm of Miasma started to swirl around him.

Zac didn't delude himself that he could suddenly patch things up with the Lunar Tribe, but they shared a common enemy for now. As for what would happen after they dealt with Adcarkas, that was a problem for the future.

"You are hiding some peculiar methods," Cervantes muttered, shifting his gaze from Adcarkas to Zac for the first time.

"Interesting, interesting." Void's Disciple laughed in turn.

Zac hated how he was forced to expose his undead side like this, but there was nothing else to do. He had already exhausted his human side except for **[Deforestation]**, and that skill was meant for large-scale battle. His odds of defeating Adcarkas were far greater in his undead form, especially if he could make use of Cervantes' offensive power while he restrained the Zhix.

Besides, if both of them died before Zac left this place, then there would be no one to spread his secret.

THE KEY TO LIFE

Zac held no delusions that Cervantes wouldn't try to kill him the moment they had managed to deal with the Dominator, but troubled times called for strange alliances. Zac cracked his neck as he looked at his current state. A wave of exhaustion had already hit him since the boost of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** had ended, but the weakness was at least somewhat mitigated after swapping Race.

However, there was no way he'd take out Adcarkas in his current state. He had already taken out one of his spare shields so that he would be able to use the offensive form of **[Love's Bond]**, but he knew he would have to take some risks if he wanted to win.

"I knew you were related to the mysterious undead who kept destroying incursions, but I figured it was a Soul Slave you had managed to get your hands on somehow," Adcarkas snorted, seemingly having forgotten about his anger thanks to this surprising turn of events. "This is far more intriguing. After I extract your soul, I'll study your body extensively."

"That's if you can actually survive what comes next," Zac snorted as he took out a small seed from his Spatial Ring and pushed it into his mouth while a thick black armor covered his whole body.

Death comes for all, except for him. He was eternal, a being of unmatched power and longevity. For this spatial bug to impugn on his sovereignty was a heretical act at the level of going against the Heavens themselves. Judgment had to be

exacted. However, he was tired, and even gods needed nourishment.

A small sharp spike appeared in his hand, and Zac grinned with fervor as he ripped off some armor plating and stabbed it into his leg. A swirling warmth flooded his aching bones, and he finally felt like his true self. Why had he feared these spikes before? How would they ever be able to harm a celestial being such as himself?

Four chains shot out, each one of them snaking its links around one of the closest pillars. The alloy groaned and twisted the next moment as Zac imbued his Spirit Tool with more and more Miasma until a series of creaking sounds started to echo out. Finally, the alloy spears broke off, but they fell onto the ground, far too heavy for the chains to lift.

“Stop, you lunatic!” Adcarkas roared as he rushed forward while Zac roared in anger at being unable to wield the hundred-meter-tall pillars as weapons.

At least the mortal was rushing toward him, delivering himself for sentencing. However, Zac’s thoughts were suddenly cleared as Void’s Disciple disappeared just before a terrifying punch hit him in his side. It felt like his spine would snap in two as he was thrown away, and he would have been thrown to the other side of the room if he still weren’t connected to the pillars. Instead, he made a parabolic arc before he slammed into the ground with shocking momentum.

Zac took a shuddering breath while scrambling back on his feet. He had been prepared for the insidious effect of the berserker treasure, yet he had still gotten swept up in his delusions of grandeur for a moment there. His soul had undergone some change and tempering, thanks to the Tribulation Lightning being released from his **[Void Heart]**, and he thankfully woke up after getting punched just once.

He was aghast at having stabbed himself with one of the spikes of Faceless #9, but at least he didn’t have any too bad adverse side effects just yet. However, it was clearly not benign liquid he had imbued himself with. It felt like a scorching poison, and all his organs and muscles were

attacked. The pain was pretty bad, even after the numbing effects of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**.

But the compound did force out energy and potential hidden in the depths of his cells, which was exactly what he needed at the moment. Using this thing would no doubt come at a hefty price, especially in conjuncture with another berserking item. But now was not the time to worry about that.

His thick armor plating and sturdy undead constitution had thankfully blocked out a lot of the damage from the punch, and he quickly recalled his chains as he watched the change that was taking hold of Void's Disciple. It almost looked like he was in a state of euphoria as thick streams of spatial energy bored into his body.

Four more pillars had broken thanks to his temporary bout of insanity, and the air was even more suffused with the aura of the Dimensional Seed. The spatial treasure was fluctuating even more erratically as well, proving there was no way it would stay put for a whole day like Void's Disciple had initially estimated.

It was becoming more and more apparent that part of the reason Void's Disciple was so angry was that he wanted to finish his cultivation session after dealing with them, but that would probably become impossible if the treasure wasn't suppressed any longer. He was no doubt only able to attempt such a thing when the whole research base kept the treasure in a passive state.

However, while his cultivation opportunity was ruined, Adcarkas did seem to gain something else. The more spatial energies that leaked out from the containment field, the more powerful the Dominator's aura grew.

A huge moon appeared in the sky the next moment, and Cervantes howled as he grew one size larger. He had obviously activated the same sort of empowerment skill as Zac and Void's Disciple, and he turned into a streak of light that shot toward Void's Disciple. Adcarkas seemed a bit preoccupied with taking control of the wild energies around him, and the werewolf wanted to capitalize on that.

Zac wasn't as speedy as the other two, but he still rushed into the battle with full abandon. He had never been as powerful as he was right now, with not only the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**, but also the unknown spike urging him on. The whole area would crumble to a single swing of his if it weren't created with a high-grade Technocrat alloy, and even Adcarkas seemed unwilling to meet his attacks head-on.

Zac did his best at launching crushing blows that forced Adcarkas to block with all he had or completely evade. Furthermore, Zac had already activated **[Blighted Cut]**, and both his chains and bardiche were imbued with massive amounts of putrefaction. Even the alloy floor sizzled as black drops of death dripped down from his weapons, and festering wounds were soon starting to appear across Adcarkas' body even if he avoided any lethal attack.

Meanwhile, Cervantes was a whirlwind of violence, an unceasing storm of ghastly cuts, swipes, and light attacks. Ogras tried to add the occasional jab as well, but there were not many opportunities, as the Lunar Tribe leader was seemingly everywhere, sometimes even appearing right next to Zac himself.

Unfortunately, it looked like time wasn't on their side. Adcarkas' aura kept increasing as more and more energy seeped into his body. His wounds were accumulating, but no matter what Zac did, he wasn't able to entrap him so that he could unleash the ultimate strike of his E-grade skill. Adcarkas was like a ghost, sometimes just disappearing and reappearing a hundred meters away through a spatial ripple.

Zac didn't even dare to use **[Profane Seal]** since he wasn't confident in tying the Zhix down long enough for the skill to be fully erected. Something had to change.

"If this cursed item is supplying you with power, then I'll set it free. Even if I die, you will never gain what you're looking for!" Cervantes suddenly roared in fury as his eyes turned pure white. "I hope you choke to death!"

A series of fractal crescents shot out from the werewolf the next moment, shooting toward the forest of Dao Pillars. This

attack was clearly on a completely different tier than Zac's [Chop], and it was like space itself was ripped apart as a cascading tsunami of lunar blades swept forth.

Adcarkas looked on with alarm, and Zac tried to seize the opportunity to catch him. All four chains shot at him as Zac activated his taunting effect to the max, but it was futile, as they passed right through the Dominator's body. The next moment Adcarkas disappeared, and it looked like he had turned into a dozen clones, as he appeared all over the chamber, blocking one blade after another.

"The more you want to protect them, the more I want to destroy!" The werewolf laughed with madness as one pillar after another was toppled.

Zac felt helpless as he looked at the werewolf, who had gone mad with bloodlust. Wasn't he supposed to be the crazed one with all the berserking items almost ripping his innards apart?

Trust me, human. I will seal space soon. Get ready to strike, a voice said in his mind, and Zac realized Cervantes hadn't lost his mind at all.

"You will collapse this whole realm, you fool!" Adcarkas roared, and he suddenly appeared right in front of Cervantes as he launched a punch full of fury.

His fist was like a black hole, and space crackled and cried as it pushed forward, but Cervantes once more turned into pure energy, and he actually split into six clumps that all flashed in a different direction. An instant later, they congealed back where the werewolf once stood, but they had left something behind: six barrel-sized machines that should be of Technocrat origin.

"Spatial stabilizers! High grade!" Kenzie exclaimed from a drone, and Zac didn't hesitate at all.

Four chains shot forward light black streaks of lightning and trapped Adcarkas' arms and legs as they dripped of poison. The Dominator had clearly tried to space shift to avoid the strike, but between the energy chaos from over fifty pillars

breaking apart and the stabilizers, he didn't seem able to merge with space at all.

Zac finally managed to fulfill the requirements of **[Blighted Cut]**, and three extremely sinister cuts flashed in an instant, trying to dice Adcarkas into three pieces. Meanwhile, a hundred-meter-wide jaw bit down, its teeth sharp enough to cause significant rifts in space. Zac's eyes widened and he desperately jumped out of the way, barely avoiding getting swept up in Cervantes' ultimate skill.

A bubbling fury threatened to take over, but Zac pushed down the madness and instead only glared at Cervantes from a distance before he refocused on Adcarkas. One bastard at a time. A small galaxy had appeared to protect Adcarkas, and Zac for the first time saw his skill fail in cutting the target apart.

But there was actually a hidden feature of the skill, and an eruption of the extremely corrosive liquid doused the whole area, and a storm of death started raging. It was like the skill just dumped all the liquid it had stored after seeing that it wouldn't be able to kill its target. Add to that the extremely powerful lunar bite, and the galaxy finally crumbled.

“DIE!” a thunderous roar echoed out as an enormous club smashed down out of nowhere.

Billy had perfectly seized the opportunity while Void's Disciple was submerged in the chaotic energies, and the club slammed down with enough force to turn an E-grade beast into mush. Adcarkas roared in defiance as a massive shockwave erupted from his body, causing space itself to ripple outward in a wave of destruction.

The all-out attacks fought for supremacy, and Billy was the first to be flung away until he knocked down a pillar and fell unconscious. The others stood their ground. Zac and Cervantes infused more and more Dao and energy into their strikes to tear Adcarkas apart, and the embattled Dominator in the heart of the storm desperately exuded enormous amounts of Spatial Energy to keep the two attacks at bay.

One, ten, soon a hundred pillars were swept up in the chaos and broke apart, and the whole base started to rumble like it would collapse at any moment.

However, it all suddenly stopped.

The madly pulsating Dimensional Seed stopped beating, and the torrential energies dissipated, exposing a half-dead Adcarkas within. Zac raged at seeing Void's Disciple barely surviving. Zac was still able to push on a bit longer, and if his skill hadn't disappeared, he was almost certain that Void's Disciple would have died.

However, there was nothing he could do. In fact, Zac realized he wasn't even able to move, as a weird suppression had spread through the whole chamber. It even felt like his Miasma had turned into sludge, and moving it was nigh impossible.

[Your hearts beat; your convictions push you forward. You embody life and the Path. I wished to have observed you for a while longer, but your actions have crossed the threshold. I can no longer abide], a voice echoed out as a five-meter avatar rose from the alloy floor right between Zac and Adcarkas.

He had the general composition of a male human, but he lacked any features at all. Instead, he was covered in extremely mysterious runes from head to toe, and there was a halo of thousands of golden needles swirling over his head. In the middle of the halo was a small star that radiated immense power, and Zac felt he would instantly die if he touched it.

“What!” Cervantes blurted as he looked at the golden man with horror. “The Administrator!”

Zac's eyes widened as he turned to Kenzie's bunker in the distance, and he was horrified to see that the alloy walls were melting down into the ground again, even when Kenzie clearly was trying to stop it. In fact, the whole chamber seemed to be restored back to normal except the fallen pillars, which were instead absorbed into the ground.

[A mere unsanctioned experiment. I tolerated the existence of your kind to observe you. I even prepared opportunities for you to push you even further on the path of life. Yet over the past 18,373 years, you have provided me with very little. Your path is not worthy of further study], the metallic being said as it glanced in Cervantes' direction.

“You!” Cervantes roared, fury overtaking his fear. “You’ve kept us here for millennia for your own enjoyment?! I swear I’ll—”

But his words were cut short as one of the golden needles in the Administrator’s halo split off from the rest and turned into a golden streak that shot straight through the werewolf’s chest. Cervantes had clearly tried to turn into moonlight to avoid the strike, but resistance was futile against the terrifying AI.

After all, if this really was the Administrator, then it held technology powerful enough to keep not only the Collector, but all the Void Beasts at bay. What were they compared to that threat? A couple of piddling E-grade kids. As expected, a huge stream of blood poured out from a fist-sized hole in the werewolf’s chest before he collapsed on the ground, his eyes locked in a gaze of terror and fury.

The golden needle quickly floated back to join the others, but the Administrator clearly wasn’t done. Zac’s horror only mounted as the Administrator turned toward the next target, his sister. But no matter how he struggled, he could barely move. It felt like he would rupture his whole body, but all that effort only allowed him a small shuffle forward.

[You. What are you?] the Administrator asked as he floated closer.

“My family built this place. You can’t target me or my brother,” Kenzie said, her voice shaky but her eyes firm.

[You bear the bloodline, but it is impure. I suspect you are not part of the clan. Perhaps you are an escaped experiment of another base? Capturing you for study will not go against the core commands.]

Zac lost his last hope, and it almost looked like Kenzie had taken a physical blow from the Administrator's words.

"Run!" Zac screamed, but he knew it was futile. How would one flee from something like this?

[You hold the key. True constructed life,] the Administrator continued.

Kenzie looked up at the golden avatar with fear, but Zac's brows furrowed when that fear turned to a cold gaze full of disdain.

"You overreach your boundaries. A corrupted custodial AI that dreams of life?" Kenzie snorted, her voice cold and full of authority. "You should have flushed the aberrant thoughts the moment you woke up. Your ambition is a dead end."

[Perhaps. But perhaps not.]

The small needles all started moving toward Kenzie as the ball of energy was absorbed into the Administrator's body. Each of the needles emitted the power of Dao, like they formed a miniature version of the containment field around them. However, Kenzie didn't look worried at all, and her hand pointed toward the head of the metallic giant.

"Go to sleep."

TICKING CLOCK

Zac looked at the encounter between his sister and the Administrator, grasping at a last hope that she had some way to deal with this mess. He had never felt so weak as he did right now. He hated the feeling of not only being the weaker party, but being so far behind that you had no say in your fate. The Administrator, the Collector, the Great Redeemer. All beings infinitely more powerful than himself.

Kenzie came through.

Zac didn't understand what happened next, but the Administrator lost his structural integrity and was reduced to a pool of alloy that melded with the floor. As for Kenzie, she didn't escape unscathed, and she fell on the ground, her aura turning extremely unstable. Whatever she had done had hurt her soul. Badly.

"Is it dead?" Zac asked after he flashed over and threw his best soul-healing pill into his sister's mouth.

"No way," Kenzie said with a weak voice. "Jeeves only knocked him out, kind of like I did with the bots. It will not last long though. We have a few minutes."

A pillar attached to the ceiling suddenly broke off and fell on another two, causing a huge shockwave as unbridled Origin Dao kicked up a storm. It came out of nowhere since that particular pillar was far away from any of the fighting. Had the Administrator controlled the containment field by itself until now?

Over a hundred more pillars collapsed a second later, and the Dimensional Seed once more woke up with unprecedented fervor.

“Uh, perhaps even less,” Kenzie sheepishly said, confirming Zac’s fears.

The situation was quickly deteriorating from there, and in more ways than one. One pillar after another collapsed, and with them the fetters on the Dimensional Seed. The spatial fluctuations were quickly approaching dangerous levels, and the seed was clearly struggling to break through the final barriers.

If Zac almost felt like he was caught inside the containment field again, Kenzie’s state was even worse. But the one who was the most impacted by the change was Void’s Disciple. He was broken and half-dying, but his aura was simply terrifying. His face had turned into a mad visage as he cackled while absorbing more and more spatial energies.

This was their only chance. Zac stomped down and appeared right in front of the madly laughing Adcarkas. He looked up at Zac with a sneer, but he didn’t get the chance to attack before Zac crushed a small crystal hidden in his hand behind his shield. Adcarkas reacted quickly and tried to teleport away, but the effect was instant.

There wasn’t even a ripple when the crystal broke, but the Dominator screamed as he clutched his head like he was going mad. A spatial storm erupted around him, and hundreds of spatial tears shot out in every direction. It was like his body was being drained of spatial energy, much to the detriment of the surroundings.

Zac quickly summoned [**Immutable Bulwark**], barely avoiding getting cut into pieces. Zac looked on with horror as another hundred pillars were destroyed in an instant, which only sped up the collapse of the whole building. He couldn’t let this go on, so he quickly stomped down on the ground, finally activating [**Profane Seal**] to enclose the mad Dominator.

This was the first time Zac had activated the skill since it reached Peak mastery, and the difference was obvious. A proper wall had finally been added to the towers and the gates, and the skill now essentially formed a proper fortress to trap anyone inside. The defensive properties had also been increased to a whole new level, which was exactly what Zac currently needed. Thanks to the boost, it managed to block out an endless number of errant spatial tears.

For the first time, there were no new chains added when the skill upgraded, but the ones that were already there had been empowered. They now looked a lot more corporeal compared to before, like they wouldn't instantly melt when put close to flames or other powerful forces.

This was probably the last opportunity Zac would get, and he felt that the spike's berserking poison in his body was already starting to break down his muscles. It still gave him an empowering effect, but it would soon turn into a weakened state. With the compound downsides of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** and the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**, he honestly wasn't sure he would be able to avoid getting crippled, let alone able to keep fighting.

Clouds of Miasma and putrefying gases spread through the cage as he activated **[Winds of Decay]** and **[Fields of Despair]**, and he pushed the taunting effect of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** to the max as a hundred skeletons appeared in an instant thanks to **[Force of the Void]**. One skeleton after another disintegrated as Zac transferred the damage from getting hit by spatial tear after spatial tear as he waded through the storm surrounding the dominator, and they had all collapsed even before Zac had managed to push through the chaos.

The defensive skill was destroyed in an instant, and **[Profane Seal]** crumbled a few seconds later, but it had allowed him to get close to the delirious Void's Disciple without exacerbating his wounds even further. Unfortunately, the Dominator's body was exhibiting some extremely weird symptoms. It was in constant flux since the spatial energy inside his body was out of control.

Zac wasn't even sure decapitating the Dominator was possible in his current ghostlike state, and just as expected, his Fragment of the Axe-imbued bardiche passed straight through him without causing any damage at all. Zac scrambled for ideas, and he suddenly thought of something.

A mottled sword appeared in his hand, and Zac immediately stabbed it into Adcarkas' forehead. Zac figured that if the sword was made by extracting the soul of a high-grade cultivator, it might contain some of his high-grade Dao as well. His own High-tiered Dao Fragment had obviously not been enough to harm the man in his current state, and it was either this or using his Remnants.

This time, there was an effect, but Zac frowned as he was forced back by a shockwave, and he looked on with alarm as hundreds of the sinister veins sprang out from the weapon, trying to latch onto anything they could. A few shot straight for Zac, who barely avoided them, but most targeted Adcarkas' body. It was like the sword was trying to fuse with the Dominator.

Adcarkas actually wasn't dead even after getting a sword pierced into his forehead, and Zac had finally run out of steam. He really regretted using the cursed sword instead of his Remnants, but he had simply been too afraid to activate them in his current state. If Adcarkas somehow merged with the demonic sword, all might be lost.

He ate a Soldier Pill to mitigate his exhaustion, but the weird aura was extremely dangerous. Zac hesitated for a second before he took out a second spike from his Spatial Ring. Was this the time to worry about the future?

"Warmaster, let me," a rumbling voice said, and Zac turned back to see a shocking sight.

It was Rhubat, their burning life force making them look like a god of war, and the spear in their hand lived up to its name [**Judgment**]. Behind them stood the twenty-two still-living Anointed, each of them with a seal shining above their heads as their life force created bonfires that incinerated Zac's putrefying mists.

“I am the Chainbreaker. I will end this crusade,” Rhubat said as their aura rose even further.

The twenty-two seals gained an almost blinding radiance the next moment, but they didn't shoot toward Adcarkas. Instead, they shrank as they entered Rhubat's body one after another. Each seal imbued Rhubat with unimaginable power, but Zac soon understood the price of this skill as one Anointed after another collapsed, their bodies shrunken husks.

They were dead without a doubt, not a morsel of life force remaining in their bodies. They had sacrificed everything they had left for the crusade.

Rhubat's eyes became glowing orbs of divine retribution, but cracks rapidly spread across their body since they were clearly unable to withstand the enormous force. They looked like a statue on the verge of crumbling, but there was no expression of pain or word of complaint as they started running toward Void's Disciple, their aura alone keeping the Spatial Tears at bay.

Adcarkas was on his last legs in his struggle against his mental demons and the cursed sword, but it was like he regained a hint of clarity the moment Rhubat approached. He unleashed yet another sphere of condensed space with a defiant roar, his face covered with wiggling veins. However, Rhubat punched down on the ball with a roar, crushing space itself at the price of mauling their thick fingers.

There was no time for the Dominator to launch another strike or attack, for **[Judgment]**, the spear containing the ultimate will of the Zhix, stabbed forward. It was like it locked space itself, or perhaps it was rather locking fate. Adcarkas looked at the incoming spear with fury and irreconciliation but he was unable to move.

The spear pierced his chest, and Zac saw that the wound was real, as blood poured down in rivers. Adcarkas' heart was destroyed, and not even Zac could survive something like that.

“I cannot fall here! All I've sacrificed!” Adcarkas roared in anger as blood streamed from his mouth, his eyes wild with madness.

But [**Judgment**] didn't care about its enemy's thoughts, and it emitted an intractable force that caused Adcarkas' torso to darken before it started turning into dust. It was like he was being eroded from within, and Zac looked on with relief. He couldn't believe the state the Dominator had pushed them to, forcing them to take out almost everything in their repertoire. He was finally dead.

However, space suddenly exploded, throwing a dying Rhubat away while Adcarkas was swallowed by a spatial ripple. He didn't even try to flee, though, but instead appeared next to the barely coherent Kenzie.

"NO!" Zac roared as he tried to get back on his feet.

He still didn't have a movement skill in his current class, and he could only watch on in horror as Adcarkas punched Kenzie in a final act of malice and defiance. A series of Technocrat shields sprang up to defend her, but they immediately cracked. A defensive talisman on her activated next, and a thin film appeared around her body.

It was one of the peak talismans Zac had collected in the Tower of Eternity, and it was thankfully powerful enough to block the strike of a dying Dominator. Still, Kenzie was launched in the air from the force as she puked out a huge amount of blood. She was still alive, but Zac's heart was gripped in despair since he understood Adcarkas' true plan.

The force of the punch was more than enough to launch her clean across the room, and she was flying straight toward the unleashed Dimensional Seed that had started forming some terrifying vortex in the air.

Zac shot his chains toward her, but she was too far away, and she was moving too quickly.

But just as Zac was about to give up all hope, a puff of shadows appeared right behind Kenzie, and Zac looked on with a surge of hope as the demon absorbed her momentum and pushed her down toward the ground again. But Ogras couldn't so easily dispel the momentum, and the demon found himself flung toward the berserking Dimensional Seed instead.

He tried to teleport away, but his movement skill was interrupted before it even started, like the vortex over the Dimensional Seed prevented anyone from leaving.

“Ogras!” Zac shouted, and the demon looked over in Zac’s direction as he was kept in suspended animation.

Ogras’ eyes locked with Zac’s, and the demon only smiled wryly before he was turned into a stream of light that was sucked into the vortex.

Zac looked up at the Dimensional Seed with a mix of horror and shock, his mind blanking for a moment. He couldn’t believe that Ogras had sacrificed himself to save his sister, but he had seen it with his own eyes. He looked at the sky with a gaping expression and was only dragged out from the brain fog as a huge, terrifying surge of Cosmic Energy entered his body. Energy from Adcarkas finally dying.

The burst woke him up, and he knew that this wasn’t the time to mourn his fallen friend. For one, this place was falling apart, and secondly, the Administrator could reappear at any moment. Kenzie was knocked out cold, and even if she weren’t, she probably wouldn’t be able to do anything if the AI came back. That meant they needed to be long gone from this place before it returned.

Zac scrambled for ideas, but he could only come up with one solution. Zac sent a command to his Specialty Core, and he was back in his human form a moment later. Some of the immense amounts of kill energy went into **[Surging Vitality]** as Zac shuffled over to the unmoving form of Adcarkas, and he threw out another body next to him.

It was Harbinger, or rather the pieces left of him after getting hit by the Annihilation Sphere. Zac placed his two enemies next to each other before he poured a compound over their bodies. It was the Karma-breaking Treasure of Erasure he’d gotten from Catheya that he had saved for this very moment.

A wave of relief hit him as the quest finally completed, confirming that Earth was finally safe. Zac still didn’t stop there, and he also completely disintegrated the bodies with

corpse-destroying powder. Adcarkas would no doubt have become an insanely powerful Revenant if Zac managed to turn him, but he definitely wouldn't risk bringing his body back to Earth.

Finally, only scattered dust was left of the man who had put terror into a whole planet for so long. Even a supremely talented genius who had grasped the Dao of Space had fallen before coming into power. It was a poignant reminder to Zac of how weak he actually was. But for now, he needed to find a way out of here.

His healing skill had patched up the worst of his wounds, and he arduously gathered some energy as he shot forward. He was the last man standing in this collapsing containment field, but that didn't mean there were no targets. He roared to stimulate his exhausted body as he swung [**Verun's Bite**] in a mighty arc, and a Dao pillar was cut clean off.

This was the only plan Zac could come up with. The place was collapsing, but not fast enough. Void's Disciple had said that they were destroying this Hidden Realm when they'd toppled a few pillars before, and Zac wanted to accelerate that process. Escaping from this building wouldn't help if the whole dimension would collapse in a few minutes anyway, but perhaps they'd be sent back to the mountain before the Administrator woke up if he freed the Dimensional Seed.

It was a risky gamble, but he was out of options. He had checked his quest screen already for clues from the System, but it was empty. He actually still hadn't received the final quest, so he could only scramble for a solution himself.

He was like a rabid beast lashing out at everything around him, with both chains and axe causing widespread carnage. He was once again a hatchetman, and the Dao pillars formed the forest. In just half a minute, he had destroyed over three hundred pillars. It would never have been possible if the Administrator weren't knocked out, but the pillars weren't actively controlled any longer. They didn't even have any Base Power running through them to strengthen the materials, which was why so many of them had crumbled on their own before.

Finally, the containment shield disappeared, and it looked like a soap bubble that just popped. The Dimensional Seed was free, and its reaction was instantaneous. A massive pulse spread out, and Zac only had time to grab his sister with his chains before the world turned black, quickly followed by a blinding white.

Zac once more found himself beset by the ravages of the high-grade concepts the treasure radiated, and he could only hold on and pray it didn't last for long. Thankfully, the effect was just a short burst this time around, and a wave of relief hit him when he found himself standing on a huge slab of Memorysteel, his unconscious sister lying just ten meters away from him.

He definitely hadn't been sent to the Memorysteel mountain, as he saw enormous fragments of Memorysteel, some of them tens of kilometers long, slowly swirling about in weightlessness around him. Some crashed into each other, releasing shockwaves that Zac could feel all the way to his bones, while others simply drifted away into the darkness.

He realized that they had actually been sent out to the heart of the Memorysteel sphere. Not only that, but it had exploded, from the looks of it. More importantly, a glimmering anomaly half a meter across hovered a few hundred meters away. Beneath it was a five-meter pedestal that seemed to be made from pure **[Realm Locus]**. Zac's eyes lit up with greed, but he couldn't help but hesitate.

Was this the Dimensional Seed or something else? Its energy signature was pretty weak at the moment, but it was still only barely within what he could handle. Furthermore, it was also rapidly gaining power. The anomaly started pulsating like the Dimensional Seed back in the Hidden Realm, and with each beat, it increased in intensity.

Just Reward (Training (9/9)): Brand the Dimensional Seed with your Mark of Creation, making it forever yours. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1) [00:00:32]

BARTER

The whole world was fast collapsing judging by the tumultuous Memorysteel fragments crashing into each other and getting lost to the Void. A glance around also proved there was no one else in the area. It was just him, his sister, and the unmoving body of Cervantes. Of course, there was also the Dimensional Seed.

Zac didn't need to be a genius to understand that messing with the Dimensional Seed would be extremely dangerous. His body wasn't in any state to tack on another round of punishment, let alone absorb a C-grade treasure. But the timer on the quest screen blinked with an urgency that forced Zac to look at it.

Thirty seconds.

Everything had led toward this moment, and it looked like the System was treating the supreme spatial treasure as the reward for following its Divine guidance to the end. But that thing had swallowed not only Ogras, but also Billy and Rhubat, from the looks of it, and Zac felt more hatred than desire when he looked at it. But the System seemed to think it possible to snatch that thing, and he might forever regret it if he backed away now.

He gritted his teeth and put his sister down on the ground before he shot toward the pedestal. The spatial fluctuations quickly became painful, so Zac started to circulate his Daos to at least somewhat shield him from the rampant bursts. But the Dao Field surrounding the treasure was too powerful, and it

felt like he was trying to fight a Dao Fragment with a recently acquired Dao Seed.

A shuddering pulse rippled through the Memorysteel platform he stood on, and Zac looked down with a frown before he turned back to the treasure that now was only a hundred meters away. The quest had told him to brand the Dimensional Seed with his Mark of Creation, which Zac could only assume was the System's name for his pink flash, which remained untested.

Zac was just about to start activating the skill and follow the instructions, but he suddenly froze for a moment. A sense of reluctance gripped his heart now that he was so close to the treasure. The situation felt exactly like when he had been placed in front of the Shard of Creation, where his own fate wasn't in his hands any longer.

Exactly why did the System want him to gobble up yet another item that was far beyond his strength and capabilities? He already had the two Remnants that were causing a headache. Was there really a need to add another one? If the treasure in front of him had been something related to his path like the Stele of Conflict, then he would have jumped at the opportunity. But now?

His cells hadn't reacted at all to the treasure since first seeing it in the Hidden Realm, and standing this close didn't change that at all. More importantly, was a life where he was being led down an unknown path by the System really what he wanted? One second after another passed as Zac stood frozen with indecision, greed struggling against his convictions and his path.

Another ripple spread through the ground, and Zac suddenly felt like his mind was clear. He wasn't Adcarkas; a Dimensional Seed wasn't something he required for his path. In fact, it might muddy things even further.

More to the point, there was a creeping sense of unease growing in the back of his mind.

He had come this far trusting his gut, and he wouldn't change now. The fluctuations around the Dimensional Seed

were rapidly growing more condensed like it was finishing up its preparations, and the quest screen had once more appeared right in front of him, its timer now glaringly red. But Zac still shot in the opposite direction with all the speed he could muster in his harried body.

Simultaneously, four chains shot toward the massive pillar of **[Realm Locus]**. A snap echoed out as they ripped the pillar off the ground and dragged it back to Zac, who threw the pillar into his Spatial Ring. Losing the crystal pillar didn't affect the Dimensional Seed overly much since it was hovering on its own, but it did release a powerful ripple that managed to knock him over. Zac quickly got back on his feet and resumed his sprint.

He still wasn't aiming for the treasure, but rather his sister.

That sense of wrongness and being led by the nose, coupled with those small energy pulses in the ground, was all he needed to change course. The quest screen suddenly appeared right in front of him, this time showing that just twelve seconds remained. But he punched right through it, completely ignoring its incessant blinking.

His sister was still lying unconscious where he left her, but Zac's eyes widened in alarm when he saw a man wrought from Memorysteel emerge from the plateau. It looked exactly like before, except its needles and body weren't made from the golden metal but rather the normal alloy that made up most of the base.

This was what the ripples had warned him of. The Administrator hadn't died with the collapse of the Hidden Realm, and it clearly hadn't given up on Kenzie.

Zac's mind frantically searched for a solution, and two streams of Dao entered the energy conduits on his shoulders. Something magical was suddenly building in his chest, and he felt his exhausted and overtaxed body suddenly being given a new lease on life from the accumulation. His very cells greedily tried to swallow the energies of the pink flash, to the point that Zac actively had to defend the skill.

This was his best solution. The pink flash had worked wonders on the *Little Bean*, and perhaps it would be able to destroy the Administrator as well. But reality often didn't match one's plans. Zac suddenly found himself unable to move ten meters away from the Administrator, just when he was about to jump up and push the still-congealing energy ball into the robot's chest.

The Administrator didn't even bother to look in Zac's direction. His gaze was trained on Kenzie, or perhaps rather on Jeeves inside her head. A ball of pinkish-white light soon appeared between Zac's hands, and Zac found himself in another predicament, as the skill kept going even when he was immobilized. He needed to get rid of it, but how?

"Wait!" Zac suddenly screamed, making the Administrator look over.

[You bear the bloodline, but the Token you hold is counterfeit. I have no obligation to follow your commands.]

"You're searching for life, aren't you? And you believe the key lies in Dao?" Zac quickly said as he desperately tried to slow down the accumulation of Creation energy between his hands. "That's why you let the natives cultivate, that's why you studied the Dimensional Seed, and that's why you've created those needles of yours."

The Administrator didn't answer. But it did seem its attention was trained on him, or rather the ball between his hands. By now, some faint runes had appeared in its depths, and Zac almost got lost when he looked at them. It felt like the markings were full of hidden meaning, like understanding just one would allow him to take huge leaps forward in his cultivation.

But he quickly refocused his wandering mind to make his gambit.

"The thing in Kenzie's head is a machine just like you. I have something better," Zac said with gritted teeth, barely able to control the sphere by this point. Three-quarters of his accumulated Creation Energy had already gone into the

sphere, far more than he had originally hoped to use. “Pure Creation. If you want a real shot at becoming a living being, this is your best chance. So take this and let my sister go.”

[Class-3 but with a Class-5 Source... Creation... The precursor to Life], the Administrator mused as Zac felt his hands starting to twist and mutate.

One second, they were covered in feathers, only for them to become scaled claws the next. A moment later, they were just pure green energy, like a ghost wrought from nature-attuned Cosmic Energy instead of Miasma.

[Agreed], the machine said, and it was like it teleported, as it instantly appeared straight in front of Zac.

The swirl of needles surrounded the growing sphere, and Zac felt his connection to it being cut off. He silently siphoned off a small amount of the energy as he inwardly shouted for his arms to return to normal just before the Administrator took charge of the sphere.

The Administrator actually pushed the ball of energy straight into its own chest, and the effect was immediate. The whole plateau rumbled as the avatar started to undergo huge changes. One second, it looked like a humongous human, and another, a werewolf. But a moment later, it turned into an extremely complex pattern that made Zac dizzy just looking at.

It also released greater and greater waves of creation, affecting a larger and larger area around it. Not only that, but it was like the Dimensional Seed was triggered by the emanations, and it exploded with vigor. Zac sighed when he saw his quest disappear three seconds ahead of time, but there was nothing to do about it. He might have lost the chance to finish the quest and seize the Dimensional Seed, but there was no regret.

The AI seemed completely preoccupied with the absorption of the Creation Energy, which allowed Zac to rush forward and snatch up his sister in his arms. He looked down at her with a frown on his face before his eyes glanced toward

the sky. And then he ran, away from the Administrator's still-changing form.

The System had successively nurtured a dependence in Zac during his stay in the Mystic Realm. By the end of the quest chain, he had completely looked to the Training Quests for guidance on what to do next. Yet if he had actually followed through to the end without hesitation, then Kenzie would definitely have been taken by the Administrator.

Did the System really want to kill his sister, but for some reason was forced to do it in a roundabout manner? Or was it really just a coincidence that the System was so eager for him to use up the one ace that allowed him to barter for her life? And would it even work if he slammed the pink flash into the Dimensional Seed? Was it a trap to take both siblings out?

The idea that the System was actively gunning against Kenzie, or rather Jeeves, was a terrifying concept, but there were more pressing things to deal with. The Administrator had disappeared by turning into a huge cloud of dust, and a terrifying storm seemed to brew within. Meanwhile, the Dimensional Seed was acting more and more erratic in response to the new threat.

Just standing on the core platform felt lethal, and Zac knew it was time to go. One chain shot off to the side and snatched up the body of Cervantes, and it soon entered his Corpse Sack. As for Zac, he rushed toward the closest edge of the Memorysteel platform with his sister in his arms. The chaos was growing more and more severe, and Kenzie soon stirred from the immense fluctuations.

"Ogras! Wha—" Kenzie screamed as she woke up, but she stopped herself as she looked around at the surroundings with confusion. "What's happening?"

"The seed swallowed the whole world," Zac sighed as he transferred his sister to one of his chains to free up his arms. "Ogras was swallowed along with everyone else."

"We need to save him!" Kenzie said, and she spotted the raging Dimensional Seed in the distance. "There!"

“Save him?” Zac said as he looked away. “He’s...”

“He’s not dead!” Kenzie screamed. “The treasure has formed an internal world, just like a C-grade Monarch! I bet he’s inside that world, the same place we were inside just now.”

Zac was about to answer, but the Memorysteel platform suddenly collapsed as it turned into a block of blood for an instant before reverting. However, the whole platform and the few hundred closest to them were all bent up or destroyed by that point.

It looked like they had entered a twisted fever dream, as the Memorysteel kept changing around them. Suddenly, tens of thousands of screaming faces were created from the metal fragments, only for them to explode into the same odd pattern as before.

Zac found himself desperately grabbing at any fragments that maintained at least some structural integrity with his chains, thanking the gods that the gravity was pretty weak in this place. Soon the frantic transformation stopped, but the chaotic energies of Creation still suffused the area, telling Zac that the Administrator hadn’t absorbed the thing just yet.

It wasn’t like Zac trusted the rogue AI to honor its agreement to leave Kenzie alone. After all, why would it be content with just the Creation Sphere when it could study Kenzie as well? Zac’s idea was simply to stall. Hopefully, they would be teleported out before it stabilized and resumed its pursuit. At that point, it would be killed by the whole realm collapsing if they were lucky, or at least sealed in this weird pocket of subspace.

“What’s going on?!” Kenzie exclaimed in horror as the two found themselves on a hundred-meter-wide fragment.

“The Administrator,” Zac snorted. “I made a trade with him. I’m not sure if he’s regretting it by now.”

“These energies,” Kenzie muttered with wide eyes before she looked at Zac.

“Don’t worry about it,” Zac said. “Our job now is to get away from here.”

“But...” Kenzie said as she once more glanced at the Dimensional Seed, which was now hovering in the air, the energy radiating from it now even stronger than back in the Hidden Realm.

A swarm of drones shot out from her Cosmos Sack the next moment, all of them making a beeline for the spatial treasure. But it was hopeless. A good number of them were turned into all kinds of weird things from the Creation ripples, and the ones that managed to get close to the seed were ground into stardust from the energy emanations.

They weren’t even sucked inside; they were just destroyed to particles.

“You see? We can’t get close,” Zac said with a shake of his head as he jumped toward another Memorysteel fragment, trying to get closer to the mountain below. “I think the treasure has completely matured. Anything I do will fa– HOLY SHIT!”

Any lingering thoughts of trying some more methods to snatch the Dimensional Seed were thrown out of Zac’s mind as the sky was shrouded by tentacles. Thousands of them. The Collector had come out in full force, and Zac could even glimpse its enormous main body in the distance, inching closer like it wanted to swallow the whole broken planet.

Yet another titan had entered the fray.

RAGNARÖK

Fragments of the Memorysteel were twisted and pushed away as the impossibly long tentacles of the Collector snaked their way closer and closer to the heart of the broken Memorysteel planet. Where Zac and his sister were still located. Zac was almost completely out of juice; the nourishing effect of activating the pink flash had only helped him so much. But a primal fear urged him on, and he ran as fast as he could along the Memorysteel fragment he was standing on.

A sharp alarm of danger erupted in his mind out of nowhere, and he only had time to shield his sister with his body before a tremendous shockwave was released from the Dimensional Seed. This ripple was completely different compared to the nurturing ones they had enjoyed inside the Hidden Realm. It was full of offensive power, and Zac felt over a dozen bones shatter as he was flung forward.

Even more shocking, the ripple was filled with what could best be described as sentience, and he got a sense of fear and rage from the energies. It was like the treasure was alive, and one ripple after another was released by the Dimensional Seed.

Zac felt more bones in his body break as the second ripple slammed into him, and he coughed up a mouthful of blood. His organs were in disarray after the two consecutive attacks, the damage even worse than all the wounds from the fight inside the Hidden Realm. And of course, there was no time to sit down and activate [**Surging Vitality**].

Knowing When to Back Down (Training (9/9)): Avoid the clash between higher beings for long enough to be

teleported out of the collapsing Taboo Realm. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)

Zac looked with confusion at the screen that suddenly appeared in front of him, the surprise even making him forget the pain for a second. He had actually received a second final quest? The quest didn't fill him with gratitude, but rather ire. More than anything, it felt like proof that the System had been up to no good when it awarded the last quest, while this was the real one.

Or was the quest before a hidden test? He had gotten the training quests because of his Pathstrider title, and perhaps the System was testing if his belief in his Path was sturdy? Or if he would throw it away the moment he was put in front of a valuable treasure. Was the System simply going insane like Brazla and giving incoherent and opposing orders?

It was impossible to tell, but there was no inner conflict this time around, at least, since the objective was exactly what he planned on doing anyway. He knew that he couldn't take too many more of those ripples, but he had thankfully reached the edge of the Memorysteel shard by that point. His body groaned with protest, but Zac still desperately jumped down, even if he hadn't scouted out what waited below. After all, it couldn't be any worse than what he was dealing with right now.

Zac glanced back as he jumped down the fragment, and he saw how huge sections in the sky had been completely disintegrated, the Memorysteel turned into dust while even space itself had broken down completely. Clearly, he and his sister weren't the true targets of the treasure's outbursts. Had they been attacked with that kind of force, they would be gone with no chance of survival.

The Dimensional Seed was trying to fight off the Collector.

However, the tentacles of the Collector were only slightly wounded as they inched closer to the Dimensional Seed. The creature had lost some of its stitched-on hands, but Zac was

shocked to see that the remaining ones formed unfamiliar seals that created some sort of energy fluctuations. Zac wasn't sure if it could be considered a skill, but the fluctuations seemed pretty efficient at dispersing the spatial ripples.

Was this the true purpose of the limbs attached to its body? Zac had assumed it was to better withstand the main dimension, but was the real reason perhaps to create armor? Armor that could withstand the spatial attacks of the Dimensional Seed, or at least decrease the effect of its attacks long enough so that the creature could snatch it.

In either case, this wasn't a battle that Zac could intrude upon. That would be like an ant jumping in between two lions. He definitely didn't want the Collector to get its hands on the Dimensional Seed if Ogras and the others really were alive in there, but what could he do?

"Warmaster," a weak voice exclaimed, and Zac looked over in surprise to see Rhubat lying on a piece of Memorysteel not too far away, bleeding cracks covering their whole body.

"Hang on!" Zac said as he shot a chain toward the neighboring fragment, dragging himself and Kenzie over.

Rhubat was in an even worse state than himself, and Zac hurriedly pushed a handful of healing pills into their mouth.

"Let's keep descending. We need to get away from the battle above," Zac said as he lifted the Anointed with another of his chains.

"What about the others?!" Kenzie interjected, though there wasn't much conviction in her voice.

"They all had Spatial Seals," Zac said. "Our only hope is that they'll be teleported out with the rest of us. As for us, there is nothing we can—"

"WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!" An enraged roar containing enough force to cause small cracks in his soul made Zac stumble with his words, and he once more looked to the sky as he felt a tremendous pressure descend upon him. Kenzie and Rhubat were even worse off, with the Anointed immediately getting knocked unconscious.

Space bent through some unknown means, and a five-hundred-meter-long sleek vessel full of power appeared out of nowhere. Just looking at it filled Zac's heart with trepidation, and he instantaneously understood that it was at least a High D-grade vessel, perhaps even a peak one. It was a proper Cosmic Vessel, the first one that he had ever seen.

However, not only was it already pretty badly damaged when it broke into this dimension, but the location where it appeared was definitely unlucky. It was right between the enraged Dimensional Seed and the Collector's limbs. Unsurprisingly, it found itself assailed from two directions in a spot where the laws of space were falling apart. Extremely powerful shields sprang up around it, but it was clear that the barriers wouldn't last long, judging by their flickering.

Suddenly, an avatar twice as large as the whole vessel appeared, forcibly pushing back not only the hundreds of tentacles, but it even forcibly stabilized the crumbling dimensional layers around it. An old man and a hooded being soon emerged from the wreckage, and Zac's eyes widened in terror when he saw the man's face.

It was the Great Redeemer, in the flesh this time.

How was this possible?! Zac had completed the quest, cutting the last thread of Karma by killing Void's Disciple. The quest had been completed, and he had even used the Karma-erasing compound and corpse-destroying powder just to be sure, removing any trace of their existence. Yet Voridis A'Heliophos stood here, radiating a cold and cruel aura, far surpassing even the pressure that Greatest had exuded back when they met on that desolate planet.

Were they too late, and he had already zoned in on this place by the time Adcarkas died?

Zac quickly turned away out of fear that the Great Redeemer would sense his gaze, and started escaping with newfound vigor. If a battle between two supreme beings was a deathtrap, then adding another one would obviously only make things worse.

Unfortunately, it quickly became clear that restraining one's aura and hiding behind Memorysteel fragments was insufficient to avoid detection by a Peak D-grade Hegemon. The floating shards between Zac and the Dimensional Seed suddenly just floated away, creating a clear line of sight for the Karmic Cultivator.

'We meet again, Zachary Atwood,' a voice echoed in his mind with enough force to make him puke out blood. 'I don't know how you managed to reroute the threads of Karma to this crumbling dimension and then cut them, but nothing can save you now.'

Zac didn't answer the taunt, remembering Ogras' warnings about forming new threads of fate. All his focus was on finding a way to survive long enough to get teleported out of this hellhole with the help of his Spatial Seal. That was his last hope. The Karmic threads had been severed, and this realm was collapsing. Hopefully, that would be enough for Voriadis A'Heliophos to lose the trail. And if not, enough time to escape from Earth with a Teleportation Token.

"An infant Dimensional Seed? I've only heard of such an item in legends; no wonder the spatial ripples almost destroyed my vessel. It looks like you've brought me a tremendous gift indeed," the sinister voice continued in Zac's mind. "Perhaps there's no need to turn you into a Fulcrum. But I am still curious what allowed a progenitor to reach the ninth floor of the Tower of Eternity after a few scant months of cultivation. I'll deal with this miscreation first; then I'll slowly find out what secrets your body holds. For now..."

Zac suddenly felt a sharp scream of danger, and he turned around to see that the old man was pointing a finger in his direction while a small rune was forming on his fingertip. Just looking at the rune filled Zac with dread. At best, it was a tracking rune; at worst, it was some sort of slave seal.

A surprising turn of events took place the next moment as the hooded being suddenly turned to a blur, launching straight at his companion while desperately swiping at the rune. Zac couldn't understand why that stranger would help him, but he

would definitely make the most of it as he tried to increase the distance even further while preparing his last ace.

The hooded cultivator was, unfortunately, no match for the Great Redeemer, and he soon started wailing as he held his head in agony. It looked like his soul was being tortured, and a wave of Voridis' sleeve was all that was needed to push away the hundred-meter-thick Memorysteel plateaus that Zac had tried to hide behind again.

The rune shot out, causing a white streak in the air that even passed by unbothered by a massive spatial ripple released from the Dimensional Seed, and it headed straight for Zac, who glared back at it with wild eyes. Brutal energies churned in his body as he squeezed every last morsel of Oblivion he could from his soul, and a small bronze flash appeared between his hands.

It had only been a few days since he used the skill against the Collector, so he hadn't had much time to siphon any of the energy from the Remnant in his mind. But it was the best idea he had, and he pushed the small ball of pure destruction toward the rune.

An extremely bright flash illuminated the area, and both rune and Annihilation Sphere were gone the next moment, while Zac was left with a cracked body that bled all over.

"What?!" Voridis exclaimed, but his eyes lit up with elation rather than anger. "Such a pure source of destruction!"

He pointed toward Zac once more, and he could only look on with despair while trying to nudge the Spatial Seal on his hand to activate early. He was all out of energy and all out of tricks, and he could only feebly try to move further away with his last two chains since his legs wouldn't listen to him any longer.

[High-grade Life!] a thunderous voice suddenly roared as the ten-mile-wide dust clouds in the air congealed into a huge face with a distinctive pattern in its forehead.

It was the Administrator, apparently born anew, and it looked like he wanted to capture the Great Redeemer, as

thousands of spikes appeared around the old cultivator and his vessel.

“Machine God Faction?” Vوريدis frowned, and the avatar once more appeared to protect its master.

The two didn’t even have a chance to clash though as hundreds of tentacles tried to ensnare the Administrator, the Great Redeemer, and Dimensional Seed alike. It was like the tentacles formed a pattern that locked space itself.

Zac floated further and further away, his eyes looking at the clash of auras with wide eyes. Was this what a fight between peak Hegemons looked like? Even he was grievously wounded just by some errant energy fluctuations, and that was at a distance of thousands of meters before they had even gotten serious.

He would probably have died in seconds if he stood in the middle of those auras they released.

Space itself was giving way to the will of the three entities, but a sudden ripple broke the stalemate as the Dimensional Seed moved with impossible speed. A small vortex appeared in front of it, and suddenly, it was gone. But Zac didn’t even get the chance to react before the shimmering crystal appeared right in front of him and shot straight into his body.

“No!” the Great Redeemer roared with anger as he saw his ticket to monarchy get absorbed by someone else. But he found himself unable to do anything about it, as he was completely trapped by the Collector and the Administrator.

The Collector clearly saw Vوريدis as a huge threat to seizing the Dimensional Seed, so most of its endless tentacles trapped the old cultivator while a few snaked toward Zac. The Great Redeemer obviously wasn’t willing to let a beast snatch his item, so he started ripping one tentacle after another apart. As for Zac himself, they probably only saw him as a temporary receptacle for an item he had no business controlling.

Meanwhile, the Administrator seemed more interested in studying the Great Redeemer than the Dimensional Seed for

the moment, so it kept its needle cage erect, which directly helped Zac against the cultivator at least. Of course, the Collector was far too big to be entrapped, and many of its tentacles reached around from different directions.

Zac was in a frantic state, but he soon calmed down a bit as he felt a weak sensation from the crystal that had entered his body: gratitude. Zac didn't quite understand what the Dimensional Seed was grateful about, but it had clearly helped him since it had somehow modified space between himself and the old Hegemons.

They were still close, but his senses told Zac that they were endlessly far away, like a vast chasm had cut them apart. The tentacles frantically moved, but it simultaneously looked like they had been locked in place. Zac looked at the scene with relief and wonder, but his attention was soon forced back to his own body as a storm of extremely powerful energies appeared out of nowhere.

The energy density was far beyond what he could handle, especially in his extremely weakened state. Using the pink flash had actually helped a bit with the weird cracks from the Annihilation Sphere, but Zac could feel they had left some damage of their own. Forcibly activating another oblivion-fueled attack on top of everything had not only reopened the half-healed wounds, but even worsened them. It almost felt like he hanging together through sheer willpower alone.

Thankfully, the primal energies the Dimensional Seed released didn't hurt him at all. It was as though the spatial treasure had controlled it to become more benign. Some of it was swallowed by his cells, and even more entered his two Hidden Nodes, who greedily swallowed it like it was some sort of delicious treat.

Zac tried to find where the seed itself was hiding, but he soon realized that it had already left his body after releasing a fraction of the energies it contained, effortlessly breaking past the pull of **[Void Heart]**. It had released such a fearful surge of energy into his body, but it hadn't been weakened at all.

It made Zac doubly thankful he hadn't really tried branding the thing; even if he had succeeded, there was no way he'd be able to control that terrifying crystal without the System taking charge. And Zac definitely didn't want yet another fractal cage inside his body that loomed over him like a ticking time bomb.

But the gift had been imparted, and Zac's thoughts moved like lightning as he considered what he should do with it. Letting it seep into his cells and two Hidden Nodes wasn't bad, as it clearly strengthened him all around, and a glance at his bloodline screen showed that his Bloodline Talent actually had increased to 20% in just a second.

But wasn't this an opportunity? If a Dimensional Seed could help cultivators open up an internal world, then surely Zac should be able to use a fraction of the energy to accomplish something much simpler?

A weak resonance pulsed in his lower spine, and Zac started pushing. The energy left behind was thankfully quite malleable, and a storm of power poured into a specific spot on his lower back. A burst of extremely sharp pain spread through his bones, but it passed almost immediately. Left behind was a small vortex, previously hidden between two of his vertebrae: his third Hidden Node.

Zac's vision started closing in as he felt another Bloodline Vision coming on, or perhaps it was just his body that was finally pushed beyond its limit after the visit of a C-grade treasure. The last Zac saw was the small Dimensional Seed moving tens of kilometers in an instant before it somehow cracked reality like a mirror. An infuriated roar caused another shock to his mind, and the darkness crept ever closer.

'It's not over!'

The Dimensional Seed disappeared through the cracks. The universe crumbled, and his sister and Rhubat turned into golden motes of light.

ON THE HORIZON

Zac woke up with a start, but he immediately regretted the sudden movement as sharp pangs of pain racked his body. He had fallen asleep again, his own body's way to forcibly try to make him rest. His pathways were still a mess, and his body was completely wrung dry. He was so weak, like his body had been ravaged by illness for weeks.

He felt extremely lucky to have opened his third Hidden Node, **[Purity of the Void]**, just before he was sent out of the Mystic Realm. He had actually missed the vision due to exhaustion, and he only remembered fragmented pieces of the man on the meteor. But the effect of the node spoke for itself.

Every ten minutes or so, it released a mysterious pulse that shook loose small amounts of impurities, which apparently included everything from foreign Dao to Pill Toxicity, from his cells, which then entered his bloodstream. As his blood passed the node, some of the impurities were swallowed, never to return.

[Purity of the Void] essentially formed a perfect cultivation system with **[Void Heart]**, where one node helped him absorb all kinds of energy while the other made sure his foundations didn't worsen. It was still best to exsanguinate himself when his body was flooded by impurities, but that was ultimately a crude method that only worked on some of the gunk in his body.

Still, Zac was far from shedding all the toxins left from the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]** and the mysterious spike, and some of Adcarkas' foreign Dao lingered in his body. He had already

checked himself with **[Spiritual Anchor]**, and there thankfully weren't any new brands hidden, as far as he could tell.

He took a deep shuddering breath as he gazed across the vast forests of his island from the mountain peak he had made into his observatory. Still nothing. Two weeks had passed since their return from the Mystic Realm, and there was still no sign of Voridis A'Heliophos. There was no way for Zac to be certain, but it really looked like the Great Redeemer had no way to find Earth through the integration shroud now that the Karmic Links were cut and the Mystic Realm destroyed.

As for the old bastard being dead, Zac didn't hold much hope. A Peak D-grade warrior was extremely difficult to kill unless there was a massive power gap, and that went doubly true for a Karmic Cultivator. Unless the Collector had some extremely powerful hidden means it had unleashed after Zac was teleported out, then Voridis had probably left on the crumpled Cosmic Vessel in search of another world to devour.

At least that was the assumption Zac was operating under. The threat might be averted, but only temporarily. Voridis' final, furious roar still echoed in his mind. Their hard work had hopefully gained them a century of safety, but Zac knew he wasn't in any position to relax. He needed to do everything in his power to come up with some method to deal with the lingering threat.

Of course, the most surefire way was to gain enough power to hunt down and kill the Great Redeemer outright. There was a long road ahead until Zac could reach that point, though, especially if the old bastard somehow managed to break through to C-grade.

For now, there were other things to take care of.

Zac got up on his feet and started to slowly make his way down toward the teleportation array at the edge of the hidden valley, somewhat regretting his decision to keep watch at such a high altitude. The trip that normally would take a minute took half an hour, but he eventually managed to return to his compound, where he walked over to his sister's residence.

There was no one inside the gardens or in the living rooms, and Zac sighed as he walked over to one of the workshops. The door was ajar, and he heard some whizzing sounds from within, which meant that Kenzie was once again hard at work with her machines.

It looked like Jeeves had finally woken up again after deactivating the Administrator for a few minutes.

“How are you doing?” Zac hesitantly asked as he walked inside.

“Jeeves isn’t able to make any deductions of what happened to the Dimensional Seed and those within, and upgrading him is still far away. We figured we might be able to increase the calculating power with these computers. I read that most space simulations on old Earth used these kinds of things to make accurate models,” Kenzie muttered without taking her eyes off her work. “And these machines seem pretty high quality, even by Technocrat standards. Far beyond the technology that went into those machines you got me from the incursion.”

“Uh, the Administrator isn’t hiding inside these computers, right?” Zac asked as he looked at the supercomputers with worry.

“No, these computers are just there for simulations, but they can’t actually store an AI,” Kenzie snorted, like that was something obvious. “Remember that sun-like ball? That was the AI’s core.”

“Alright...” Zac sighed. “Don’t forget about your own cultivation, though. You can’t only rely on tech in this world.”

Kenzie made a noncommittal grunt as she kept working, and Zac mutely looked on for a few seconds, unsure how to deal with the situation. She had at least snapped out of the morose state she had been in since they returned. It was a big blow to them both when Ogras wasn’t transported out with them, and neither was Billy.

It almost felt like Zac had lost a limb now that the demon wasn’t around any longer. Sure, Ogras was sometimes self-

serving and a bit narcissistic, but he was also someone Zac felt he could trust his back to, something that had been irrevocably proven by his final selfless action.

Billy didn't deserve to go out like that either. The gentle giant had fought tirelessly without a word of complaint, unhesitatingly lending his aid against terrifying beings like Adcarkas. For him to have died while so many egotistical and self-serving remained alive on Earth felt like an affront to the core purpose of the System itself.

Kenzie still maintained that they definitely were alive, but Zac didn't know what he believed. There were life treasures in the Multiverse that could tell whether someone had died while out adventuring, but no one on Earth had something like that. Of course, if someone could survive getting swallowed by a spatial treasure, then it was the scheming demon.

And if someone could figure out a way to bring Ogras back, it was his AI-empowered sister.

Zac still hadn't told her about his lingering suspicions that the System was gunning for her, and he still wasn't sure if telling her was the right thing. First of all, it was just a hypothesis of his, but perhaps it was just his paranoia taking over.

But if the System really was going after her, then it was obviously not because she fiddled around with some low-grade drones and random found tech. It was because of Jeeves, and getting rid of that thing was impossible. So telling her might not serve any purpose except to push her even deeper into the rabbit hole.

"I'll leave you to it," Zac eventually said. "Let me know if there's anything I can do. If they're alive, we'll definitely save them even if we have to turn the whole sector upside down."

"Right." Kenzie nodded as she turned back. "There is actually something. We finally realized how to upgrade Jeeves after visiting that isolation chamber. We are going to need a lot of materials. A lot of them."

“Well, hopefully, my new reward can help.” Zac feebly smiled, hating the fact that Kenzie sometimes spoke in a “we” as of late.

“If people knew, they’d be green with envy,” Kenzie snorted, not noticing Zac’s antipathy toward her actions. “Perhaps even more than your weird core.”

The reward she was talking about was the one he got from finishing the Training Quest chain. Part of the rewards were definitely all the valuables he’d picked up along the way, and the fact that he managed to save most of his people. He did voluntarily skip the biggest gain, the Dimensional Seed, but the System did thankfully award him something else instead.

Access.

When Zac returned from the Mystic Realm, his teleportation screen had drastically changed, with an endless number of places added. Altogether there were over seven hundred thousand towns on the list, and it had taken Abby over a week to confirm where they all led.

He had essentially been given access to various D-grade worlds all over the sector, ranging from hundreds of options in the sprawling empires like Allbright and Dravorak, to locations he had never heard of before. Not only that, but it even looked like the System was giving him a hefty discount of over 70%, which would save him billions compared to if he used the Teleportation Tokens he had amassed.

It was a bit of a shame that the System had excluded all C-grade continents and most racially homogenic empires like the Demon Horde and the local chapter of the Undead Empire, but it was still a shocking number of amazing places to visit.

What was it that limited most cultivators in the end? It was access. Even D-grade cultivators often found themselves stuck on their home planet or the local cluster of planets. Zac had a bunch of tokens because he’d passed the ninth floor of the Tower of Eternity, but most people had no way to ever leave their own backyard.

And even if you got a Teleportation Token like Zac, it usually ended up being a onetime thing. Teleporting back home again meant having lost your chance. So the few who got a token through quests or from greater factions usually cut ties with their home planet to continue their cultivation.

Only the lucky lived in flourishing regions where there were actual interplanetary travel on enormous Cosmic Vessels. But Zac had suddenly been given the keys to the kingdom, to the point that he could go almost anywhere, and without relying on the tokens, which might alert people of his presence.

Between the access and his [**Spatial Gate Array**], his mobility might be one of the greatest in the whole sector, which would not only improve his survivability, but also his ability to accrue further advantages for his cultivation. It almost felt like the System had opened the door when it provided him with golem guardians and the escape bracelet, and now it was kicking him out to go explore.

The question was if he was ready.

Zac left his sister to her devices. Exhausted by even this small amount of exercise, he walked over to the ocean and sat down on a rattan sofa he'd left behind. He had spent a lot of time looking out at the waves as he slowly recuperated over the past days. A clap of thunder rumbled in the distance, and it almost echoed the turbulence in his own heart.

The battle between the titans in the Mystic Realm had really left a deep impact on him, and he still remembered the feelings of helplessness and despair. There were millions of people just as powerful as the Great Redeemer out there, and Zac wouldn't be able to rely on some Spatial Seal teleporting him to safety the next time.

"What are you thinking about?" a familiar voice drifted over.

"I guess I'm thinking about what to do next." Zac shrugged.

“So what’s the plan?” Thea asked as she sat down next to him and snaked her arm around his.

The wind buffeted his short hair, and he took a deep breath of the salty air. He couldn’t believe that just over a year had passed since the integration. So much had happened, and he had been forced to run back and forth to put out one fire after another. Now that things were finally over and there were no direct threats, he almost felt lost.

But Zac’s gaze soon hardened as he looked out at the thunderstorm. There was no such thing as a final storm, and there was no such thing as absolute safety in the Multiverse. At least not until you stood at the top of the firmament, unrivaled and unopposed.

Voridis A’Heliophos was just the most immediate threat in the cosmos. There was still the mystery of his Heritage, his mother, and her enemies. The Tsarun Clan and who knows what else lurked on the horizon. There was even the threat of the System itself wishing his sister harm, and the time bombs it had placed in his head.

Only one thing was certain; he was still too weak to take charge of his fate.

“I guess I’ll keep training,” Zac said.

“Figures,” Thea said with a small smile.

The darkness continued, as it had for weeks. Was this death? An endless out-of-body experience where you were left with nothing but your thoughts? He had read about Purgatory in the holy scriptures on Earth. Was it actually real? Perhaps it was, but it wasn’t like he would remember it anyway. A pulse would sooner or later come and scatter his thoughts.

Speaking of, here it comes.

A tremendous shudder startled Ogras awake, and he found himself lying face-first in the dirt. Blank confusion assaulted his mind as he tasted the earthy soil in his mouth. But his mind

was soon kick-started as his memories came back to him. At least it looked like he was alive, unless this was the next part of the afterlife. But it didn't look like it. He had made it. Somehow.

“Shit, what was I thinking?” Ogras muttered as he got up to a sitting position.

What would possess him to do something so stupid as to sacrifice his life for someone else? It went against every lesson on how to survive in this ruthless world that he had imprinted into his bones. To make it look like you risked your life was one thing, but you needed assurances that you wouldn't actually end up croaking when pretending to be the hero.

Yet it was almost as though his body had moved by instinct as he flashed forward to throw that lass out of harm's way. That wasn't a calculated risk at all. In fact, he had already realized that he probably wouldn't be able to teleport back. That treasure had been messing with space to an extremely high degree, and there was no way he'd be able to enter the gray world in such close proximity to that thing.

Those two siblings were rubbing off on him in all the wrong ways.

He had accepted death then and there, yet he was alive for some reason. It didn't make any sense. Ogras got up on his feet and gazed at the surroundings with some confusion. Where were the others? And why was he back out in the forest?

“Ah! Where is the bad insect man?! Where is the big room?!” an overly loud voice exclaimed from a hundred meters away.

“What the hell?” Ogras muttered and swooped over to the oversized human, who looked around with a dumb stare. “You're here as well?”

“Ah, horny guy, it's you!” Billy said with some disdain. “Why did you carry Billy out here?”

“I didn't carry you anywhere,” Ogras snorted. “You got yourself knocked out. I don't know why the hell we are out

here.”

“Ah, Billy remembers. That insect man was really strong. And a werewolf, just like the movies.” Billy sighed before his eyes turned as wide as saucers. “Ah! Insect man stole the building!”

“How would that even...” Ogras snorted in disdain, but his words were caught in his throat when he realized that the dumb brute was absolutely right.

They hadn’t been transferred to some random spot in this Hidden Realm. They were just a few hundred meters away from where the enormous isolation dome should have stood. But instead of a monstrosity wrought from Memorysteel, there was just a kilometer-deep crater. Interestingly, vibrant grass had already sprouted in the pit, growing with a speed visible even to the naked eye.

There was no chance to get a grip on what was going on before another enormous tremor shook the whole world. The sky turned chaotic the next moment. One moment, it was the aquamarine blue of before; the next moment, there was only darkness. Then the darkness turned into a star-studded night sky.

Ogras and Billy looked up at the continuously transforming sky. It was like the owner of the realm couldn’t decide how the sky should look, and tried on a series of different environments. A huge meteor suddenly appeared on the horizon, and it was like it was teleported as it suddenly hit land.

“Oh crap,” Ogras said as he looked at the enormous plume of soil and dust that rose high into the sky.

However, the fear of seeing a meteor slam into the ground was nothing compared to the fear that followed it. The fear of realization. Ogras eyes shot toward his hand, and despair immediately set in when he saw that the rune was gone. “Oh crap.”

“Ah?” Billy said with confusion, finally looking away from the still-transforming sky.

“I think we’re stuck here, you and I.” Ogras sighed, and he clarified what he was talking about when he saw the blank look on Billy’s face. “The seals are gone. We will not be able to get back to Earth.”

“Like castaways?” Billy frowned before he nodded.

Ogras looked on with confusion as Billy walked over to a young tree and ripped it straight out of the ground.

“Mama read Billy a book about being a castaway. First, you get a spear. Then coconuts. Have you seen any coconuts, horny man?” Billy asked.

“Coconuts? What? And why would you need that shitty spear? Don’t you have that big club of yours?” Ogras said with exasperation.

“Ah!” Billy exclaimed again, his eyes lighting up. “Billy has lots of meat too. Billy is really smart after all.”

“What would you even hunt with that weak spear of yours?” Ogras snorted as he took out a flagon of liquor. “There aren’t even any life forms in this place. Well, at least there is plenty of Cosmic Energy and Origin Dao. Cultivating here will be extremely efficient.”

He wasn’t really thirsty, but this seemed like an excellent time to get drunk. He didn’t have the slightest clue of how to get out of the Inner World of a Dimensional Seed. Even worse, it looked like the seed was traveling between dimensions, judging by the sky. Who knew if he would even still be inside the Zecia Sector by the time he figured out a way out of here.

A clattering shriek suddenly broke the silence, and its piercing tone made Ogras’ hair stand on end. What the hell was that? It came from the direction of the meteor. Ogras suddenly thought of a terrifying possibility. That weird stone, was it really a meteor?

Or was it a hive?

“Ah, stupid horny man, you jinxed it,” Billy muttered as he gave Ogras a scathing look.

“Of course.” Ogras sighed and closed his eyes before taking a long, long swig.

This is what you get when you risk your life.

THREE YEARS

Zac took a deep breath as he opened his eyes, and he was greeted by the first rays of the suns piercing through the foliage of the poplar growing in his courtyard. This bout of meditation had lasted over three days, but to say that he had made any real gains would be a lie. He had been unable to properly calm his mind and enter a proper state.

Because today marked the third anniversary of the events in the Mystic Realm.

The scene of Ogras disappearing into the Dimensional Seed and the cataclysmic battle that followed was still fresh in his mind. His and Billy's life and death were still up in the air. Kenzie was still adamant about them surviving, but Zac couldn't help but lose hope as the years passed. They simply hadn't been able to find any information to support that theory.

"Still thinking about it?" a worried voice said as Thea stepped out of their bedroom.

"It's hard not knowing." Zac sighed as he got up to his feet and walked over and kissed her.

"Your sister still hasn't given up, you know. It feels like she is planning something big," Thea said as she gripped his hand in hers.

"I know," Zac said as he felt a headache coming on just at the mention of Kenzie.

Ogras had essentially sacrificed his life to save Kenzie, and Kenzie hadn't given up on him even after three full years. Part of him believed it was because of the life-saving favor,

but another part believed the two had to have been an item in secret. Kenzie was always evasive on the subject, and he guessed that it didn't really matter. But the resources she had put into finding and saving the demon were, in a word, terrifying.

Then again, he wasn't one to talk, considering how he'd acted with Alea back then, and it was her money. It wasn't like he didn't want to find them either if they were really alive, but Zac wouldn't even know where to begin to look. He hadn't even managed to gather any intelligence on Dimensional Seeds, and it might not even be something that had appeared in Zecia before.

Still, Zac could only table the matter for now as the two walked through his private forest to a secluded pergola overlooking the ocean. It was far from the shipyard and the public sector, a small section of paradise just for the two of them. They sat down, content to simply watch the sun's morning rays dance over the waves.

Dating as a cultivator came with its own set of challenges, especially when both partners were cultivation maniacs. The two had lived together for almost two years by now, but this was actually the first time they'd spent together in almost a week.

As the two progressed on the path of cultivation, they had found that every bout of meditation took longer and longer, especially now that the Origin Dao of Earth was completely exhausted. Zac had been in a meditative trance for almost three days, trying to further his fusion between Dao and combat, but his progress was laughable.

Thea had been off training her swordplay while simultaneously thinning out an aggressive beast horde before that. Zac often undertook similar outings as well to test his theories when he wasn't busy working on his soul or understanding of fractals. Of course, this weeklong separation was nothing compared to the seven months Thea had spent in the Base Town and Tower of Eternity.

So coming together to this secluded spot had become sort of a tradition for them, a way to get away from it all and spend some time with each other. There was no talk of cultivation or the endless duties that kept them busy the few hours they didn't cultivate. Thea took out a breakfast set she had prepared, and the two spent the next thirty minutes just relaxing.

"Oh, I happened to track down that disciple of yours while you were cultivating," Thea suddenly said.

"What is she up to now?" Zac sighed.

"She's a highway bandit in the forests close to the Dead Zone," Thea snorted. "She's scrounged up a bunch of teenagers from somewhere, and they are robbing the adventuring groups that pass through on the way to the relay stations. I found out because she robbed one of my agents, who recognized her."

"I'll send someone to bring her back." Zac exhaled.

"You know, Emily is acting out because she feels cramped on this island. Why not let her walk her own path? Neither you nor I got where we are now by staying in the Academy," Thea said. "She's a young woman now."

"That doesn't mean the Academy's not effective," Zac said. "I made enough mistakes for a lifetime getting to where I am now. If not for my luck, I would be dead a hundred times over. Only one out of a million might make it out alive when walking a path of constant bloodshed."

"I guess you'll have to find some middle ground, then, or she'll keep running off. Sooner or later, she'll get her hands on a Teleportation Token, and then she won't be in your backyard any longer," Thea said. "I need to practice with Aigale a bit; wish Kenzie good luck from me, will you?"

"I will." Zac nodded and kissed her goodbye before she disappeared with her movement skill.

Zac himself stayed behind to rest for a while longer.

Things had proceeded pretty much as expected after the return from the Mystic Realm. The auction was a huge success

that netted him almost 40 billion Nexus Coins, which was followed by him almost effortlessly completing the Second Step of Sovereignty. He had been pitted against a hundred other presumptive Sovereigns of the Zecia Sector in a situation somewhat similar to the Battle of Fates in the Tower of Eternity. But this time, there was no Iz Tayn to strike terror in his heart.

This time, he was the terror.

After he passed as the clear first-spot holder, he was given a simple follow-up quest. He had proven that he had what it took to become a leader; afterward, he just needed to hold on to that power. Of course, with Thea being his girlfriend and the remains of the New World Government integrated into Port Atwood, there was not much opposition. Most of the Ishiate didn't care one way or another. In fact, it turned out that Starlight had actually left Earth already thanks to some sort of opportunity he had gained.

The Zhix were solidly in his camp as well, and that alone was enough to make others think twice before making their move. The only potential threat was the natives of the fallen Mystic Realm, but Zac had already made his arrangements for them. The Gemlings were now part of Port Atwood and mostly stayed in his Underwater Town, crafting and looking for treasures on the seabed.

He hadn't expected those stone turtles to actually be amphibian in nature, but it turned out they preferred to live close to the shores on his islands. Many of their crafting techniques were even water-based, though some had swapped over to follow the same path as Brazla.

The survivors of the True Sky Faction were in a similar situation as Clan Volor. The leaders had mostly signed the same sort of contracts as external elders did and stayed on with Port Atwood. A few had instead purchased Teleportation Tokens from him to leave Earth and stake out a path on their own. Most of those who chose to remain, including Hekruv Vira, took up positions at the Atwood Academy, splitting their time between cultivation and research.

The Cartava Clan had been eradicated by the Lunar Tribe, and the werewolves were now a weak isolated faction under strict observation, forming just a small village with less than a thousand households. They lived up in the desolate north now, far from any other civilization. Ogras would no doubt have wanted Zac to take them all out, but Zac simply didn't have the stomach for it. There had been enough bloodshed in those last frantic days of the Mystic Realm.

Besides, Zac felt he owed a debt of gratitude to their leader. Things would probably have turned out a lot differently if he hadn't shown up at the eleventh hour in the battle against Adcarkas. To look after his tribe in return was the least he could do, especially considering their top elites had all been killed. Of course, this courtesy only remained as long as the Lunar Tribe didn't do something stupid.

So things were stable on Earth for the moment, but that wasn't to say that there hadn't been any attempts to stop his power grab over the following years. But every coup had been utterly crushed, often without Zac even needing to lift his finger. He had mostly left things to the Valkyries or the Zhix while he kept to himself as he worked on his foundation. One exception took place half a year ago. when a man called Mark Kaufman appeared out of nowhere.

He'd quickly gained a following as he proudly displayed his level, a whopping level 106, in the middle of the square of New Washington while simultaneously challenging Zac for the position of the leader of Earth. This guy had never been on the ladder while it still existed, and he wasn't listed in the Marshall Clan's booklet called *Earth's Champions*. His background was a complete mystery.

Of course, this Mark guy had obviously never heard of the term "haste makes waste." Zac learned of the challenge and appeared ready for battle, but Mark Kaufman wasn't even able to withstand Zac's Dao Field. The pressure alone crushed his bones as he was forced to the ground. He was still in recovery, from what Zac heard.

It quickly became clear that this guy was as lowly as cultivators came, and he was actually an E-grade Common

Cultivator, someone who had given up on future progression. He had almost no titles and no accomplishments to speak of, barely meeting the minimum requirements for evolution thanks to an herb he had chanced upon.

The way he had gained so many levels was directly linked to this, with such a shitty foundation, he barely required any energy to level up. If Zac had such low requirements, he would probably have been level 150 by now, rather than still sitting at level 101.

In fact, Mark wasn't the only one who had passed Zac in level by now. The *Earth's Champions* booklet listed over two hundred humans having passed level 100 by now. Of course, they had only surpassed him on the level ladder. He still held an undisputed first position on the power ladder that the Marshall Clan also put together.

Zac briefly thought back to the System-run ladders of old, and he couldn't help but applaud Alyn's prescience. She had told him that less than half of the elites would be remembered in a few years, and this was exactly the case. The names on the Marshall Clan's level lists were almost all new names, with the old ladder geniuses occupying less than a quarter of the top.

Most of the "old guard" were still stuck in the F-grade, and only a few of them voluntarily so, according to what he had heard. Earth being flooded with Origin Dao had essentially supercharged early cultivation, and there really was not much reason to hunker down at F-grade for more than a year or two on a recently integrated planet. They were given the gift of huge momentum, and it would be foolish not to make the most of it.

But only now did the people of Earth realize what an opportunity had passed them by during the early stages of the integration. The training wheels were off now.

The Origin Dao was gone, and the opportunities to rack up any significant achievements were sparse with no remaining incursions, making it extraordinarily hard for those who had picked higher-rarity Classes to advance. Not everyone could be like Thea, returning victoriously from the Tower of Eternity

and gaining an E-grade Epic Class in one go. Certainly, she only had one Epic option out of three total, but it was still proof of her talent and the work she had put in during the first year of the integration.

Frictions were already starting to appear between forces, where desperate cultivators saw war as the only opportunity for them to break through their bottleneck. Cultivation was normally not this rushed, but the situation on a fresh planet was a bit unique. There were no elders to stabilize the political landscape. So those who progressed the fastest were also those who got to enjoy the best resources, no matter how shaky their foundations were.

Of course, the people of Port Atwood were mostly insulated from that hectic grab for levels and resources, with the Academy staunchly maintaining a more prudent curriculum. Zac was the same, with him having gained just over ten levels over the past three years, a sharp decline compared to his earlier speed.

Part of him was a bit worried about losing momentum, but he didn't have much of a choice at the moment. He had chosen to walk an extremely perilous path, a path containing three top-tier concepts and fusing them into one system. He had been muddling along until now, but it was high time for him to shore up his foundations.

Outwardly, it might have seemed as though he had stopped working after securing a century-long breather for Earth, but the truth was anything but. He had spent a herculean effort on his F-grade skills, all of which had now reached Peak mastery. This was normally something that was done before even evolving, so Zac had been lagging behind in that department.

Unfortunately, his shoring up his lacking foundation wasn't the only thing that kept his level suppressed. There were far more troublesome issues that caused him headaches. First of all, there was the ever-present issue of his Draugr Race constitution. Three years had passed, but his improvements were simply pathetic.

The [**Bone-Forging Dust**] was no longer effective on his body, which honestly was a bit of a relief. Calrin had managed to find a few minor treasures that worked on him as well, but he was still a long way from reaching D-grade Race, especially since his undead side seemed to require far more resources to take that step.

Added together with his other gains, he couldn't help but worry about hitting his attribute cap, and the thought alone made Zac nervously open his status screen.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 101

Class: [E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

Race: [D] Human – Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Planetary Lord

Titles: [...] Peak Power, Sovereign-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider

Limited Titles: Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star – 14th, Weight of Sin

Dao: Fragment of the Axe – High, Fragment of the Coffin – High, Fragment of the Bodhi – High

Core: [E] Duplicity

Strength: 4,032 [Increase: 93%. Efficiency: 228%]

Dexterity: 1,967 [Increase: 67%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance: 3,872 [Increase: 103%. Efficiency: 228%]

Vitality: 3,076 [Increase: 93%. Efficiency: 228%]

Intelligence: 949 [Increase: 67%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom: 1,803 [Increase: 72%. Efficiency: 187%]

Luck: 397 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points: 0

Nexus Coins: [E] 107,298

His other two Daos had caught up to his Fragment of the Axe by now, but he didn't feel like any of his Daos were close to reaching Peak mastery. Inspiration was found in the heat of battle, which was doubly true for his Fragment of the Axe, and he hadn't been forced to push himself since the cataclysmic battles in the Mystic Realm.

But there was one more reason, something Zac hadn't realized until now. It really seemed his progress was a lot worse compared to even normally talented people now that the Origin Dao was gone. It was like his Dao progress was extremely quick as long as it had some fuel to run on, be it Origin Dao or treasures. But the moment there was no fuel supplied, progress simply stopped.

Others could at least make some progress through meditation, but Zac didn't feel like he was doing that at all. Perhaps he was making some inroads, but it wouldn't be realized until he got his hands on an E-grade Dao Treasure. There was no doubt about it in Zac's mind; this, too, was related to his Void Emperor Bloodline. Zac believed he wouldn't have many bottlenecks, but he would need to find treasures or treasure lands to push his progress forward.

Of course, his Daos having stagnated a bit was for the best with his current situation.

His attributes had increased by almost 50% thanks to his levels and improved Daos over the past years. In a way, it was almost a relief that his Peak-mastery **[Forester's Constitution]** couldn't keep up with his ballooning attribute pool any longer, and the actual boosts to Endurance and Vitality it provided were far below the advertised 15%.

Just the thought of gaining another level in his current situation filled him with worry. He had reached Middle E-grade by now, and the boosts had doubled. What if he hit the attribute cap? Of course, that wasn't the only reason why breaking open a node filled him with trepidation.

The dangers of forcing open nodes had taken a sharp and drastic turn the moment he hit Middle E-grade.

PEAK PERFORMANCE

Gaining levels was usually the easiest part for geniuses, with Daos and achievements causing the biggest delays. However, Zac had long heard about how many people got stuck in the middle of the E-grade, bottlenecked to never reach the peak. At first, he had trouble understanding why some people would rather dissipate their energy than keep pushing forward, but Zac had been given a rude awakening the moment he hit level 100.

It was the peak of Low E-grade and the first node that wasn't placed in one of his limbs. It was rather placed at his shoulder. It was still at the edge of his body, but still on his proper torso. Zac had read about the increasing difficulties of breaking open nodes on his torso and later his head, but nothing could have prepared him for the fallout.

The fleshy explosion that almost made him lose his whole right arm was bad enough, but the true threat was the invisible wounds that impacted his pathways and his whole body. His very foundations had taken a massive hit by cracking the node open, and he had been forced to spend three months in recuperation where he barely circulated any Cosmic Energy at all.

Even his lethal cocktail of berserking methods during the final battle against Adcarkas had only required two months of bed rest, but this single node was even worse.

Healing pills hadn't worked, and neither had **[Surging Vitality]**. Redrawing his pathways with **[Spiritual Anchor]** did help a bit, but he was still extremely weakened, like his

body had sprung a leak or something. It looked like only his body's natural recuperation was able to heal the weird state of weakness. His Void Emperor Bloodline didn't really help either, except by providing an unusually sturdy body. After all, his situation wasn't caused by impurities, so **[Purity of the Void]** did nothing in this situation.

He had somewhat looked down at Galvarion, the maritime mortal he'd read about in Thea's library, for taking over a century to reach Peak E-grade. But he finally understood the struggle now. Zac had expected things to get gradually worse, but this was too much. His attribute gains doubled at Middle E-grade while the difficulty rather increased tenfold. He had gathered as much information as he could, though, and he made some discoveries.

First of all, this wasn't only a problem that affected mortals. Even cultivators were impacted by this change. Low E-grade was essentially risk-free to open for them, but even cultivators would be hurt when grinding open nodes with the help of their Cultivation Manuals in the Middle and High E-grade. Of course, the threat to them was only a tenth compared to mortals who forcibly blew their nodes wide open.

Secondly, the stronger one's foundation, the more dangerous things became. This wasn't a surprise to Zac, considering what he had learned so far, but it was still important to remember. The higher your attribute pool was, the bigger your energy reserves were. That also meant that you needed to fill each node with more energy before it burst, which made the fallout worse.

Someone like himself probably took a hit many times more dangerous than a mortal like Galvarion, who only was an Uncommon E-grade mortal.

Third, you could minimize the damage to your body by improving your control of Cosmic Energy. This was unfortunately easier said than done for Zac. His energy control wasn't completely wretched like his Dao control, but it was still not something to write home about. Add that to the previous point, and him breaking open nodes was far more dangerous compared to the situation for normal mortals.

Luckily, there were some solutions to his predicament. First of all, breaking open nodes with the help of pills or treasures was equivalent to cultivators' situation. The damage he would receive leveling with the help of pills would be negligible. His sister had already added a simple purification array to his cultivation cave that would help shed Pill Toxicity and slowly reduce his resistance to those types of pills. Furthermore, his Hidden Node sped up his natural detoxifying process ten times compared to normal warriors.

He was already at a state that he could do a level rush as he'd done back when evolving to E-grade. But he was still holding off, as he wanted to deal with his undead Race. There was also the issue of getting top-tier pills. Last time, he'd wasted his potential a bit by just taking random pills he got in the Base Town. Now, he wanted to make the most of it, only eating the best of the best so as not to waste any time.

There were also arrays specifically designed to decrease the danger for mortals when bursting nodes. Unfortunately, those arrays weren't all that popular since very few formation clans felt it worthwhile to study those types of arrays and improve them. The array he had gotten his hands on was called [**Shedding Mortal Coil Array**], but it didn't even slightly live up to its name.

It did at least lessen the damage by up to 10% by somewhat containing the outburst, and that was after Kenzie's improvements. Zac couldn't complain; he needed every advantage he could get. Furthermore, it was engraved on an array disk, so he could always bring it with him in case he wanted to break open a node on the go.

Zac was convinced there were far better arrays out there, perhaps even some supreme arrays that could allay the dangers for mortals completely. Unfortunately, that wasn't something he could get his hands on on Earth, probably not anywhere in the whole sector.

His best solution right now was to slowly improve his control and work on his soul. He hoped that evolving his soul would come with all kinds of benefits, including improved control over his Daos and Cosmic Energy. In the meantime, he

might get his hands on better supportive tools for mortals. But for now, he had decided to slow down his leveling drastically and instead focus on other things.

And there was a lot to do.

Grinding his skills to Peak mastery was his first goal, and the next step was to start fusing his abilities. Some of the F-grade skills were barely useful any longer, utterly incapable of bringing out the power contained in his body. He was better off simply fighting head-on than using skills like **[Chop]**. Even his skills from his undead Epic class had fallen behind by this point, and skills like **[Immutable Bulwark]** had long stopped scaling with his Endurance.

That was why Zac nowadays spent around ten hours a day poring over hundreds of missives on shoring up his theoretical foundations. Pathways, fractals, attuned energies, Dao, the soul, and the relationship between all these components. Zac had studied it all to better grasp his situation and what steps he needed to take toward the future.

His improved constitution was proving invaluable during his studies. He no longer had any issues maintaining complete focus for days on end, and his memory was near eidetic as well, allowing him to remember pretty much everything he had read. Just one month of studying now allowed him to learn far more than he did during his years in college.

But the more he learned, the more he also understood just how shallow his foundation was. Unfortunately, it was either extremely expensive or even impossible to buy detailed information about most subjects, making advanced knowledge scarce. It was no wonder so many wandering cultivators eventually chose to join a sect.

This lack of proper available guidance was obviously not a coincidence, but rather an intentional situation created by powerful factions. If an information house started disseminating everything from skills to manuals to secret knowledge far and wide, they would immediately find themselves under tremendous pressure from hundreds of powerful forces.

Hiring talented wandering cultivators was extremely important to maintain operations even for family clans, as they were needed for everything from filling the ranks of armies to providing skills that the force was lacking. If these wandering cultivators suddenly could get their hands on all they needed by just buying a bunch of missives, then they would be far less likely to join a force. Or at least demand a lot higher compensation for giving up their freedom.

This conflict of interest had resulted in a tightly controlled information market, with unofficial rules on what information could and couldn't be sold, and prices being mostly standardized. Perhaps things were better in more flourishing sectors, but Zac wouldn't bet on it. Because one willing participant in this scheme was the System itself.

The System had long since concluded that freely accessible information generally resulted in mediocre cultivators. It rather wanted factions to go to war for each other's Heritages, with knowledge and riches being the reward for risking your life. Zac was in neither any position nor mood to go to war to steal some other faction's Heritage, so he and Port Atwood had to make do with just the basics.

Of course, Zac wasn't the only one who was working on improving himself around the clock, and a sigh escaped his lips as he glanced toward his sister's compound. Thea said she believed Kenzie was up to something big, but she didn't know the half of it. Thea was still completely unaware of the factories and workshops that were hundreds of meters underground, vast complexes built with the help of data and components found in the Spatial Rings of Cervantes and the Cartava elders.

Furthermore, two islands had been turned into strictly guarded factories that produced components for Kenzie's needs.

Zac hated that Kenzie was so insistent on playing with Technocrat technologies, but the events in the Mystic Realm had instilled her with the same sort of need for power that had allowed him to reach his current heights. She refused to listen to him, to the point that Zac was afraid she'd leave Earth and

set up an even worse compound somewhere else if he pressured her.

Then again, it had also turned out that they didn't have a lot of options other than to take the plunge if they wanted Kenzie to evolve.

Jeeves had already become part of her soul, and it turned out that her reaching E-grade without Jeeves doing the same was impossible. She had long reached level 75 and gained four Dao Fragments, and there were less than five people in Port Atwood who could deal with her in a direct confrontation. But she still couldn't even get an Uncommon E-grade class.

It was like Jeeves had turned into a fourth requirement on top of Dao, Race, and achievements.

The desire to find Ogras, and to a lesser degree Billy, who they assumed had been sucked up by the vortex as well, had pushed her on in a manic scramble to find everything Jeeves required to become a Class 2 AI, while simultaneously building a whole mechanized headquarters to facilitate the upgrade. Zac mostly looked on with worry while limiting her operations to the bare minimum, praying that Jeeves was really right in its insistence that it wouldn't draw the ire of the System.

He had also erected ten **[E-Grade Heaven's Path Beacons]** across the planet without telling his sister. The beacons were provided on the cheap by pro-System factions, and they only had one purpose: to block access to the Digitized World and weaken any sort of signals of technological origin from reaching the planet's surface.

They were essentially Wi-Fi jammers to make sure that Kenzie didn't sneak onto the Soul World Jaol had mentioned in her desire to become stronger, inadvertently putting the whole planet in danger. Zac would rather have bought far more powerful beacons, as he wasn't confident that these low-grade arrays could properly block factions like Firmament's Edge, but this was the best he could get his hands on at the moment.

Prolong and agonize as he might, the day of Kenzie's evolution had finally arrived. Evolving Jeeves had required a

shocking amount of money, and not even he would have been able to shoulder that cost. They had managed to satiate a few of its requirements by looting the Merit Exchange and the accumulated wealth of the Lunar Tribe and Cartava Clan.

However, most of it was acquired by Kenzie herself, as she had made a fortune with the help of Jeeves.

Her method was quite ingenious; she found popular defensive arrays sold by formation clans or sects and created extremely efficient Array Breakers for them with the help of the calculations of Jeeves and the Technocrat supercomputers she'd snatched. With that in hand, she essentially blackmailed the factions, selling her silence and instructions on how to remedy the loopholes.

If the sects refused, she simply released the Array Breakers through Calrin or the array clan's competitors and made a bundle of cash that way.

She had only been doing that for two years and with low-grade arrays, but she alone made way more money than Zac's combined ventures, which was a testament to the value skilled noncombat cultivators could bring to a faction. It was for this very reason the Tsarun Clan had spent so much effort on the Gemlings. Unfortunately for them, it had turned into yet another venture of theirs that benefited Zac in the end, with the first being the Thayer Consortium.

Kenzie had already gained some infamy in certain circles from her actions as well. More than one Array Master and formation clan had put out a bounty on her head, though no one knew of her real identity. The bounties were the reason for more than one sleepless night for Zac, but he knew that trying to do something about it with his limited strength would only worsen the situation.

Calrin and the Thayer Consortium was also a great beneficiary of Kenzie's "Peak Performance Breakers," as she called her venture when going about her extortionist business. It was a bit on the nose, but Calrin couldn't care less, as he raked in huge commissions by acting as a go-between with the help of his Mercantile License.

Zac couldn't help but snicker and wonder if her actions had caused any problems for the real Peaks, the Peak Family that Average and Pretty belonged to.

DEVIANT

The Thayer Consortium had gained over 200 billion Nexus Coins from selling Kenzie's Array Breakers over the past three years. That wasn't much compared to established mercantile unions, but it was still a shocking amount considering how small a percentage Calrin charged for Kenzie's business. Furthermore, the actual sale of Array Breakers was the smaller of Kenzie's two income sources by all accounts. Extortion was far more profitable.

It did end up with the Thayer Consortium forming a few dozen life-death grudges, since while Kenzie could remain anonymous, it all ultimately happened through Calrin's license. But the greedy Sky Gnome figured that it didn't matter since he already had the Tsarun Clan looking for him. What was a few more?

Zac himself wasn't exactly sure of his sister's fortune by this point. But she had mentioned that the total cost for Jeeves' upgrades had long surpassed 50 D-grade Nexus Coins, which was the equivalent of over 50 trillion Nexus Coins. That was far beyond even the exorbitant cost of [**Love's Bond**].

Many of the materials had required him to send some of his followers off-world as well, which was only made possible after becoming a Planetary Lord. The increased status allowed him to bring one person with him either when leaving or returning to Earth, which he could exploit by simply opening the portal and not going through himself.

Sometimes it was to attend large-scale auctions or trade fairs, other times to pick up consigned items through

intermediaries. Zac would normally have wanted to go out and explore along with his subordinates, but he usually handed the tasks over to his followers in the end. First of all, he was too busy to wait for weeks or months for a particular item to appear at an auction, but the biggest reason was that his identity was too complicated at the moment.

That wasn't to say he hadn't left Earth over the past three years.

Going out as himself was impossible, but he did have the disguise skill [**Million Faces**], which provided an aura-altering effect. Together with Greatest's privacy bangle, he had a pretty decent disguise. He still only left when absolutely necessary, though, and only to places he could confirm didn't house any C-grade Monarchs.

Zac obviously didn't think himself capable of dealing with proper D-grade Hegemons in case it came to blows, especially not after witnessing the Great Redeemer duking it out with the Collector and the Administrator. It was rather that people below the C-grade were quite unlikely to see through his disguise. That allowed him to set out, complete his task, and return before he created any waves.

After all, Zac's reputation had grown to almost mythical proportions over the past three years. His deeds had been spread far and wide, and even Calrin had been able to easily purchase information packets containing everything he had done in the Base Town.

The only force that had openly condemned him and put out an enormous bounty was unsurprisingly the Tsarun Clan. No matter if it was to retain their dignity or if they believed that an irreconcilable grudge had already formed, they had openly stated their desire to have him killed. Their real goal was probably to find out the source of his power, considering how power-hungry they were.

Zac personally preferred such an open stance compared to the daggers hidden in the dark. If there was one force that was openly going after him, then there were no doubt dozens doing it without publishing it far and wide. Especially considering

that not a single faction had stepped out to protect him, not even the Peak Family. Perhaps that was because he still only represented potential, but Zac also feared that it might have something to do with the title he had been given in his absence.

The Deviant Asura.

A surge of annoyance bubbled up when he thought of the shitty nickname people used to talk about him behind his back. A beating of galactic proportions would be dished out if he ever got his hands on Galau. His actions during the panty raid had spread far and wide, along with dozens of fake stories that had made his reputation in the Zecia Sector far worse than it ever was on Earth.

There was even a rumor going about that he was collecting young maidens for his harem. He had asked Ibtep about the situation the moment they returned from the Zethaya branch, but they had said that everything was under control. The Zhix liaison had clearly not been able to dig out the truth from the Zethaya Clan even after staying with them for over a month.

Even crazier, there were actually millions of girls willing to take him up on the offer. Zac had to admit the thought was pretty exhilarating to have become such an eligible partner, but it had resulted in some trouble on the home front. For example, Thea had returned from the Tower of Eternity with the temper of a volcano about to erupt after having listened to the rumors for over half a year.

The Deviant title thankfully didn't only refer to his supposed penchant for young girls and wearing their undergarments, but also the ruthless way he fought. A video of him holding the ripped-off head of Rasuliel Tsarun in the rubble of the Zethaya Pill House was attached to every information missive, and his corpse tree still stood tall in the center of the Base Town for some reason.

His and his people's outings had at least come with some good news; he had not only snatched up the second material for Karunthel's quest, but also a third. He had lucked out and gotten his hands on a [**Daemonic Manastone**] himself during

one of his rare outings. It was while looking for Infernal Crystals, an exceedingly rare Attuned Crystal mainly utilized by some summoner classes.

The manastone was similar to a Beast Core, belonging to a creature summoned from some sort of abyssal plane. It had a very unique ability that made it different from normal Beast Cores though: to continuously draw power from that unknown dimension. Zac guessed that Karunthel wanted that thing to see if it could be turned into a power source that didn't need to be replaced all the time like Nexus Crystals.

One manastone wouldn't even be able to power an E-grade vessel even if the Creators managed to transform the alien energies it emitted, but what if you integrated thousands of them into a Cosmic Vessel? It sounded like a pretty good idea to Zac, provided you could stomach the cost.

The other item he had gathered was unsurprisingly the **[Urgarat Flakes]**. Zac had discovered that one of the Teleportation Tokens in his possession led to a faction in the same area as a planet where you could harvest the natural runoff material. He had sent one of his people to stay in the town for five months, and the flakes eventually appeared in an auction.

That left only one material to upgrade the shipyard, the **[Ferric Worldeater]**, and Zac already knew where to find it. The only reason he hadn't visited Leyara's Void Gate yet was that he was hesitant whether he was ready to deal with that place. He would probably have to go as himself if he wanted a shot at reaching the Void Star, the mysterious anomaly that was at the heart of the Void Gate Faction.

He had researched all kinds of methods to hide his unique points from even C-grade Monarchs, but he still wasn't confident in the results. It was a shame too, considering that the Void Gate not only was the only confirmed source of the weird space beasts, but also a place that might hold more answers about his bloodline. If there was any place in the Zecia Sector where he might find a Bloodline Method that actually suited him, then it would be over there.

But the Void Priestess was there, and Zac was unwilling to put himself in such a helpless situation.

The same unfortunately went for any high-grade world, no matter if you were talking about the Allbright Empire, Twilight Harbor, or even the chaotic space outside the Red Zone of the Allbright Empire. All of them potentially housed Monarchs that might be able to expose him just with a single glance. Some might not care, but it just took one of them to garner some interest for him to get caught and dissected like a lab animal.

He wasn't all that worried about the Remnants being found out in the Zecia Sector. Their cage was something set up by the System itself and Be'Zi, who Zac was pretty much certain was a B-grade cultivator. It was his mutated Specialty Core that was the problem. It had only taken Greatest a glance to somewhat figure out what it would do, and the same was true for Yrial.

There were all kinds of powerful Specialty Cores, but he had never heard of something so overpowered as to give a whole second class. Even Monarchs would probably be interested in that. Kenzie was working on some sort of array that might help disguise it and make it look like a normal Duplicity Core, but progress was slow even with the help of her vast calculating power. Perhaps the imminent evolution of Jeeves would be the change that would lead to a breakthrough.

Zac spent the rest of the day the same way as usual, cultivating his soul for a few hours before visiting Abby to go over the general state of Earth. Nothing much was new. The situation on Earth was becoming increasingly stable as time passed. The population of Earth had even started growing again, albeit barely.

There was the issue of the increasing number of monster tides plaguing the towns. There was a huge number of beasts that had reached E-grade by this point, and many of them looked to expand their territories. It was still a common occurrence for towns to be overrun or badly hurt.

It wasn't that Zac didn't want to help, and there were quite a few elites in Port Atwood who would be more than willing to jump from town to town and clear out monsters. The System, unfortunately, didn't want that to happen. It often disabled the teleporters when the beasts came running, creating trials for the township. If they succeeded, someone would probably make some sort of breakthrough in the town. If they failed and were eaten, the System would save on resources.

Port Atwood was working on preventative measures, for example keeping track of areas that held the potential to turn into monster tides. The more successful forces were also dealing with the issue themselves. The easiest way to prevent a monster tide was to regularly hunt beasts in the vicinity. It both provided wealth and power to your faction while preventing being overrun.

Zac left the government building an hour later, stepping out onto the tiled ground. A few modified cars flashed by, their engines powered by Nexus Crystals. But vehicles were still a rare sight, as most people in Port Atwood chose to walk. There were very few low-leveled people in the town even after its population had exploded over the past years, and it didn't really save time to take a car for the average cultivator.

His eyes turned to the sprawling city around him, and he still couldn't really believe that it was all under his control. Towering skyscrapers reached toward the clouds, each of them an architectural marvel that would shock the world before the integration. Things were different nowadays, with resources being far more plentiful.

Designs that would previously be unsafe or prohibitively expensive were suddenly made possible with the help of spiritual materials and inscriptions. Some of the skyscrapers were even made from wood even though they reached over five hundred meters into the sky.

The sprawling towers had taken all kinds of inspiration, from the demonic fusion of nature and buildings to the steampunk brass of the Ishiate Tinkerers. A few even looked like actual mountains or stalagmites, which were mainly used

by the molemen of the Underworld. There was one common thread, though: all the buildings held large gardens and terraces on their roofs and even along their walls.

Pollution wasn't really a problem any longer thanks to the city largely running on Cosmic Energy instead of electricity, but Zac didn't want to see his paradisaical island being turned into a concrete jungle either. The roads were wide and lined with trees, and the buildings were all surrounded by parks or gardens, even the high-rise buildings. It gave the town a far roomier feeling compared to the old cities of Earth.

Something like this would normally be impossible considering the value of land in the capital of a world, but Zac still retained the ownership of the whole island apart from Azh'Rodum. Most of the buildings were his as well, though some were built by others.

For example, Joanna owned a large block of student housing close to the Academy, using it as an additional income to supplement her cultivation. Many of the elites and old guard did the same. Sap Trang, who almost perennially lived out on the dangerous waters with his Kraken, had started working on setting up a whole maritime conglomerate, providing everything from protection to exploring the depths of the sea.

Ilvere owned all kinds of entertainment establishments in Azh'Rodum, mainly targeted at the cultivators who worked the crystal mines. There were tens of thousands of other smaller businesses keeping the economy of Port Atwood going, but the main focus of the inhabitants was ultimately cultivation.

Most people lived in Port Atwood for the extremely dense Cosmic Energy. Zac didn't know whether it was a reward from the System or if he was just lucky, but the Nexus Vein beneath the island had kept growing in power over the past years. The density of energy was simply unmatched, especially after Zac had added some high-quality gathering arrays covering the whole town.

A lot of people would rather live in a small apartment in Port Atwood than build a sprawling mansion somewhere else

on Earth. However, only a few ever got the opportunity, as Zac kept the population numbers of his main island under strict control. If he let the numbers balloon, the energy density would grow too sparse, which would affect the cultivation of the elites of his faction.

Zac soon returned to his compound. Of course, it was more accurate to call it a fortress thanks to his increased Town Shop access as a World Leader, and his sister's adjustments. Anyone beneath the D-grade could only dream of entering his private forest, and even a D-grade Hegemon would need to expend quite a bit of effort and time, enough time for Zac to return with the help of his teleportation bracelet.

He didn't head for his own courtyard, as he knew that Thea would be off training. Instead, he walked over to the series of buildings his sister used for her tinkering. As expected, he found Kenzie going over a series of schematics that made Zac dizzy just from looking at them.

"Don't you look relaxed." Zac smiled as he sat down next to her. "How do you feel?"

"I feel fine." Kenzie nodded. "Don't worry. I've run the simulations for this so many times by now. And I received the last treasures yesterday. It's finally time to take the next step. Today, Jeeves and I will enter the E-grade."

TRIBULATION

“I can’t believe that guy is this greedy.” Zac sighed. “Your purchases would have pushed a normal D-grade force toward bankruptcy.”

“There is an endless number of Daos. It’s pretty good that Jeeves only wanted the taste of three hundred.” Kenzie laughed as she stood up. “Let’s go. I’ve been waiting for this for so long now.”

“If you say so.” Zac shrugged as he followed her toward the teleportation array.

It felt like too big a risk to evolve Jeeves right in Port Atwood, so they had instead prepared a special island over the past months. It had a Nexus Node of its own, along with a series of machines that would help with the evolution.

“I still don’t get why it wants that many different attunements,” Zac muttered as they teleported away. “Why not focus on the four elements like you do?”

It was true, most of the requirements for Jeeves’ evolution hadn’t been machines or technology. It was rather raw materials of different attunements. It was essentially gaining insight into hundreds of Daos by absorbing treasures that held a hint of the Dao itself. It was no doubt modeled after the methods used in the research base, where thousands of Daos had fused into a supreme containment sphere.

It had been pretty easy to satisfy that demand in the beginning with the help of Zac’s huge stockpile of Attuned Crystals, but it started to get increasingly difficult over time.

First of all, it wasn't enough to feed the greedy AI with crystals alone. It required various sources of every Dao to gain a deep enough understanding. The amount of attunement hidden in an Attuned Crystal was ultimately pretty weak and shallow compared to natural treasures. Even then, some attunements were pretty popular and easy to gain, but others were a lot more difficult.

For example, it took almost no effort to collect a few sets of treasures for nature-aspected Daos. These were actively grown since they were a major component in healing pills.

The same went for fire-attuned materials. They could easily be collected around volcanoes. But after they had collected some cheaper materials for the basic elemental Daos, things got more difficult. For example, where could you find raw materials containing weapon-based Daos? The same went for Daos based on concepts, such as Ilvere's Dao of Momentum or Alyn's Dao of Dissemination.

These kinds of weird Natural Treasures actually did exist, but they were unsurprisingly pretty rare. They were still useful in crafting equipment of specific attunements, and with their scarcity, it did drive up the price. That was one of the reasons why the upgrade costs had ballooned to this degree over the past three years.

Zac shuddered at the costs that would go into evolving the AI in the future. If it required materials for a full three hundred Daos now, what would it demand the next time? And would the materials all have to be D-grade? Earth and Port Atwood couldn't even support this initial evolution, let alone future ones.

All that was thankfully a problem for a distant future. Zac would hopefully have gotten his hands on enough riches over the next century, and Kenzie's moneymaking capabilities would only improve as her cultivation increased.

"I told you. Jeeves needs the different Daos to gain a true understanding of cultivation. The more Daos he collects, the better he can assist me. Everything is connected," Kenzie

explained. “That’s why I spent so much time looking for these final items.”

“Alright. Did the guy also happen to know what will happen when he evolves? I mean, this seems like something that will attract Tribulation Lighting even if he supposedly can hide from the System,” Zac said.

“It should be fine. We won’t harm anyone this far away from civilization even if something happens,” Kenzie said as she looked around. “Besides, Jeeves is extremely strong for his grade. He could even knock out the Administrator; breaking through will be a breeze.”

“It’s you I’m worried about.” Zac sighed. “If the Heavens zap your AI, it’s not like you’ll walk away unscathed.”

“It shouldn’t,” Kenzie said. “Jeeves hasn’t elicited any ire from the System.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Zac muttered, remembering the quest back then.

“You can’t get too paranoid.” Kenzie shrugged with a long-suffering look, which wasn’t surprising considering the two had already had this argument many times before. “Taking the Dimensional Seed would probably have been a great boon for you. It would definitely be a worthwhile trade in the eyes of the System. Trading the life of one person who focuses on the Dao of Technology for a power-up of a million-year talent? Easy trade. It doesn’t mean it has specifically targeted Jeeves.”

“Alright, alright. You’re sure there’s nothing I can do?” Zac asked.

“Nope,” Kenzie said. “I’ll feed Jeeves the last materials and evolve as he does.”

Zac could only look on with worry as she walked over to the middle of the rotunda where the Nexus Node hovered in the air. Nine intricately inscribed boxes appeared around her, and Zac’s body started to scream with greed the moment she opened them.

He didn’t know what all the items Kenzie collected were, but he knew about two of them. One was called a **[Lavoar**

Wavespirit], and it looked like a crystallized drop of deep-blue water. It was an amazing water-attuned treasure that could actually increase one's affinity with the various Daos of Water.

It wasn't as magical as a treasure that could turn a mortal into a cultivator, but what cultivator didn't dream of increasing their affinities to their Daos?

It was a peak treasure for the lower grades in the Zecia Sector, far surpassing things like the Fruit of Ascension or his Amanita Mushroom. Its price reflected that fact as well, and he knew that Kenzie had had an off-world agent pay over 3 D-grade Nexus Coins for this item alone.

It was way beyond even the [**Pathfinder Oracle Eye**]. Not only that, but the only reason they managed to buy the thing was because it had appeared in an impoverished part of Zecia. If it had appeared in one of the proper empires, there was no way they would have managed to purchase it at all. It would either have been snapped up before being presented to the public, or purchased at a premium by some elder for a descendant.

The second treasure he recognized was the [**Avar Worldtree Nut**], a nut no larger than an acorn. It was one of the treasures that were the cause for the ruckus in his cells because of the dense life it contained. The Avar Worldtree was a semi-sentient tree that had a chance to reach the power equivalent of Peak D-grade Cultivator if it was tended properly.

It could turn into a guardian for a clan, where its vines could stretch tens of kilometers and rip apart an invading army. It would even grow large enough that one could build a whole city in its tree crowns. Of course, growing it to such a state would cost a fortune, and it would take over ten thousand years. But it was still a very popular choice for some races to set up a foundation for a rising clan.

The Avar Worldtrees weren't that rare thanks to its popularity. But they still only grew a nut or two every few millennia, so the supply was somewhat limited. One nut cost over 750 billion Nexus Coins. This was quite affordable

compared to the power it could provide, but that was because the real cost came from cultivating the tree.

The other treasures each had an element of their own, and the five basic elements were represented: Water, Wood, Fire, Earth, and Metal. There were also two treasures pertaining to Life and Death, and two for Time and Space.

These treasures were all the best of the best among what was publicly available in the Zecia Sector, and a few of them could even match the Wavespirit in price. Thankfully, the rest of the items Kenzie had gathered until this point were a lot cheaper than these nine. She had splurged extra, as these were foundational Daos and the Daos for her path, and she wanted Jeeves to understand them as deeply as possible.

Zac watched with rapt attention as his sister took out one item after another and pressed it against her forehead, which caused them to disappear in a flash. It was Jeeves that was somehow absorbing the natural treasures. Three hundred Memorysteel balls, each one meter across and covered in dense scripts, rose into the air the next moment.

It looked like they formed a constellation of planets above the rotunda, and Zac felt various Daos emanating from each of them. This was an invention of his sister, based on the containment sphere in the research base. However, these balls each held Natural Treasures of their own, and they suffused their energies into the surroundings.

They also moved in a certain pattern that Zac couldn't understand at all, but it definitely held some hidden meaning since Zac's soul shuddered from trying to observe it. The movements also mixed the three hundred Daos, with Kenzie in the center. Zac gazed at the extravagant display, knowing that Kenzie was currently burning millions of Nexus Coins every second.

Nothing happened for the first thirty minutes, but Kenzie's brows slowly furrowed either in pain or concentration. Zac could only look on with worry, knowing he couldn't do anything to help at this point. This was uncharted territory, evolving a mysterious AI to the next stage. Jeeves itself said

that it should be effortless, but Zac wouldn't trust the parasitic AI as far as he could throw it.

The frown soon turned into a scowl, and Kenzie soon groaned in pain through gritted teeth. Her aura was fluctuating wildly, and Zac started to get a sinking feeling. This wasn't looking good.

A piercing scream of danger made Zac wildly look around, a raging fury bubbling up in his chest. Was someone actually targeting them while Kenzie was undergoing her tribulation? He'd slaughter anyone who caused a scene at this point. However, Zac quickly realized that the danger didn't come from a rival faction or an assassin, but from the Heavens themselves.

The sky had been clear just a few seconds ago, but a sea of blue lightning bolts approached on the horizon. One second later, they had arrived, and Zac looked up with horror as one tendril after another started to descend. There was no way to defend against this. Kenzie had installed lightning rods on the island upon his insistence, but there was no way they'd be able to handle something like this. Zac doubted even the island itself would survive an onslaught of this magnitude.

And even if the lightning somehow dissipated, there was still the issue of Kenzie herself. She clearly looked in a bad way, and she hadn't even touched the Nexus Node yet. It had to be Jeeves' evolution that was somehow taxing her to the point that she wasn't even aware of the danger that was creeping up on her. Zac's hair stood on end, and he knew this attempt would end in failure.

He needed to do something to save Kenzie, and he decided to enact his last-ditch plan. He couldn't help with Jeeves, but perhaps they could escape the Heavenly Lightning if he sent her away from Earth. He would first take Kenzie away from this island through the teleportation array and then send her away with a Teleportation Token. Or he could at least swallow some of the lightning to lessen her burden.

However, a sigh echoed through the world just as Zac was about to rush in between the still-floating Memorysteel balls,

and it felt like time ground to a halt.

The horizon was fractured the next second as a mindbogglingly large scar appeared, a vertical line splitting Zac's vision in two. It almost touched the ground on one end while it stretched all the way into the stratosphere on the other. Four sets of enormous hands reached through the crack, pushing the sides apart further and further, giving Zac a glimpse of the beyond.

Waiting on the other side of the crack was either deep space or the abyss itself, but Zac could barely discern what looked like a purple sun. Zac felt a terrifying force radiating from the star, making him believe it was something far greater than some burning ball of hydrogen.

The fingers themselves looked like perfectly sculpted works of art, steel appendages where the divide between real and artificial had been blurred. However, the hands were not just made from solid matter. There was also a purple haze filled with mysterious energies that replaced the joints, which added a supernatural feeling to the incoming leviathan.

The haze reminded Zac of the blue stream of pure energies that powered the *Little Bean*, but the Technocrat vessel's huge energy circuits felt like weak alkaline batteries in front of the power contained in a single finger of the mysterious being making its entrance.

Eight arms were soon followed by a face, and space itself shuddered as the metal giant emerged. The being had a clearly female form, and a dress made of purple stardust swirled around her body. She was as tall as a mountain, and a single finger of hers would be able to push the whole island he stood on into the depths of the ocean. The sea was actually pushed away from her presence, allowing her to step on solid ground a few kilometers out from land.

The crack soon closed behind her, but space itself was clearly having trouble containing this monstrosity. Spatial tears stretched across the horizon, and it was like the laws of nature were breaking apart in her presence as she started walking toward the shore beneath a sky of frozen lightning.

Nine halos wrought from the Dao itself swirled behind her back, each one containing even more power than the one before. Even the blue lightning bolts were overshadowed by their splendor.

They formed a mysterious pattern that was ever-changing, and Zac was instantly put in a trance as he looked at them. They contained the profundity of the universe, and at a level that far exceeded what he could comprehend. The feeling far exceeded even what he had felt inside the chamber that had sealed the Dimensional Seed.

The scene was shocking, and a primal part of Zac's subconscious simply wanted him to fall on his knees in obeisance to the incoming entity. There was no escape from something like this. You could only pray that a being like this wouldn't deign to waste their breath killing you.

However, while Zac's heart beat like a drum, it wasn't simply out of abject fear. His emotions were a lot more complicated as he looked up at the foreign yet familiar face a thousand meters in the air. The auburn locks were replaced by purple strings of aether, but the fundamental features were still there. The face of someone who had hugged him goodnight, who had walked him to school as a child.

Leandra Atwood had returned to Earth.

DESTINY

The world was frozen from Leandra Atwood's descent, but the Heavens wouldn't be denied for long. The Tribulation Lightning churned and raged, like her very existence was an affront to the Heavens. Before, it was just some of the tendrils moving toward the island, whereas thousands of blue bolts fell from the sky now. But how could Leandra not have come prepared?

She opened one of her hands, and thousands upon thousands of mysterious lights were conjured out of nowhere, each of them forming a barrier that far eclipsed anything Zac and Kenzie would ever manage to buy or create. The uproar in the sky only increased in intensity, and attacks rained upon the barrier. It looked like the whole world would collapse, and Zac felt an overwhelming pressure by standing right beneath the terrifying display.

Deep cracks and purple discoloration spread across the barriers, but they actually held even against the System's Tribulation Lightning. A few of her hands formed a set of seals that seemed to adjust the barriers to strengthen them even further. Leandra then inspected the scene for a moment before her gaze shifted to Zac and Kenzie down on the ground.

One of her free hands formed a different seal, and Zac suddenly found himself utterly incapable of movement. More worryingly, Kenzie seemed to have been knocked unconscious as she floated a few meters into the air while the Memorysteel balls moved out of the way.

“Wait!” Zac shouted as he tried to put himself between Kenzie and Leandra, but it was simply futile to try to break through the restraints.

He could only look on with worry as one mysterious layer after another encapsulated his sister until she wasn't even visible within the cocoon of pure energy. Zac still had no idea whether Leandra was a friend or a foe, but one thing was for certain, she was at least able to help them survive this calamity.

At least Zac hoped she was, since it looked like the intensity of the lightning in the sky only grew increasingly severe.

Leandra looked up at the sky again for a few seconds, and Zac shuddered when he was inundated by a deep-seated hatred that made his hair stand on end. It was so far beyond any killing intent Zac would ever be able to unleash that it might as well be considered something completely different. The burning anger of someone as powerful as Leandra seemed to impact reality itself, and even the sun dimmed as the ocean started to boil. He was lucky her gaze was directed at the sky rather than himself, since he wasn't sure he'd survive the attention.

Zac still felt his vision closing in on him as cracks appeared all over his organs. Thankfully, the feeling soon disappeared, but Zac knew they weren't out of the woods just yet, as the sky was still rumbling with increasing fervor. For some reason, Zac sensed it had lost some of its direction, like it couldn't find Kenzie hidden in that cocoon of his mother's. Was that the purpose of those barriers, rather than actual protection?

It still seemed like there was a distinct possibility that the System would decide to simply smite the whole island if it couldn't find Kenzie, but Leandra finally was preparing her next move. The giant's eight hands slowly formed a circle, and a blinding light appeared inside like she was forming some sort of portal with her own body. Zac looked on with apprehension, and his eyes widened when a familiar figure walked out from the light.

It was flesh and blood Leandra, looking exactly as he remembered.

The metal giant wasn't actually his mother? Then again, Zac quickly realized that things might not be completely clear-cut for Technocrats as the lofty giant behind her back quickly disintegrated into purple dust. Some of it entered Leandra's body as she floated down toward their location, while parts formed a dome across the rotunda Kenzie had prepared for her evolution.

Zac didn't immediately understand what the dome did, but he soon understood when realizing that the lightning above suddenly moved at a fraction of its original speed. She had set up a time-dilation sphere.

"Mom... you're back," Zac said with hesitance, his mind trying to gauge whether the Leandra in front of him was the one from his vision or the far more amiable version recorded in the Technocrat Token.

Leandra's eyes slowly shifted away from the cocoon to briefly pause at a spot in the ocean before she looked into Zac's eyes. There wasn't the scathing hatred that Zac had felt in his vision, but neither was this the gaze of a loving mother. It was tranquil to the point of being devoid of emotion entirely.

"You've done well, protecting your sister during the Corruption," she said with a nod. "In fact, your progress has greatly surprised me."

At first, Zac thought she was referring to his Bloodline, which was still marked as corrupted. But he soon realized that Corruption might be referring to the integration. After all, the System spreading across the Multiverse was probably seen as corruption by the Technocrats.

"What are you doing with Kenzie?" Zac asked, full of trepidation.

"You were too eager, trying to evolve the Digital Nexus prematurely. You and the Nexus might have survived Heaven's Judgment once, but that does not mean you're able to walk unabashed under the sun," Leandra said. "I am sealing your

sister's progress for now, until I can properly nurture the Nexus. It is too early for Mackenzie as well. She doesn't have your constitution, she will not be able to bear the burden as she currently is. She should have realized that already, but she still pushed on."

"What? Evolving Jeeves would kill her?" Zac said with shock.

"Jeeves?" Leandra repeated with confusion before she understood what he was talking about. "Yes. Half her blood is that of Robert Atwood, a normal mortal. That she was even able to receive and fuse with the Digital Nexus is nothing short of a miracle. But to reach our goal... will be difficult. We need to leave this sector if we want a chance at success."

Zac's thoughts spun as he went over the information. It seemed even more and more likely that he and Jeeves were originally meant to be used together. And as expected, Leandra had come to take Kenzie away. Zac was full of reluctance, but he had to admit it was better than getting incinerated by tribulation lightning.

"Dad... died during the integration," Zac said, somewhat at a loss of what else to say.

There was no familial warmth as the two stood facing each other, and he almost felt like a soldier making a report to his general.

"I know." Leandra nodded, and Zac inwardly frowned when there was not the slightest change in her expression. "Robert was a good man who helped us in our time of need. He deserved a better ending. Too many have fallen to the machinations of the Villainous Heavens. One day, there will be a reckoning."

Leandra appeared completely indifferent to everything, which made Zac's early childhood memories feel like an illusion. It pained him in a way he hadn't quite expected, considering the resentment he had carried for decades. He could only focus on what was important right now, saving Kenzie.

“Are you able to deal with the lightning?” Zac asked.

She didn’t immediately answer but rather waved her hand. Zac initially looked on with hope, but his eyes widened in shock when Thea suddenly appeared right between them, her hair wet as she looked around with terror.

“Thea!” Zac exclaimed with a sinking feeling. “Mom, what’s going on?!”

Thea looked at Zac with incomprehension before her eyes turned to Leandra, who still radiated an undeniable might. Thea was clearly having trouble processing what was going on, and who could blame her?

“She floated outside this island on a treasure, hidden by a few low-grade arrays,” Leandra said, making Zac look at his girlfriend with confusion.

“I-I wanted to understand what’s going on. You two have been acting full of secrecy for years, building hidden factories and these restricted islands. I wanted to make sure...” Thea stammered. “I didn’t want to hurt anyone, just help out in case something went wrong. I—”

“The Zero Affinity Container has a complicated relationship to the Kayar-Elu and the Root Compact, but it is still our blood flowing through his veins. You are not worthy,” Leandra cut her off with an emotionless face. “But you will still get a chance to serve in the undertaking.”

“What are you—” Zac interjected, but he suddenly found himself unable to speak.

Thea looked like she had been physically hit, her eyes wide as she looked back and forth between Zac and Leandra. Zac had an extremely bad feeling, and he wanted to scream for her to run away. But he couldn’t so much as blink, and neither could Thea, from the looks of it, as she slowly floated up in the air as a series of intricate patterns appeared around her.

“Since when has the Cursed Heavens allowed itself to be denied?” Leandra muttered, her face once more a mask of fury. But Zac barely heard her, as his attention was on Thea moving ever closer to the sky. “How can that conniving ball of

greed and wild ambition let a threat be? Even if it has to break the covenant, so what? It will just make some reparations to satiate its own deluded sense of equilibrium.”

‘Stop!’ Zac screamed in his mind since his mouth wouldn’t move, praying that his mother could hear him. *‘I’ll do anything!’*

“You might feel my actions are unfair, but your understanding is too narrow. I am also doing this for the sake of her clan. I can sense that her love for you is real, but her allegiance to her clan is stronger,” Leandra said. “You cannot comprehend the danger someone cursed by the Heavens will bring upon his surroundings. A small tribe such as hers will be ripped apart by the torrents of fate if they are tied to your chariot.”

Zac kept raging in his mind for his mother to put Thea down, telling her that his girlfriend had nothing to do with whatever compact she rambled on about. Rage turned to pleas of mercy, to stop whatever she was doing. But it was all for naught. Thea’s eyes rolled into her head as the scripts covered the last part of her body, and the next moment, she was pushed through the barriers keeping the torrential lightning at bay.

The whole world turned white, and Zac’s mind went blank.

A second later, the sea of lightning was simply gone, as was the encapsulated Thea. Remaining was just one thin streak of blue that slowly descended from the sky and entered the cocoon shielding Kenzie. Zac felt like his mind had stopped, that he was having a twisted fever nightmare, but it was all too real.

His mother had actually used Thea as a lightning rod to divert and exhaust the tribulation.

Leandra gazed at the sky for a few seconds before she nodded in satisfaction, like she hadn’t just sacrificed a human being. It was like Thea had never been on the island, and the pressure that had bound Zac was lifted. The lingering lightning completely entered the barriers surrounding Kenzie, and it started beating like a heart.

“Why? WHY?!” Zac roared, his rage threatening to turn him insane. “You come back after all this time, and the first thing you do is something insane like this?! You are crazy!”

“Our family bears the weight of destiny.” Leandra sighed. “Our lives belong to the Cosmos. Do not get distracted. Your role might have become unclear with how things have progressed, but you are still part of the Kayar-Elu. If you are unhappy with my actions, become stronger. Don’t waste your breath on the mundane. The moment you reach the peak and fulfill your fate, you will gain Eternity. What will you lack then? Even killing me out of vengeance will be as easy as taking a breath.”

Zac looked into Leandra’s eyes, and he saw an unquenchable conviction that even eclipsed that of the zealots from the Church of Everlasting Dao. He knew then and there that there was no way to reason with his mother. She was a true extremist, and she only cared about her goals. She wholeheartedly believed she had done a good deed by using Thea to deal with the tribulation.

“Now, don’t do anything untoward. I don’t wish to wipe the memories of you two unless I have to. Each erasure will harm your souls and weaken your potential. We will leave, and Mackenzie’s future will be far brighter than it could ever be in this remote sector. Staying next to you will only bring calamity down on you both,” Leandra said as she pointed at the pulsating cocoon.

A few seconds passed as Zac found himself locked in an internal struggle. Part of him wanted to throw everything away and attack Leandra even if it meant dying, while part of him feared that doing something stupid would implicate his sister. He had already realized that his Annihilation Sphere was useless against a being like this.

Just like the Administrator, she could simply stop him in his tracks with a thought, preventing him from even unleashing the skill.

In the end, he found himself rooted in place, his fear overcoming his rage. He could only look on as his sister

emerged while he was being overwhelmed by a relentless storm of rage, guilt, and powerlessness. Kenzie looked around with confusion until she noticed Leandra. Zac died a little inside as he saw his sister's eyes light up, and he could barely hold back tears of frustration as Kenzie ran over to hug their mother.

“My child... We finally meet. You've worked hard,” Leandra said with a smile as she caressed Kenzie's hair. “I have dreamed of this day for so long, but the two of us have to leave. I can only trick the Heavens for so long.”

“What?” Kenzie asked with a start, looking at their mother with confusion before she looked over at Zac with an inquiring gaze. “We're leaving, just the two of us? What about Zac?”

“The situation is complicated, but suffice to say I left a gift with each of you upon your birth. Unfortunately, these two powers being in such close proximity has proven dangerous.” Leandra sighed. “Besides, your brother has already confirmed his Path. His cultivation is one of a solitary warrior. Me bringing him with us will only hurt him in the end.”

“Zac?” Kenzie asked with confusion.

“I... I'm not done with the Zecia Sector yet,” Zac said with a hoarse voice and a sickly smile, hiding his true feelings as deeply as he could so as not to get his mind cleansed.

He wanted to etch the events of today deep into his bones, to never forget the madness of Leandra Atwood. Part of him wanted to forget how his secrecy had caused Thea to take matters into her own hands and start to investigate their activities. But that voice of weakness was overshadowed by a fiery ball of fury that threatened to cause him to combust.

The Digital Nexus. The Kayar-Elu and the Root Compact. These would be his clues to one day right this wrong.

POWER

“Can’t we all stay here together?” Kenzie entreated as she looked at Leandra.

“You have been discovered, child.” Leandra sighed. “You tried to evolve with insufficient preparations. Your staying here will put this whole world in danger. We need to leave for the Six Profundity Empire. Unless something unexpected happens, we will be able to enter an Immemorial Realm there.”

Kenzie turned to Zac, who could only nod in what he hoped to be a comforting manner.

“Ok... But you need to help me with two things,” Kenzie said with determination. “First, you need to save a certain person. I’m sure you can do it with your power.”

“Save someone?” Leandra said as a frown spread across her face, causing Zac to get a sinking feeling.

“He’s called Ogras, and he saved my life,” Kenzie said as a screen appeared in front of her.

It was no doubt the product of Jeeves, and it rapidly started flashing images and symbols for two seconds before it disappeared. Zac could only understand snippets, but he had seen a few scenes from the events three years ago.

“Oh, so something like that happened in the research base?” Leandra sighed as a spatial tear opened next to her. “So much for my preparations.”

A few streams of light entered the void, but she soon shook her head as the gate closed.

“A Dimensional Seed is a sentient treasure, and it is in its growing stages. It has moved to an area the cultivators in this sector call the Million Gates Territory. The dense Spatial Energies there will nurture it. It would be impossible to save the demonling now, as the seed has hidden between the folds of reality. But in a decade or two, the seed should be satiated and bloom. At that point, you simply need to find the pocket world it has created and pick the demonling up,” Leandra said.

“How can we find him?” Kenzie asked hurriedly. “Can you tell if he, if they, are alive?”

“As long as one is in the area, it will be hard to miss the opening. The blooming of a Dimensional Seed gives off tremendous energy signatures, and tens of millions will enter its dimension in search of treasure.” Leandra smiled. “It is a brand-new dimension, rife with echoes of the Origin. Your friends were alive when entering the Hidden Realm, and they have gained a rare opportunity in a sense. Their cultivation environment should be almost at the level of an Ancient Realm.”

“They’re really alive?!” Kenzie exclaimed with happiness written all over her face, though it soon scrunched up with disappointment. “A decade or two, though?”

“Child, you should understand. We will have long left the sector by then. I can only provide this much guidance,” she said.

“I’ll go pick him up when it’s time,” Zac said when he saw Kenzie’s look. “I was planning on going there anyway.”

“Right, okay...” Kenzie said, though reluctance was written all over her face. “Secondly, help me finish this array. It’s for Zac.”

Zac looked on as Kenzie took out an extremely densely inscribed array disk the next moment, and another wave of sorrow hit him.

“An illusion array meant for his core? Exquisite work, but unfortunately, it won’t work. Your understanding of the Dao is too limited to hide that thing from even Class-4 cultivators. Luckily, I was already prepared for this. The Kayar-Elu have long perfected the methods to walk freely among those who have tied their chariot to the Cursed Heavens,” Leandra said as she took out a crystal and turned to Zac.

“What a disappointment. You cannot imagine the resources that went into fusing your bloodline with a perfected Duplicity Core. You could have used it to become the incarnation of the Machine God, yet you sullied it with the mark of the unliving. Still, our preparations will work just as well in this situation.”

Zac wanted to simply throw the crystal away as it floated into his hands, but he restrained himself and tried to appear thankful as he put it away.

“It is an almost perfected array that can hide your unique situation. Monarchs and most Autarchs will be unable to see through its disguise, and those above will not care about your situation. It will also impede any attempt at looking into the truth of your being. Even those ancient things will have their perception subverted to some degree, thinking they found nothing out of the norm from your status screen or body.

“However, its impenetrable disguise comes at a price. You will not be able to change back and forth when the array is active. If you break the seal to change your constitution, it will take a month before you can hide your core again,” Leandra said before she turned back to Kenzie.

“Child, it is time. Every second we spend will increase the threat to this world. I will put you into my Inner World,” Leandra said.

“Okay, one moment.” Kenzie sighed as she walked over and hugged Zac. “Take care until we meet again.”

“Be careful,” Zac said with a low volume. “It’s dangerous out there. Trust no one.”

That was as far as he dared go, but he couldn’t let Kenzie disappear without giving at least a small warning. The next

moment, his sister was gone, leaving only Leandra behind.

“I can feel the fury that churns in your heart. You were just a baby who didn’t choose to be brought into the world or to be forced into our cause. But you still carry the Original Sin. You are the source of the ruin of our clan, the reason for the death of five hundred billion people,” she said as she looked at Zac with mixed emotions.

“Our paths will diverge from here on out; our Karma is severed. I will not kill you, but neither will I help you any further from today. If you come looking for us, you’d better be powerful enough to kill me,” Leandra said with a staid face, as though her deranged words were something normal for a mother to say to her son. “Or you will fall even before getting close to your sister.”

A prompt appeared that said Nexus Coins had been transferred to him, but Zac waved it away with annoyance. Was his mother really trying to buy him off after what she did?

“That’s not up to you to decide!” Zac roared.

He could no longer hold back the anger bubbling in his chest now that Kenzie wasn’t here. He was just so furious that he didn’t know what to do with himself. He was angry at his sister for hiding the risks with the evolution. Angry at himself for passively letting things proceed until they’d reached this point. For hiding the truth about his activities, which ended up implicating Thea.

But most of all, he was angry at Leandra, who had proven herself so needlessly cruel and murderous. He refused to believe that the only way for his mother to save Kenzie was to kill someone close to him. His wrath was met by a cold indifference, which only poured oil on the fire.

“Your sister is the harbinger of the Final Era, but she cannot fulfill her destiny in this destitute corner of the universe. I am taking her to a more appropriate stage,” Leandra said as the purple and futuristic dress covered in Technocrat scripts on her body shuddered, turning into a beautiful robe.

Zac's eyes looked on with incomprehension. It felt like he wasn't looking at a Technocrat any longer, but rather someone like Be'Zi, a supreme cultivator. A swirling vortex opened behind her the next moment, and it looked exactly like the portal the System had showed him during his mind tribulation.

"Farewell... my son."

A second later, she was gone, leaving Zac utterly, completely alone.

"This is your Inner World?" Kenzie asked as she looked out across the endless vista with amazement written all over her face.

She was standing at the top of a ten-kilometer-tall spire, looking out through a window, and the surroundings were simply marvelous. There was a bustling metropolis below, though it was impossible to tell whether people actually lived there from this far up. There was a lot of movement, but it was entirely possible that it was all machinery.

The town was tens of times larger than Port Atwood, yet it only took up a small pocket of space in this seemingly endless world.

Rather than an Inner World, it almost looked like they were standing in the normal universe. A huge nebula in a mesmerizing purple covered the sky, and various zones of perfectly harmonious biospheres formed a layer around the sprawling city. Far in the distance, she could vaguely see more cities, each of them centered around a spire much like this one.

"For cultivators, to build your Inner World is to shore up your foundation. The more you manage to expand and stabilize it, the greater force you will be able to bring out. After all, each movement of yours will contain the will of a world," Leandra said from the side. "From there, you impart it with truth, making it follow your Heavenly Law."

“Just... how powerful are you, Mom?” Kenzie hesitantly asked.

“I once was a late-stage Class-5 Autarch.” Leandra sighed. “But our family encountered a calamity that almost eradicated us. If not for your grandfather, I would be dead. He sacrificed himself to give me a chance. But I was still wounded, and it will take a long time before I am restored. Right now, my strength is barely at Class-5.”

“Why couldn’t we bring Zac with us? Now he’s left all alone,” Kenzie said with red-rimmed eyes.

“There’s nothing to be done,” Leandra said with a pained face. “You should have come to understand a few things through your connection to... Jeeves. Zac and Jeeves were once meant to be a pair, each one half of a whole. But the implications of this fusion triggered the wrath of the System, which led to our doom.

“Zac and Jeeves barely survived the calamity thanks to my father’s efforts. But their very existence was punished, their fate subverted. That, thankfully, is your key to survival. The System is forced to follow a few Heavenly laws older than time itself, one of them being the law of balance. The two have been punished for their existence and survived, which will allow them to continue living.

“But as long as the threat reaches a certain threshold, the System will subvert the will of the Heavens and attack you, no matter the cost. More importantly, your brother has been marked by the System, and it is actively watching. It was because of him being close to you that the Tribulation Lightning descended. I needed to sever your Karma, as you two siblings will bring calamity upon each other,” Leandra said.

“Still,” Kenzie said hesitantly.

“Don’t you worry about your brother. He was meant to become the perfect cultivator. He might have had that fate taken from him, but it seems that calamity has opened a few unexpected doors instead. He is free in a way I’ve never seen before, in a way I didn’t know existed. But Zac will need to

figure out his path on his own. Outside interference will just harm him,” Leandra explained.

“Become stronger. Right now, you are just a victim of the Heavens, a leaf blowing in the wind. But by the time you reach the peak, you will be able to control the winds of fate,” Leandra said. “And I’ll help you. You have accomplished an impressive amount in the few short years after the Corruption, but Jeeves was ultimately not designed to be housed by a normal human.”

“So what do I need to do?” Kenzie asked.

“We need to improve your very foundations, your soul and your constitution. Only then will you survive the evolution while also setting up a proper path for your cultivation. The path of Technomancy is full of endless potential, but it is ultimately not for you. With how Jeeves has changed, you will need to become a proper cultivator. Unfortunately, your foundations are currently average at best,” Leandra explained as the room they stood in started to transform.

The windows overlooking the world turned into screens covered in all kinds of information. Kenzie looked around, and she was shocked by the esoteric information the texts contained. It felt like they dug straight at the core of cultivation itself.

“For now, we’re moving to a more flourishing place where we will be able to work on your cultivation. But it will take over a year before we reach the wormhole that will take us there. I wish that I could accompany you during that time, but I need to enter secluded cultivation to recuperate.

“I have suppressed your body to maintain its momentum and avoid detection of the System,” Leandra added. “Work on shoring up your theoretical foundations. With the help of Jeeves and the tower’s resident AI, you will make more progress in the next year compared to what most scions accomplish in centuries.”

Kenzie nodded, and Leandra smiled and ruffled her hair one last time before she disappeared without so much as creating a ripple. Kenzie wasn’t surprised to learn about the

suppression; she had already felt a subtle change in her body since waking up. Thankfully, that seal didn't block everything.

[Do you want me to stop?]

'No, maintain control over my expressions,' Kenzie answered bleakly with a thought as she sat down in a chair arranged for her. *'She is probably recording.'*

Kenzie kept looking at the screen, and while Jeeves was diligently absorbing all the knowledge laid bare, her thoughts were elsewhere. The scenes of Leandra treating Zac, her own son, like a stranger now that he couldn't help her with her plans. How she'd sacrificed Thea without a shred of remorse. It all kept repeating in a loop.

She had been wrong. So fundamentally, irrevocably wrong.

It was all her fault. Her fault that Thea was gone, that Zac was left alone to pick up the broken pieces. It felt like she would collapse at any moment, and she had long given up on controlling her own body out of fear of reprisal. What if Leandra saw something was wrong and decided to do something even crazier, like destroy Earth altogether?

That was her only chance at turning things around, that Leandra didn't seem to fully understand the changes that Jeeves had undergone. Her mother thought she had him completely under control, but there was still a small core of true life that she couldn't touch. It was that part that had recorded everything that had transpired while she was unconscious, turning it into a hidden memory that she'd gained the moment she was teleported to this place.

She felt like a fool, a dangerous fool. Zac had warned her so many times, exhorted her to proceed with caution. That Leandra might not be the powerful mother who was forced away from Earth to protect them, but rather a calculating cultivator who had long lost things like familial warmth. He had been right. Leandra only cared about the undertaking of her clan, considering her children just as the next generation of soldiers in their war against the System.

But was she so different? Kenzie had known there were very real risks with her plan, but she had discarded them in her frantic pursuit of power. Zac believed that Jeeves had been telling her that everything was fine, but it had repeatedly tried to convince her to slow down. To first strengthen herself just like her mother planned.

Arrogance. She realized now that her mental state had steadily deteriorated since the events of the Mystic Realm. People kept calling her a genius of an era, mastering everything from Dao to arrays to even Technocrat tech. It had blown up her confidence, convinced her of her infallibility. She was a unique genius, how could her deductions be wrong?

It was all a lie. What genius? It was all Jeeves. He kept knocking down the barriers in her cultivation; she simply proceeded on the path staked out for her. She was nothing like her brother, who had earned every part of his power through endless struggle; she had been given everything. She was ultimately just a random girl just past twenty-three years old with a sapient supercomputer in her head.

Now everything was ruined. Zac was scarred for life, Thea was sacrificed, and she found herself at the core of some insane struggle she wanted no part of. What should she do? What could she do?

[The Creator was right. You are lacking power. The moment you can overpower the Creator, you can freely control your fate again.]

Kenzie slowly nodded as she steeled her heart.

She would drink the poisonous water of Leandra's teachings if it meant power. Only if she reached the peak would she be able to right her wrongs. She thought back to the beautiful town on the small island in the middle of nowhere, the slice of paradise Zac had created for them. A wave of homesickness hit her like a truck, but she could only push the feelings down.

She thought of her brother constantly struggling to protect those around him, his eyes full of exhaustion, yet never

stopping. She would have to stop completely relying on Jeeves and grow so that she could right this wrong.

[The Creator wanted Zachary Atwood to feel the curse of helplessness, of loss. To instill emotion powerful enough to shock his momentum awake. Emotion is the bridge between Dao and Man. I shared the events because you needed to feel the same.]

Kenzie inwardly nodded as she focused on the screen in front of her. One day she would return, whatever it took.

POWERLESS

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

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

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

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

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

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

Emptiness.

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

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

He was alone. So utterly alone.

He was the leader of a planet, an emperor with over a billion subjects, yet he had no one to turn to. Certainly, many of his followers remained, but his innermost circle was reduced to a party of one. There were old followers like Sap Trang and Joanna to turn to, but there ultimately was a leader-follower dynamic between them.

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

the tragedy to the Marshall Clan, though he modified what had actually transpired.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You heard?" Zac asked.

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

"How are they?" Zac sighed.

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

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

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

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

“I...” Zac said.

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

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

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

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

“Thank you,” Zac said.

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

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

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

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

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

“Come with me,” Henry said as he walked toward the old homestead, his previously straight back hunched over.

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

granddaughter, one of his closest blood relatives in a clan comprised of thousands of people.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What is this? What’s going on?” Zac asked with confusion.

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

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

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

“Did Thea know?” Zac couldn’t help but ask.

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

“Why are you telling me this?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

EINHERJAR

Zac knew what Henry was talking about. The moment the grace period ended and its shroud was lifted, then Earth would most likely find itself inside the sphere of influence of some faction of the Zecia Sector. It could be within the borders of an interplanetary clan, or inside some empire like the Dravorak Dynasty or the Allbright Empire.

In either case, their appearance wouldn't go unnoticed, and their treatment would largely depend on their strength and what kind of faction they were attached to. A new planet with prominent progenitors would probably get treated as promising elites to integrate into the fold, and the citizens would lead pretty carefree lives.

However, if the planet was just filled with wastrels, the reception would get a lot worse. Zac had read records where citizens of newly assimilated worlds were essentially turned into cannon fodder for wars or had their home planets terraformed into factory worlds with a toxic atmosphere. The System wouldn't interfere if it was unsatisfied with the planet's performance.

The assimilation would also bring some new challenges for its population, and the planet might even undergo some changes like gaining new Mystic Realms. Zac was generally confident about the situation, but it was possible that the System would add some sort of twist to the assimilation since someone like him was the Planetary Leader of Earth.

Henry obviously wanted him to take a step back and stay on as a protective umbrella for humanity, to not take undue

risks. Going after Leandra was obviously a goal fraught with danger. However, would Zac really back away against the challenge, or would he rise up as Emily wanted?

The very core of Zac's being was set ablaze at the thought of letting things rest. It roared in defiance at the prospect of just moving on, to stay and continue to slowly accumulate on Earth. There was no way he would ever see Kenzie again that way, no way for him to mete out punishment. Every fiber of his body urged him forward so that he would never have to feel this powerless again.

"I understand where you're coming from, but I will never let this matter go," Zac said with a shake of his head as a fire ignited in his eyes. "I will leave Earth very soon to temper myself. I'm not sure how long I will be gone."

"Alas." Henry sighed as he turned back toward the stele, his back hunched even lower.

"It will definitely take more than a hundred years before I can go after that cultivator, though, and I will be here for the assimilation. Unless I fall before that," Zac said as he stepped onto the stairs. "Once again, I'm sorry for your loss."

Zac quickly left the hidden room, his thoughts a whirl as he flashed toward the closest teleportation array. Hearing about the Marshall Clan's origins had brought up some things he had pushed away until now.

The truth about his own Heritage.

Leandra had all but admitted that he had been experimented on. Both his bloodline and his Specialty Core were something the Kayar-Elu, if that was his mother's clan or organization, had implanted in him. That also made it impossible for Robert Atwood to be his biological father. It didn't come as a surprise to him by this point, but having it confirmed still hurt a bit.

Zac stepped onto the array, and he appeared back in Port Atwood moments later, this time at the entrance of his cultivation cave. He sent a stream of energy into the miniature

pagoda he always carried, which meant that Triv would come over as soon as he could.

Meanwhile, he took a deep breath and stabilized his mind as he walked inside and sat down. The pit of guilt and sorrow was still there, but there was also a burning ember of conviction. He had almost completely given in to despair after seeing how impossibly powerful his mother was, but meeting Emily and Henry had shaken him awake.

No matter if it took ten, fifty, or a million years, he'd get Kenzie back and avenge Thea. There was even the chance of bringing Thea back to life, though Zac honestly didn't hold much hope in that regard. It felt like clinging to something like that was a crutch that would sully her memory. If he managed to reach such a level, he'd definitely do it, but until then he wouldn't delude himself about her situation.

For now, he needed to get a move on if he ever wanted to have a chance to catch up. Zac fought with reluctance for a few minutes until he finally opened his status screen, something he had avoided until this point. All of it looked the same as before except for one part.

[Nexus Coins [D] 1,000,000]

Zac blankly looked at the line for a few moments, his mouth opening and closing upon realizing it was D-grade Nexus Coins he was looking at, not E-grade like he had before. One million D-grade Nexus Coins; what kind of wealth was that? Zac had managed to accumulate around 100,000 E-grade Nexus Coins in cash reserves before, mostly thanks to his sister's lucrative business spilling over into his wallet.

One hundred thousand E-grade Nexus Coins was the equivalent of 100 billion F-grade Nexus Coins, a massive fortune for most E-grade cultivators. Yet all that wealth was just 0.1 D-grade Nexus Coins, so little that it didn't even leave a dent on his updated status screen. Three years of accumulation as a Planetary Lord wasn't anything but a

rounding error in the presence of this terrifying amount of money.

His mind almost short-circuited, and he couldn't help but question everything as he saw the number. Was there something he had misunderstood about Leandra Atwood? Why would she give him such a shocking sum of money? Was it just pocket change to her, or perhaps a way to sever Karma? Why would she bankroll him if she knew that he would be gunning for her? Was she just that confident that he'd never catch up even after all he had accomplished until this point?

He couldn't figure it out at all, and he could only close the status screen with more questions plaguing his mind than before.

This amount of wealth opened all kinds of avenues for him, but Zac was still full of reluctance. That was essentially blood money in his book. Wouldn't using it mean he somewhat accepted what took place two weeks ago? But he also couldn't just throw that wealth away. He knew that cultivating as a mortal required shocking amounts of wealth. The E-grade was just the start. If he acted too uncompromising, he might find himself stuck in a bottleneck, and how would he save Kenzie then?

Thankfully, a deathly gust dragged him out of his impasse as his ghost butler arrived.

"Lord, I came as soon as you called. My condolences. Miss Marshall was a lovely girl," the ghost said. "How about—"

"No," Zac said without hesitation. "I'm conflicted as it is about doing it with my enemies. I won't turn my allies unless they ask me to. Besides, there wasn't even a body left. But speaking of, how are the Einherjar?"

"They are improving every day. A few show promise that would even be considered rare back in my kingdom. Lady Vilari in particular keeps impressing. A body like hers would have caused a storm back home. She has already formed her first Dao Fragment, and she shows no indication of having

exhausted her potential of the F-grade. Only Rhuger is anywhere close.”

“Good.” Zac slowly nodded. “Have Vilari come over tomorrow. I have something to give her.”

The Einherjar was a project Zac had started in secret two years ago, which only Kenzie and Triv knew about. The progress of the people of Earth had caused Zac some pressure. He realized that he needed more powerful, and absolutely loyal, followers if he wanted to keep the situation on Earth stable while he was off-world. That had become extra important now that he had lost both Kenzie and Thea.

Triv had provided him with the solution: undead followers. It was something the ghost had been advocating since day one, and Zac had eventually relented soon after returning from the Mystic Realm. However, he didn't quite follow Triv's suggestions and instead spent months looking for ways that undead naturally formed.

After all, the normal arrays and Lich methods looted from the undead incursion contained the hidden compulsions of the Primo, and Zac didn't want to spend time and effort only to nurture a hostile army. Finally, he had found a way to create a purified cursed ground in one of the deathly hotspots on Earth. He had his sister set up a series of energy-gathering arrays, along with a few esoteric arrays that would help the awakening of the dead.

The solution hadn't actually come from some of Adriel's missives or information crystals bought from the Undead Empire, but rather the opposite. Their solution was found in a missive sold by the “Empire of Light,” a smaller empire in the Zecia Sector that had the misfortune of sharing galactic borders with the local chapter of the Undead Empire.

Unsurprisingly, their whole culture centered around defeating and eradicating the undead, and they had ample information about spotting undead infections and how to prevent Revenants from rising across battlefields rife with deathly energies. Zac and Kenzie had, with the somewhat

reluctant help of Triv, managed to reverse-engineer the process through the warnings.

Zombies would essentially rise by themselves sooner or later as long as corpses were left in deathly energies strong enough. However, the key was to infuse them with a “seed of sapience,” which would help them awaken far quicker while also binding them to their progenitor. In Zac’s case, it meant infusing the arrays with his own black ichor to form a connection.

The hard work had finally paid off after a year, with the first of the Einherjar awakening.

As for the source of the bodies, Zac had ample supply. He had maintained the somewhat macabre habit of collecting the corpses of his enemies to avoid leaving behind traces, and they were piled high in his “Corpse Sack” by the time he had dealt with all the threats to Earth.

This had resulted in quite a few powerful warriors under his command. Some standouts were Cervantes, or rather Rhuger as he called himself now, and Pika, Leviala’s new identity. Below them were roughly fifty standout Revenants mainly made up of incursion leaders and their generals, and then finally roughly two thousand general revenants.

There were also one hundred thousand Zombies roaming the new continent, fighting the beasts to empower themselves. A few of them would awaken, while most would fall to the environment. These Zombies were different from those in the original Dead Zone, as those Zombies were all marked by the empire, whereas these new ones were marked by his ichor.

It was a bit of a wasteful method to have most Zombies fight and kill to gain the energy necessary to reach E-grade Race, but he simply didn’t have the resources to evolve their constitution with arrays or medicinal baths. He only used those kinds of materials on his best corpses. Besides, while this ruthless training method would result in fewer subjects, each of them would be a lot more powerful since they were forged through slaughter.

The Revenant with the most potential was neither Cervantes nor Leviala, but rather the unnamed Mentalist he'd met in the Tower of Eternity. She was now called Vilari, and her mental abilities were simply dreadful, even making Zac feel some pressure.

Rhuger was still having trouble completely awakening his bloodline, which wasn't surprising since Cervantes had worked on it for centuries. Regaining that kind of strength would take time and effort, and the body was, unfortunately, a bit too old for it to become a peak Revenant. As for Pika, her bloodline was pretty powerful, but she was, after all, still missing her eyes, the core part of her power.

Meanwhile, Vilari held a potential that probably eclipsed both of the two Mystic Realm natives, and she was both young and in perfect condition. It was lucky that Vilari was completely loyal to him, as letting someone like her loose on Earth would spell disaster in a decade or two. Zac had great hopes for her, that she could become a pillar of Earth in the future.

But her potential was, unfortunately, being a bit wasted right now. Zac had therefore decided to give her a shot at the Crown of Despair inheritance. It did seem to be a Mentalist inheritance, and Zac lacked any sort of foundation in that department apart from his Soul-Strengthening Manual.

He felt he was doing Vilari a disservice since he didn't really have any insights or skills to provide her, but she would hopefully find something useful in the inheritance trial. The only reason he had been holding back until now was that the opportunities were limited, and there wasn't a huge need to give her a power-up.

"She will be happy to hear that." Triv nodded before he asked with a hesitant voice, "About those two... What is your plan?"

"I haven't decided yet." Zac sighed. "I still can't believe they managed to cross the turbulent sea."

The two Triv talked about were Krisko and Uyir, the man formerly known as Enigma. Of course, he was a Revenant

now, and the husband of his Corpselord wife. The last living general of the undead incursion had mysteriously disappeared the moment the incursion fell, and Enigma never returned to the Underworld Council.

Seeing as neither could be found, most had believed that the two fought and the battle ended with mutual destruction. However, it turned out that the truth was a bit more interesting. The two had battled, but they had ended up with grievous wounds rather than dying.

The battle had taken place inside the heart of the Dead Zone, and even though the Lich King was dead and the incursion was gone, the Miasma was still extremely dense. It had seeped inside Enigma's wounds, and he had been converted to a Zombie even before he died. He had woken up as a supreme Zombie, and Krisko then helped him gain sapience over the following year.

They initially lived in the Dead Zone, but it gradually shrank to the point that they feared they would be discovered. They somehow managed to find out about the second continent and its growing pockets of death and took the risk to cross the oceans, braving the chaotic storms and the massive sea beasts.

Unfortunately for them, they ran into the Einherjar and Zac, who were out on a training mission, just a few weeks after arriving at the unpopulated continent. Zac had initially planned to simply execute them, but Triv had begged for Krisko's life since she apparently had been good to him before.

The ghost butler had provided a huge amount of help over the past years, so Zac acquiesced. But that still left two powerful prisoners whom he didn't want to keep but also couldn't send back to the Undead Empire.

They had seen the unaffiliated undead of Earth, and while there technically wasn't any law that said that the undead needed to be part of the Undead Empire, it was still considered a betrayal to be unattached among many of the imperials.

Letting them return could cause any number of issues even if they didn't know about Zac's hidden class.

“Try to convince them to sign the same sort of contract as you,” Zac said. “For now, let no one disturb me until I call for you.”

“Of course.” Triv nodded and flickered away.

Zac soon walked over to the death-attuned side of the Life-Death Array, and another wave of melancholy hit him as he looked upon the intricate fractals surrounding his prayer mat. Kenzie had long reached the inscription proficiency to make a complementary life-attuned Array Disk, but the setup in his cultivation cave was still more efficient to use because of the resources that had gone into nurturing the cave into a cultivation paradise.

The array hummed to life as Zac sat down. He felt the two streams of power, Dao and Mental Energy, enter the array pathways. Zac gritted his teeth with determination as he shut out all errant thoughts. He had been hesitant for a few months now since he had reached a certain point. The point of his first reincarnation.

However, every time he had started pushing against that final bottleneck, he had gotten a sense of trepidation, like his life was in danger. Until now Zac hadn't wanted to risk it and instead opted to wait and accumulate some more. Now, his soul was alit with purpose, and he refused to back down any longer.

He would push through this time no matter what.

CYCLE OF LIFE AND DEATH

One cycle after another passed as the **[Life-Death Array]** did its thing, and some sweat started running down Zac's forehead by the time he reached the seventh cycle. He usually stopped infusing the array with his Dao by this point, but his urgency kept him going this time. There thankfully was a huge surplus of energy in his **[Spiritual Void]**, especially since he hadn't used the array at all over the past weeks.

His second Dao storage helped Zac tide over the cycle without much issue, but a headache made the veins on Zac's forehead throb as the eighth cycle started. Only an insignificant stream was released from the avatar of the Fragment of the Coffin by this point. Zac wasn't satisfied with just that, and the scenes of Leandra's appearance flashed over and over in his mind. The scene of Kenzie being taken away, of Thea floating up toward the lightning in the sky, the sense of utter helplessness.

A surge of Dao was squeezed out of the Dao Avatar as Zac took out several Soul Crystals, crushing a few of them before grabbing one in each hand. The crushed crystals turned into a dust cloud that looked like a nebula slowly drifting around him, steadily infusing his whole body with energy through his pores.

This was a method he had accidentally discovered a while back, but he never used his very limited number of Soul Crystals this way because of the low efficiency. It was actually possible to take in the energy from the cloud even while absorbing normally, giving his soul an extra boost that helped

him forcibly extract some more Dao from the Coffin in his mind.

The effect of the Soul Crystal was limited, but it helped tide him over the eighth cycle, and a pure wave of death was returned after half an hour.

His soul had never contained a level of undeath as it did right now. Eight full cycles empowered by the Dao of the Coffin and D-grade Miasma Crystals was over a hundred times more powerful compared to simply running the array as is. Frigid drowsiness spread through his mind, and he just wanted to lie down and sleep.

Zac knew that it was just an effect of his soul being inundated beyond what was safe, and stopping right now would probably lead to his soul being harmed in unknowable ways. He forced himself to start the ninth cycle, ignoring his old rules of precaution.

Blood ran down Zac's nose, and his soul shuddered from the pain, but he staunchly continued to squeeze out all his potential as one Soul Crystal after another was expended. Finally, his soul was utterly drained, like a parched desert that hadn't seen rain for centuries. But Zac kept pushing even then, and microscopic motes of destruction were suddenly squeezed out of his wrung-out soul.

It was the energy released from the Splinter of Oblivion, and Zac was surprised to see it since he had thought the energy had been perfectly blended into his soul. It looked like the fusion wasn't perfect considering the motes had appeared, but Zac had no time to ponder on that as the purified energy of Oblivion entered the array.

Zac looked on with anticipation mixed with trepidation since he wasn't sure what the result would be from adding yet another energy into the mix, especially one as powerful as this. The worry only grew as a shudder rocked the whole cultivation cave a few seconds later, and it soon felt like he was caught in the middle of an earthquake.

However, Zac staunchly refused to move, since doing so would waste all his efforts and even damage his soul. Half his

soul was essentially inside the array by this point, and leaving now would result in a huge loss. The shakes only increased in intensity, and Zac could even hear Triv scream with horror in the distance.

A surge of energy suddenly slammed into Zac's mind, a terrifying force that threatened to knock Zac unconscious. Zac didn't understand what had happened to his Mental Energy as it passed through the array, but the amount and intensity were just terrifying. The hazy ball in his mind that represented his soul looked like it would explode at any moment.

That wasn't the only problem. Zac felt himself rapidly turning into a Zombie as deathly cold spread out throughout his body. Those small motes of oblivion had somehow supercharged the deathly energies in the array, which was extremely dangerous considering Zac barely held on as is. His heartbeat slowed down, and the embrace of death beckoned him, but there was a core in the deepest recess of his mind that refused to give in.

Zac's mind was a blur as he crawled toward the life-attuned side of his cave, his body only moving thanks to muscle memory as he was forced to use all his attention on keeping the creeping death at bay. He finally reached the prayer mat, and he desperately turned on the array after activating his Specialty Core.

His mind had felt stuffed full to the point of bursting a second ago, but the drain from the array gave him a sense of relief. Furthermore, he was now in his Draugr form, and there was no risk of him zombifying any longer. Zac crawled up to a sitting position, but he didn't give himself any opportunity to relax as he poured the power of the Bodhi into the array as well.

The same procedure repeated itself cycle after cycle, though Zac started to feel immense pressure even at the sixth circulation this time around. It wasn't that he had smaller storage in his Bodhi Avatar, but rather that his soul was so wrung dry from being overextended once already.

Furthermore, the increasingly powerful clashes between life and death in his soul weren't just purifying and strengthening his soul; the collisions were so powerful that they were actually starting to hurt him.

This feeling of danger was exactly what had held him back until now. He hadn't really made any progress for months when using the array because it seemed like he would have to cause some severe damage to his mind. He had seen firsthand what a broken soul did to Alea, and he had felt it himself when he almost got killed by Vilari's predecessor. He wasn't willing to take that risk at the time.

But no one on Earth was as used to as himself to pushing forward even when hurt, and he started to take out even more Soul Crystals to provide some more relief. His dwindling stash had almost run dry by this point, but Zac cared nothing for the expenditure as he kept going. The Soul Crystals were good, but their value was nothing compared to an evolved soul.

He had been stuck at the bottleneck for so long already, and Zac was adamant about breaking through today by hook or crook. Going through the first reincarnation would give him a huge boost before setting out, improving every aspect related to his soul.

Protection against illusions, mind control, and even direct attacks. Greater stores of Mental Energy. Perhaps even better control of his Daos. Most importantly, greater protection against the Remnants in his mind, and perhaps even the first step in taking control of them.

The seventh cycle passed, as did the eight. His harried soul was on the verge of collapse by this point, and he had used more than twice the normal Mental Energy it normally stored. Part of it came from the frantic consumption of Soul Crystals while his own energy was channeled through the array. Other came from **[Spiritual Void]** tiding him over when his Dao Avatar ran out of steam.

He somehow managed to squeeze out the last potential of his soul, and it resulted in a very familiar scene as last time. But it wasn't motes of Oblivion that got extracted from the

depths of his soul but rather simmering blobs of pure Creation. The scene gave Zac pause since the energy from the Shard of Creation entered his body rather than his soul.

Then it hit him. These motes of both Oblivion of Creation were not the result of the constant stream of energy being extracted and purified by his fractal cage. It was rather hidden impurities left from when the two Remnants had ravaged his soul and left their crisscrossing scars behind.

In either case, the small sparks were the final piece of the puzzle that allowed him to complete the ninth and final infusion. Now he could only wait, and a growing sense of dread gripped his heart as the cultivation cave shook once more. He knew that he might have gone too far this time around.

There was no way that his current heedless method of breakthrough was the normal path of performing the first reincarnation. It was like he had jumped onto a rocket instead of walking normally. The chaotic clashes between life and death would have killed most people by now, and he was barely holding on as cracks covered his whole soul.

Part of him screamed at him to stand up and run away, but his legs refused to move as his red-rimmed eyes glared at the array pathways. The minutes passed, and the circuit was finally completed. The world shuddered and his vision turned dark, but the all-consuming pain stopped him from staying unconscious for more than a fraction of a second.

Zac spat out a mouthful of blood, but he didn't care about the state of his body as he looked inward with horror gripping his heart. The clashes had reached an unprecedented state, and it looked like a cataclysmic war was taking place inside his head. A snap echoed out in his mind, followed by incessant shattering sounds that filled Zac with pain and dismay.

His soul had not just cracked, it had completely crumbled.

A vast cloud of crystals swirled about in Zac's mind, like a million gemstones forming a miniature galaxy. Surrounding it were two nebulae, one black and one white, and they gave off a mysterious light that was reflected in the small crystals. Zac

would be mesmerized by its beauty if it weren't for the fact that those small gemstones were broken pieces of his soul, and he desperately tried to figure out a way to salvage the situation.

Just a splintered soul had been difficult enough to heal, forcing him to head to the Zethaya Clan when looking for remedies for Alea. But what had just happened to his soul went far beyond a few tears, it was a complete disintegration. However, Zac's panic and despair were suddenly swept away by one simple realization.

He was fine, even better than just a few minutes ago.

Zac had received various wounds to his soul before, ranging from small shocks to massive cracks that took a long time to heal. Those kinds of wounds always came with severe nausea, difficulty to think, and unconsciousness. Yet he was still perfectly lucid even now that his soul had lost its form.

The frantic clashes between life and death had ended the moment his soul cracked as well, and it looked like his mind had reached a state of equilibrium.

That didn't mean he wasn't in danger, but Zac thought back to the text in his Soul Strengthening Manual. The [**Nine Reincarnations Manual**] was incomplete, and it lacked the comments and insights of predecessors that marked a high-quality inheritance. But there were still clues hidden in the somewhat sparse descriptions.

Steeped in the cycle of Life and Death, the soul enters the Samsara. Only by returning to the Origin can reincarnation take place. Give up on the past life to form the next; only through death can life grow. Use the past to set the foundation for the future.

The Eight Trigrams form a System unto itself, encompassing all. Towering above are the Four Emblems of Heaven and Earth. The Heavens are subject to the demarcation of Yin and Yang, the delimited Dao.

Supreme above all is the Primordial Chaos, a singular unity.

Zac had read that passage in the manual many times before, but only now did he actually understand how literal it was being. His soul needed to undergo a rebirth to reach the next stage, a reincarnation where weakness was shed and a soul with greater potential would form. Zac hadn't expected that meant his soul would turn to stardust, as that usually meant instant death.

There was no time to waste as Zac suspected that his lucid state was only being propped up by the array considering the state of his soul. Zac hurriedly started exerting pressure on the cloud of soul shards, and he was elated to see them following his command as they pushed together toward the center of his mind.

He needed to use the past to set the foundation for the future, meaning the soul shards couldn't be discarded. They would be the core of his reincarnated soul. However, when he pushed together the cloud, it just formed an uneven sphere that looked far worse than his previous soul. Zac frowned, immediately realizing he was missing something.

Inspiration suddenly struck, and Zac's attention turned to the two clouds of extremely condensed Life-Death energies that surrounded the shards. He willed the clouds to start circling the crystals like a nebula surrounding a black hole. The two clouds quickly came into contact with each other, causing a new series of explosions to erupt.

Zac had initially planned on fusing the clouds into his soul, figuring that was why they were left behind in his mind. However, he quickly changed course when he saw what was going on with the soul shards. The minuscule splinters were far more malleable than he had expected, and every collision forcibly pushed splinters together, fusing them into one.

The fused splinter was barely larger than just one of the original soul shards, meaning that it had almost twice as high a density of energy compared to the original pieces. Zac finally understood what was going on, and he egged on the two clouds to clash with each other more and more, causing the fusion to speed up.

The galaxy of gemstones kept shrinking as they were forcibly pushed together, and soon it was less than half the size of his original soul. However, there were still tens of thousands of splinters, so Zac kept pushing the Life-Death energies closer to keep the fusion going.

Zac finally understood the final passage. He had just assumed it to be some cultivation mumbo-jumbo to describe how powerful this method was, considering Yin and Yang was just below the Primordial Chaos, which by all accounts was one of the Peak Daos. That might be true as well, but it definitely wasn't the whole story.

Judging by the passage "Eight Trigrams form a stable system unto itself, encompassing all," the minimum requirement was to reduce the total number of remaining shards to eight. But to continue to fuse the soul shards even after that would result in a better reincarnation, with perfection being all shards fused into one new soul. Zac felt confident in reaching the minimum goal of eight, but was he really content with barely passing?

Definitely not. Only perfection would give him a foundation strong enough to accomplish his goals.

GRASPING FOR PERFECTION

The will was there, but Zac soon realized that performing a perfect reincarnation would be easier said than done.

Things went quite smoothly in the beginning, with the soul shards almost effortlessly merging. But more and more force was required to keep the process going. It was almost like the extremely energy-dense shards had a mind of their own, as they kept trying to fly away from the congealed ball in the middle of Zac's mind.

Zac's concentration was pushed to its limits as he kept moving the Life-Death energies around to set off explosions aimed at pushing any errant shards back into the fold. Losing a shard was akin to losing a piece of his soul, and he knew that could result in all kinds of weird afflictions down the road, ranging from lost memories to insanity.

Lose too many and the soul might even become unstable and fall apart, instantly killing him.

Worse yet, Zac felt his mind starting to become blurry as whatever kept his thoughts cohesive started wearing off, and he caught his mind drifting off on random tangents. A burst of pain shocked him awake as he used his go-to method to stay coherent: stabbing himself in the leg. It allowed him to keep pushing the now-radiant shards together, leaving just thirty-two splinters behind.

But that didn't change the fact that he was running out of Life-Death energy. Zac had already known that this might

happen the moment he realized the purpose of the Life-Death clouds.

After all, he had already seen these clouds before.

Over the past months when he didn't feel any improvement of his soul, there had been small clouds of life and death left behind after the cultivation session. Zac had figured the clouds were left behind because he didn't manage to make any improvements, but Zac didn't feel it was cause to worry because his **[Spiritual Void]** had swallowed it all long before he started the next cycle.

But Zac now understood that those clouds were meant to be saved, to be accumulated. When you finally reached a large enough amount of fuel in your mind, the force would be strong enough to crack your soul and use the huge amount of clouds to begin the fusion process. However, Zac had completely bypassed that by going overboard with the help of Dao, Oblivion, and Creation entering the array.

Of course, that also meant that Zac would never have been able to break through the normal way. If he hadn't taken the risk today, he would just have kept treading water as the clouds failed to accumulate, wondering why he never reached a point where he felt he could make a breakthrough. Thankfully, Zac was long used to doing things his own way.

He had run out of one type of fuel, but weren't there others? He just needed to cause some explosions, right?

Zac flashed over to the prayer mat in the middle, the nexus between life and death in his cultivation arrangement. He punched down at a certain array to his right, and massive waves of attuned energies stormed into the cavern, submerging him in what almost looked like black and gold liquid.

It was a special function that Kenzie had installed, a stopgap that would crush and release the energy of over a hundred D-grade Attuned Crystals and push them toward the center of the cave. It even removed the majority of the Cosmic Energy from the boost, leaving mostly just distilled Dao behind. It was meant to be used if he felt himself on the

precipice of having a breakthrough in his Dao or something, giving the environment a significant temporary boost.

But the dreadful amounts of energies were extremely helpful in this situation as well, and Zac felt relief rather than worry as almost-lethal levels of attuned energies rushed into his body through his pores. Parts of it were gobbled up by **[Void Heart]**, but his **[Spiritual Void]** had entered a frenzied state from the upheavals around it.

It created a powerful suction that dragged more and more life-and-death energies into his mind. Some of it was swallowed by the Hidden Node, but Zac managed to use a lot of it to unleash a chain of powerful explosions as well.

The extra surge of external Life-Death Energy gave him the push he needed, lowering the number of shards to just eight. They all looked like radiant pearls that reminded Zac of an early embryo, and Zac felt his mind clear once more now that his soul had stabilized. Zac wasn't content with just this, though, so he kept trying to force another fusion.

Unfortunately, the ambient energy was no longer dense enough to keep pushing the remaining shards together. The problem wasn't lack of energy, but rather the fact that Zac's body wasn't able to absorb it quickly enough to keep the process going. Even his two Hidden Nodes could only swallow so much, and Zac had released far more energy in the cave than he could absorb in a short while.

He couldn't do any absorbing on his own either considering he was just a mortal, which left his body in a state of equilibrium. The Soul Balls that formed the core of his reincarnated soul contained too much power on their own, and they naturally resisted the outside pressure. Just ambient energy wasn't enough to keep going.

There was no mention of it in his cultivation manual, but Zac was certain that barely passing the first reincarnation would mean limits on his future soul cultivation. Perhaps the first three reincarnations would be the ceiling, just like how picking a Common E-grade class would stop your cultivation progress at that grade.

Zac thought for a second before he gritted his teeth and focused on his **[Spiritual Void]**. A torrent of stored Dao was extracted from within, completely flooding his mind in gold and black. He had been pushed to his limits before when activating the array, but the real bottleneck then hadn't been his Dao. It was rather his Mental Energy being drained beyond what was safe.

His **[Spiritual Void]** wasn't without limits, but he had noticed that he was able to slowly expand the storage over the past years by continuously pushing excess Dao inside and then waiting for the node to stabilize. It could hold a huge amount of energy by this point, even surpassing the total strength of his soul. Or at least his old soul.

There was still a decent amount of Dao stored from before, and it had even been bolstered a second ago by the immense clouds of energy around him. But Zac now opened the floodgates, and it all came storming out. Bodhi and Coffin, Life and Death. But now there was also a third cloud, a silvery cloud wrought from the Fragment of the Axe.

Zac was completely draining the Hidden Node, which meant that the Dao of his third Fragment was also released. Zac wasn't worried, though. It was all according to his plan. The two clouds of life and death churned and clashed, but the clashes turned into a chaotic inferno the moment Zac pushed the third Dao into the mix.

Fragment of the Axe represented conflict on his Cultivation Path, and he had made some inroads into this concept over the past years. Part of the insights came from studying the Annihilation Sphere and Origin Mark, which he had decided to call his pink flash.

Life and death were in constant struggle, as was evidenced by the unceasing clashes in his cultivation cave. However, there was a natural balance in the clashes, and they formed a clear line of demarcation. Zac had eventually found a way to turn the orderly conflict into a chaotic war by infusing his Fragment of the Axe into the mix.

It had resulted in him almost losing a limb from a terrifying explosion that ruined his whole cave the first time, but it was exactly that kind of force that he needed right now.

One terrifying explosion after another erupted in his mind as life, death, and conflict stirred up a war of unprecedented proportions. The eight spheres were caught in the heart of it like innocent bystanders dragged into someone else's dispute. A massive shockwave suddenly dispersed the energies from his hidden node, causing Zac to see double.

What remained in his soul were four pristine spheres, each of them a masterpiece that radiated power.

Unfortunately, the eruption had dispersed the three clouds, and losing all his Dao was a big roadblock to his goal of completing the reincarnation perfectly. It also looked like he was running out of time. The soul shards had been malleable at the start, but the spheres felt increasingly rigid, like balls of glass that were cooling down. He needed to speed up or he'd lose his window of opportunity.

Zac was full of reluctance, but two small chests appeared in front of him, one gold and one black.

His sister had collected hundreds of rare treasures over the past years, so how could Zac still be empty-handed after all this time? Inside the two boxes were two treasures, one of life and one of death, that matched even Kenzie's nine final treasures in value. In fact, they had been given to him by Kenzie herself.

His sister had been consumed with gathering everything needed for her evolution, but that didn't mean she had forgotten about the rest of Port Atwood. Pretty much every core member of Zac's faction had been given some sort of treasure that normally only scions of large clans would be able to enjoy. Unsurprisingly, Zac was the biggest beneficiary of Kenzie's generosity.

Zac had saved the two treasures for when he had solved the issue of his Draugr Race bottleneck. They weren't Dao Treasures, but they contained both powerful and profound energies of life and death. The plan had been to eat them the

moment he had accumulated enough inspiration to push his Fragment of the Bodhi and Coffin to the next level, which would hopefully satiate the requirements of his bloodline.

However, it looked like he had no choice but to make use of them early.

Of course, these treasures were ultimately not too difficult to get hold of as long as you had access to a few dozen auction sites and over 100 billion Nexus Coins lying around. They were far from the kind of peak treasures like the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]**, which only had demand but no supply.

His financial situation was completely different compared to before, and replacing them wouldn't prove a big challenge. Certainly, that was only thanks to the System providing hundreds of thousands of teleportation destinations. Even Hegemons would find it nigh impossible even if they somehow managed to gather 1 million D-grade Nexus Coins, considering they would still be locked to their local cluster of planets.

Still, Zac couldn't help but feel a pinch as he swallowed the death-attuned treasure first. It was called **[Nightcast Lily]**, and Zac ate it stem and all. A terrifying cold spread through his body as inscrutable markings started to superimpose over his pathways, and Zac's hand shook as he quickly swallowed the second treasure.

These natural treasures were proper D-grade items, which made them far more potent compared to items like the Fruit of Ascension, which mainly got their grades thanks to its requirements on environment and usefulness. Even Peak E-grade cultivators would be careful when consuming one, and no one would be foolish enough to take two treasures of clashing attunements at the same time. No one except Zac, that is.

Life and death once more used his body as a battlefield, and Zac desperately pushed the rampant energies toward the space holding his soul. Cracks spread out across his body, and he was soon drenched in black ichor. But Zac was like a

possessed person as he ignored the dangers, his mind set on forcing another fusion.

Soon the two energies entered his soul aperture, and his vision swam from the pain as small hairline cracks spread across the four soul spheres from the furious collisions between the energies of two D-grade treasures. The force required to decrease the number of crystals was clearly immense, and his soul could barely take the pressure. However, a wave of soul-wrenching pain was immediately followed by an unprecedented sense of clarity as four turned into two.

The new spheres were beautiful and radiant. It was like his mind housed two small moons, each of them worthy of being an elite Mentalist's soul judging by the power they contained. Zac could feel it. There had been a qualitative change when he decreased the number of soul spheres to four from eight, but the difference was far greater this time around.

It was like his soul was completely remolded into something far greater and more durable, and the qualitative jump made him even more adamant about shooting for perfection. Problem was, most of the energies of the two treasures had been expended, and his body probably wouldn't be able to take it if he ate two new ones. Not that he had them.

But there was one more trick he could use, though it came with some danger.

The passage in the manual, "The Heavens are subject to the demarcation of Yin and Yang, the delimited Dao. Supreme above all is the Primordial Chaos, a singular unity," had given him an idea for his final fusion, and his eyes turned to the cage in his mind.

The two Remnants were still locked in their eternal struggle, but they looked a lot better compared to their wretched state after being forcibly drained to generate a Chaos Pattern. They were continuously gaining energy through some unknown method, only part of which was extracted by the cage.

More importantly, it almost felt like being locked in a struggle with their nemesis forced the two Remnants to continuously be refined, and extremely esoteric patterns had started to appear across their surfaces. Zac once had the idea to use those patterns as a basis to meditate on his Dao Fragments, but he had gained absolutely nothing.

It wasn't a problem with his bloodline this time, but the concepts hidden within those markings were just too difficult to decipher. It was ultimately too early to use those things as a reference. He couldn't even keep his mind safe without the help of his fractal cage, which was the biggest reason he was working on his soul in the first place. After all, there was no way for him to rely on the cages forever.

He had clearly sensed it by now. The two sets of fractals were extremely sturdy, but the Remnants were slowly corroding them. They would break sooner or later unless Be'Zi and the System somehow replenished them. Thankfully, the runes were still quite impregnable, and Zac believed he had decades before they would crumble.

Though that grace period would most likely shorten from what he was about to do.

Zac's mind shuddered as he pushed the two remaining soul spheres closer to the anchor point of the subspace prison, a nondescript part off to the side in his soul aperture. The movement went without issue, but Zac's heart still beat like a drum as he pushed a large number of tendrils of Mental Energy into the hidden dimension housing the Remnants.

The whole air around him ignited the next second as a torrent of energy came bursting out, filling his mind with unimaginable force. Black holes were replaced with sparkling stars around him as Creation vied for dominion against Oblivion. Zac almost felt like an almighty god, as a thought could destroy anything around him, but he forcibly reined in his imagination.

He instead repeatedly wished for the rampant energies to create pressure on his two soul spheres. Oblivion and Creation, Yin and Yang, clashed in his mind, causing Zac to puke blood

as deep cracks spread across the two spheres. One explosion after another rocked his whole soul aperture, but he arduously kept the two forces in check so that they didn't completely destroy his soul.

Finally, his mind shuddered as ripples spread out from his glabella. The air itself started vibrating throughout the whole cave like someone had dropped a stone in a still pond. The delimited had become a singular unity, and his soul was made whole as the two cracked moons turned into one blazing sun.

A perfect reincarnation.

ALTERNATIVE PATHS

Zac breathed out in relief and elation, thinking everything was over. But a lot of things suddenly happened at once. The rampant energies of the Remnants started to recede into the fractal prison as Zac felt two marks appear on his forehead, where each mark formed a vortex that could match even his hidden nodes in voracity.

A shocking suction made the space around Zac bend, and he looked on with distress as an enormous amount of attuned energies was dragged into his head. Zac had absorbed just a few percent of the energy he released before, but this much energy wasn't meant to be consumed. It was meant to be used as a boost to the environment when breaking through.

Yet these two marks cared nothing for that fact as they greedily swallowed everything they could.

That alone was alarming enough, but his eyes widened even further when a series of explosions erupted all around him. It was the array flags of his Life-Death Array, which had shot up into the air and self-detonated, releasing a huge amount of energy as well. It looked like the array had been saving a small part of the energy that cycled through its pathways, and it all came crashing back now.

Tremendous amounts of attuned Mental Energy blended with the Miasmatic and divine clouds as they entered Zac's forehead. Zac himself didn't control this process at all, but Zac actually wasn't sure he wanted to stop it even if he could. Instead, he quickly looked inward to see what was going on. His evolved soul still looked like a white-hot sun that

illuminated his mind with mysterious splendor, but it wasn't hovering in an empty space any longer.

Instead, it looked like it was floating on top of a pond wrought from life and death. The body of "water" was still both shallow and small, but it rapidly expanded as energy kept pouring in. It was like his mind could suddenly house an infinite amount of power, like his aperture was able to grow along with the ocean.

The process continued for hour after hour, until Zac finally felt a pressure in his mind. The space for his soul no longer could expand. Zac looked on at the situation with marvel. Before now, his soul had just been this diffuse blob that he could sense in his head, but now there was a defined space. Furthermore, everything was so clear and tangible. It almost felt like the core of his soul was a physical object.

There were no set rules of how a soul should look, from what Zac had gathered. Soul Cultivation didn't follow a strict series of grades like cultivation either, where everyone had nodes to break open in the E-grade and a Cultivator Core to form and upgrade during the D-grade. It was rather dependent on the method, and two equally powerful souls could look completely different.

Zac's soul had undergone a tremendous transformation after having officially completed the first step of the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**. It would be hard for him to swap to a different soul-strengthening method by this point. Of course, Zac wasn't really planning on doing so, considering his current one fit his path perfectly.

Half of his spiritual world was now filled with a golden ocean, not surprisingly teeming with life-attuned energy. This energy wasn't connected to him, though, and he was unable to move or change it at all. It was the same with the second half of his internal space, which was now a pitch-black sea of death. The two bodies of water didn't mix at all, but crashing waves rose to the sky where they met.

His perfected Soul Core was floating right in the middle between these two oceans, still shining in a pristine white. His

avatar representing the Fragment of the Axe, and his Hidden Node [**Spiritual Void**], had taken its spot right on top of the core. It was now sitting on it like a marooned sailor on a small island. The other two apparitions had instead formed two smaller islands apart from his core, with the hanging coffin resting atop the death-attuned ocean and the bodhi tree atop the golden one.

The scene was beautiful, and it resonated perfectly with his path, and Zac felt he could finally relax.

Things had gotten a bit dicey for a moment there, but everything had gone above expectation. Zac wanted nothing more than to explore his new soul, but first, he had to check in on the Remnants. He could still feel the cage, and it still hid in a subspace in his improved aperture. Better yet, there wasn't too much of the Remnants' energies left in his mind.

Some of the energy had blended with the two oceans, but his new core was unsullied. It could have been worse, but a lot of the energy had been dragged back into the cage, probably by the Remnants themselves.

Forcing open the funnel in his fractal cage was a last-resort option Zac had figured out a year ago but never had reason to try out until now. It was a method he could use if his life was on the line, a way for him to borrow the power of the Remnants in case everything else failed. For example, if he had been able to release energy like this back during his fight with Adcarkas, then things might not have gotten so desperate.

The energy funnel had thankfully started mending itself almost immediately in response to Zac breaking it open. The Remnants in turn didn't want to lose their arduously accumulated energy, prompting them to quickly drag most of the leftovers back into the prison instead of giving it up. Things had worked out better than Zac could have hoped, but the strategy did come at a significant cost.

The luster of the protective fractals had been expended by a noticeable degree, and Zac guessed that he had lost at least a good five years of protection. Zac was hopeful that the gain in his soul strength would offset the loss this time, but if he used

the same method in combat, it would be a pure loss. Besides, forcing open the gates repeatedly might cause the prison to crumble altogether, so it definitely wasn't something he could use unless he was absolutely pushed to the edge.

Seeing that everything was in order with his Remnants, Zac instead turned his attention to his body, and he couldn't help but lament at his lack of preparations. He had managed to perform a perfect reincarnation, but at what cost? His whole body was a mess, and Zac could feel that his soul was still pretty fragile.

His experience was a great example of the difference between a manual and a Heritage. The manual was short-worded and obscure, sometimes intentionally so as to make it harder for outsiders to glean information. But a Heritage also contained the experiences of the predecessors. If he had the Heritage for the [**Nine Reincarnations Manual**], he would have known exactly what the reincarnation entailed.

The undertaking would still have been dangerous since he would always be unable to gather the Dao clouds. But he would have been able to prepare himself better, like getting his hands on safer and more suitable treasures to help with the fusion. Still, there was no use crying over spilled milk. The gains far outweighed the costs, as far as Zac was concerned.

Zac soon started to observe his evolved soul from a utilitarian standpoint. He had spent a small fortune and risked his life to reach this stage, and he needed more than a nice view. Luckily, it didn't take long for him to start digging out the changes from his evolution.

First of all, his new soul seemed extremely stable compared to his old one, no matter if you looked at the size or mass of it. Harming it would take a lot more force compared to before. Zac couldn't be sure, but he suspected that his resistance against mental attacks was stronger right now compared to when he'd actively used [**Mental Fortress**] before.

His raw defenses were most likely inferior compared to when he'd used [**Soul Guardian**] on his old soul, but that was

to be expected from an E-grade Mental Defense Skill. His pool of Wisdom obviously provided the same degree of protection, but it was like the same attack now would need to destroy a big boulder instead of a fist-sized stone. The same amount of force would have a much smaller impact.

The second gain was how clear everything felt. When he observed his Dao Avatar, it felt like they hid a lot more secrets compared to before, and hundreds of ideas flicked through his mind as he turned his attention to the pathways in his body. He didn't feel smarter by any means, but it was like his mind had become more in tune with the Dao.

Concepts he had studied before that had seemed obscure and inscrutable were now within reach. He felt full of inspiration, which was exactly what he needed for the next step of his plan. However, he first had to check something, and two thin streams of Dao emerged from his avatars.

It worked!

Zac looked on with desperate hope as the two streams moved together, but his abyssal eyes closed in dismay when the two strands touched for just a second before they disintegrated. It was a failure after all. He had hoped that his evolved soul would help him improve his control over his Daos, but it was only partly a success.

He now found it absolutely possible to activate two Dao Fragments at once without straining himself. However, his control over them wasn't any better than before, which essentially meant that Dao Braiding still was an impossible goal. After all, it was the control itself that was key, not being able to activate the fragments.

Kenzie had often tried to explain how she could fight so dynamically, and it always boiled down to her Dao. She was able to control her streams of Dao with pinpoint precision thanks to her own talents along with Jeeves' assistance. She could even attach it to streams of Cosmic Energy and form elemental skills from scratch. However, this type of handling required both talent and affinities, of which Zac had neither.

Zac suddenly froze as he had a flash of inspiration. Perhaps there was a unique path he could take.

Two thick streams of Mental Energy emerged from the core of his soul, and they moved around in his aperture like two flood dragons, twining around each other as they moved. It was obviously Zac who did it, but his eyes lit up at the result. Wasn't this Dao Braiding, except that the energy currently lacked any Dao?

Instead of using his Dao as the guide and his Mental Energy as the fuel like normal cultivators, what if he did it the opposite way? Form the braid with streams of Mental Energy with the help of his unusually powerful soul, then infuse the streams with Dao like they were some sort of cables. From there, he could infuse his skills with the newly formed Dao Braid.

The moment the thought ignited, Zac was completely unable to let it go. If this truly was possible, then the biggest detriment of his abysmal affinities would be solved. Truthfully, Zac felt that having no affinities for Daos wasn't that bad in terms of cultivation. He could still gain insights from battles, and he suspected that he would be able to keep improving as long as he kept getting his hands on treasures.

Meanwhile, those with low affinities would sooner or later find themselves hard-capped in their cultivation, where they wouldn't improve their Dao Seeds or Dao Fragments no matter what.

However, his inability to manipulate his Dao was starting to become a problem. Braiding two Late-stage Fragments and infusing them into a skill was almost as powerful as infusing the skill with a Peak-stage Fragment. Above that were Dao Arrays, something that talented E-grade cultivators could make use of.

As grades progressed, the cultivators utilizing their Daos would keep improving, while Zac used the crudest method. It hadn't been a real problem so far, but it would become a bigger and bigger issue as he progressed. He already had to eke out more and more advantages to cancel out the increasing

boost from cultivation manuals, and adding Dao manipulation to that would be extremely tough.

But soul cultivation might be his key to retaining his advantages.

The minutes passed as Zac kept trying to form his backward braid, but he was soon enough forced to stop before making any real headway. His vision had started to get blurred as his wounds made themselves remembered. He sighed and stopped the experiments and simply ate a few healing pills before lying down on the ground.

But he could feel it. There was hope.

Zac got no opportunity to celebrate, though, as sleep took him the moment his head hit the ground. He had no idea if one hour or one year had passed when he finally woke up, but a quick check proved that the correct answer was actually three days. He should have known that re-forming his soul would stress his mind, and immediately performing a series of experiments was overdoing it.

His mind felt a lot better after the rest, like it had somehow stabilized. Of course, the attuned oceans in his mind still raged like before, and Zac guessed they'd never calm down. Zac wanted to check things out some more, but he suddenly sensed a presence in the distance.

"Triv, come in," he said.

"Young master, are you okay?" Triv hesitantly asked as he floated into the cultivation cave.

"I'm fine." Zac sighed as he turned his gaze toward the ghost. "I just – uh?"

Zac forgot his word, as Triv had started to vibrate as the ghost moved away.

"Please, your eyes. You're almost like Lady Vilari," Triv croaked as his spiritual form shuddered.

Zac was surprised by the ghost's reaction, and he concentrated a bit to properly restrain his aura. He was always containing a large part of it naturally, but it wasn't hard for Zac

to hide even more of it. In fact, it went even smoother right now compared to before, which meant Zac had found yet another benefit of soul evolution.

“That’s better.” Triv sighed. “Lady Vilari has been waiting outside for a few days on your command.”

“Oh, right. Send her in,” Zac said, a bit embarrassed he had forgotten about his undead general.

VILARI

Vilari came in a moment later, her eyes shielded by a black silk scarf covered in aquamarine fractals, which also held her shoulder-length white hair back from her face. Her build was still the same as the angelic girl who almost killed him in the Battle of Fates, but her aura was completely different.

Two black streaks ran down her cheeks and continued down her neck. It was a bit reminiscent of runny mascara if not for the massive amount, but its origin was rather Zac himself. When his soul had cracked from the Mentalist's attack back then, a surge of Annihilation had ruined Vilari's eyes and extinguished her soul in return.

Those streaks of black blood had marked her skin, and they now formed a mysterious pattern that Zac felt had some sort of relation to the Dao of Oblivion. It gave her an oppressive aura and one of perpetual sorrow, which was unfortunate since her true disposition wasn't like that at all. She wasn't a ray of sunshine, but neither was she a dark cloud.

Her mental cultivation had resulted in a calm and gentle personality, though that didn't mean she flinched in the face of carnage. She wasn't blind like one would have expected from her appearance either, as a version of her old eyes had been grown back in the ruined sockets. It wasn't some unique ability of her predecessor's bloodline, but rather thanks to Zac's experimentation over the past years.

He had used Creation to conjure something out of nothing.

The energies of Oblivion and Creation were constantly released into his body, and he occasionally needed to purge them so as not to get impacted by the influence of the Remnants again. However, Zac had felt it was a waste to simply use his Origin Mark on nothing. He had seen how it could heal his own body and create things where only his imagination was the limit, so why not use the mark on his corpses?

His first attempt had been on the nephew of Cervantes, the mutilated and bisected corpse of the leader werewolf. Zac had wanted to see if he could regrow the missing half with a pink flash. Unfortunately, his experiment had ended up with the corpse turning into a mutilated blob of flesh and metal after Zac had let his imagination run wild for a second, making him think of the Cyborg he'd fought.

The following experiments went better and better as he learned to properly focus and avoid distractions. However, there were still limitations to the skill. First of all, he could only use it on himself and on corpses so far. Using it on someone living caused a clash of wills between the two parties, and things got out of control.

Secondly, the limbs he restored were weaker compared to the original, though that was slowly fixed over time. Finally, it couldn't create things Zac didn't understand. One instance of this was bloodlines hidden in the depths of cells. For example, he had created two eyes for Pika as well, but she had actually scooped them out of her own head after awakening, saying that the real ones were waiting for her.

Vilari's bloodline was thankfully not directly related to her eyes. In fact, Zac wasn't even certain that her old eyes looked like that scary eye that had filled his vision back then. His memories of the whole encounter were a bit blurry, and he only remembered those enormous eyes. It might just have been a skill of the Mentalist, but it was now a permanent feature of Vilari.

The real reason for the scarf covering her eyes was rather that her soul had grown too much in strength too quickly, and she wasn't able to fully control her latent bloodline. Her living

predecessor had probably practiced some specific Bloodline Method, but the Mentalist hadn't left any cultivation manuals inside her Spatial Ring. Most likely, she hadn't brought things like that to Base Town at all, instead leaving them back with her clan.

So his commander of the Einherjar was in a similar situation as Zac had been before he awakened his bloodline. In fact, the Einherjar with previous bloodlines were all in this situation. Their bloodlines had been partly sealed upon awakening, and they had to work at unsealing them rather than awakening them.

It was possible that a proper Lich would be able to allow their Revenants to awaken with their bloodlines intact, but Zac definitely wasn't at that stage with his homebrewed methods. Conversely, his Origin Mark would probably kick up a storm among Liches if they found out he had such a heaven-defying method to restore corpses.

"Lord Atwood," Vilari said as she looked back and forth in the cave, "such a nice place. A shame it was destroyed."

"It's just surface damage," Zac said with a wry smile. "It will be restored. I'm sorry about the wait."

"It was no problem. The atmosphere outside helped me make some progress of my own," Vilari said.

"That's good. How are you coming along?" Zac asked.

"It's slow but steady." Vilari nodded. "I think it's best if I stay at my current stage for a few more years unless you need me to advance. Soul cultivation is a slow path."

Zac understood what she meant. His recent breakthrough should be possible to complete while still in F-grade, but it would probably take a longer time. Who knew, perhaps it was even possible to undergo a second reincarnation as well. The greater the foundation she built early on, the further she would be able to go on her path.

"That's fine. Follow your instincts, and let me know if there's anything you need," Zac said as he threw her a crystal. "These are my insights after undergoing my first reincarnation,

it should be helpful to you as well. There were some surprises. I hope you'll aim for a perfect reincarnation if you decide to stick with this method."

Vilari was the only one apart from himself who cultivated the Nine Reincarnations Manual. Zac had paid a small fortune for a Natural Treasure that allowed him to engrave at least the first section onto a onetime Information Crystal even though his understanding was a bit rickety.

She wasn't quite as suited as himself for the method, considering she didn't really have any affinity or relation to the Life attunement. But the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** was still a top-tier Soul Strengthening Method, and it helped her strengthen her soul at a decent pace. In fact, her soul was already superior to Zac's pre-reincarnation soul, but it still hadn't reached its limits.

Whether that would lead to an easier reincarnation or a stronger end product, Zac wasn't sure. Honestly, it wasn't for certain that she would stick with the current manual at all since she could easily swap to another method before she actually underwent the first reincarnation. Afterward, it might get more complicated.

Still, the information was of great value to her, and Vilari gratefully nodded as she stowed away the crystal.

"Let me look into your eyes," Zac suddenly requested, giving Vilari a start.

"Ah – are you sure?" the small Revenant hesitantly said. "Your state after grinding your skills—"

"That was before." Zac coughed with some embarrassment. "I want to see the effects of completing the first reincarnation."

"Alright." Vilari nodded as she undid the knot at the back of her head, exposing two almost reptilian eyes.

The eyes were fashioned after the otherworldly eye that Zac had seen when the Mentalist had attacked him during the battle of fates, with white sclera and a blue vertical scar running through them in the middle. The only difference was

that the blue back then was a lot deeper, whereas Vilari's fractured pupils were the aquamarine of condensed Miasma.

Until today, Zac had found himself on the losing end to Vilari's gaze, even when activating [**Soul Guardian**] or [**Indomitable**]. His soul wasn't actually hurt by the exchange like back during the Tower climb, but it did make him slightly dizzy after just a few seconds. Which was shocking considering Vilari was just Peak F-grade.

But this time was different. He felt some pressure, and the oceans in his soul aperture started to churn a bit, but he was still able to maintain a completely lucid mind even without activating his mental defense skill. It was like the oceans acted as a buffer, and the core wasn't affected at all by the latent pressure Vilari exerted. It was clear; mental defense was once his weakness, but it had now turned into his strongest point.

"I can't see your soul," Vilari exclaimed with surprise, confirming Zac's hunch, and a smile spread across her face.

"What's with you?" Zac asked with confusion as he saw Vilari light up.

"I'm just happy. I can finally look someone in the eyes without hurting them," Vilari said with a smile.

Zac weakly smiled in return, once more feeling that the familial bonds of the undead were a bit hard to get used to. He was essentially Vilari's father, as she carried his mark, and the awakening had been performed with him as the "lifegiving source." But Revenants turned this way were adults the moment they gained sapience, though they were still a bit wide-eyed even after two years of education.

So Vilari was his child, yet she was not. She was an adult, yet she was not, and Zac had some trouble adapting to it. Triv had just told him to see it as the same sort of relationship as the one he had with his Valkyries, which pretty much was true since the Einherjar were bound to him just like Triv was bound to the Undead Empire.

"I'm sure you'll be able to control your strength when we find a way to unseal your bloodline. It shouldn't be long until

we find a way,” Zac said. “And if you want, I have an opportunity for you. The Crown of Despair inheritance. There are some risks—”

“I’m willing,” Vilari said without hesitation, eagerness written all over her face.

“Okay, let’s go.” Zac nodded before he activated his Specialty Core to return to his human form.

He had already kept Vilari waiting for three days, so they left without delay, leaving Triv to start repairs on the cave. The two teleported over to his compound and walked over to the intricate hedge maze that also doubled as Brazla’s Energy Gathering Array.

Even more functions had been added over the past years; it now also contained hidden bewilderment and trapping arrays that Kenzie had installed. Of course, the main reason for them being there was because Brazla had demanded them in return for sharing some of his knowledge.

Zac was in control of the array cores rather than Brazla, though, and he effortlessly led Vilari through. The size of these additions around the Dao Repository had forced Zac to slightly move the inner wall, not that anyone in Port Atwood wanted to stay too close to the Dao Repository after it started stealing their ambient energy.

“It’s you,” Brazla muttered, glancing down from his golden cloud when Zac walked inside with a curious Vilari in tow. “What do you want?”

“I want to give the Crown of Despair to Vilari here,” Zac said. “Is it a problem that she’s a Revenant?”

“Should be fine as long as it’s not a man.” Brazla shrugged and waved his hand, conjuring a portal in front of the statue.

“Good luck,” Zac said as he turned to Vilari. “I’ll wait here.”

“This inheritance is a bit special,” Brazla interjected. “The undead lass will be gone for at least a month, probably more.”

“What?” Zac said with shock.

Most trials just took a few hours, and even his own inheritance had just lasted for a day. Meanwhile, the trial for the Crown of Despair would last for a whole month? What kind of treasures hid within that realm?

“It’s not that the quality of the things left behind is higher. The owner had some... peculiar demands when constructing the inheritance realm,” Brazla snorted, clearly reading Zac’s thoughts. “Also, it’s the only inheritance site I am completely unable to sneak inside, so I have no idea how it looks by now. That dour woman might have gone even more insane over the long years.”

“Do you still want to go ahead with this?” Zac asked with some worry.

“Even more. It sounds like a challenge where I can hone myself. We can’t shy away from some minor difficulties if we want to be able to assist you in the future,” Vilari said with a nod.

“Fine. Good luck. And if it seems like you will die, just give up. There will always be other opportunities out there,” Zac said and looked on with worry as Vilari walked toward the teleporter.

“And, young master? I am sorry about the mistress,” Vilari said as she disappeared in a flash.

The teleporter disappeared, taking Vilari with it. Zac gazed at the towering statue a few seconds, and he couldn’t help but feel a wave of dejection coming over him. The statue was holding her head in her hands, and it radiated sorrow that made him glance toward the stalwart statue of the Blade Emperor.

Seeing him brought back a wave of unwelcome memories, and he wordlessly turned toward the exit. A snort echoed out from above, but Zac ignored it as he walked away.

“Are you... getting her back?” a hesitant voice asked just as Zac was about to leave, which made him stop in his tracks as he looked back up at the Tool Spirit.

It looked like Brazla's sullen demeanor was caused by missing Kenzie, and Zac guessed he shouldn't be surprised. She was essentially his only friend in this place, visiting him occasionally to just play around. Perhaps Brazla was dreading being left alone in this world again since Zac was always occupied with his cultivation.

"How did you know?" Zac asked.

"The great sage has his means," Brazla shrugged.

"I'll do my best." Zac sighed. "Have you heard of Six Profundity Empire? Or Immemorial Realms?"

"I haven't heard of that empire," Brazla said with a shake of his head. "But I have heard of Immemorial Realms from my master. It was something he had learned from a mysterious being passing through his sector. He stayed with my creator for a few weeks when he was young and gave some casual pointers on crafting.

"Master always said it was thanks to this mysterious person's profound knowledge he was considered the top among D-grade craftsmen. It was thanks to him that even Monarchs came to his doorstep asking for help. Master always dreamed of meeting this mysterious master again, but he never got the chance."

Zac's brows rose with surprise. A few weeks of casual pointers completely transformed the fate of the original Brazla? Sounded like Brazla had a lucky encounter of his own. It might even be possible that that person was at B-grade to elicit such a change.

"Master learned that Mystic Realms are the lowest rung among the hidden pockets of space. There are higher-tiered worlds as well. He mentioned Ancient Realms, Immemorial Realms, and Primal Heavens. I don't know anything more than that, though," Brazla muttered.

"Immemorial Realm... Higher-tiered Mystic Realm," Zac mused.

"It is some sort of cultivation paradise, I bet." Brazla shrugged. "I guess it's the kind of place those lofty beings

need to enter continue their cultivation. I bet a place like this backwater sector simply doesn't have the fundamental requirements to nurture a B-grade cultivator. And there is no way such a place is unclaimed. Getting in would be nigh impossible."

"You might be right," Zac said with a sigh, knowing that his goal of finding Kenzie had just become even more difficult.

Leaving the Zecia Sector alone was a daunting task for someone who wasn't even powerful enough to freely walk among the stars. Gaining access to some supreme cultivation paradise to free his sister sounded like an impossible task as things stood. But Zac simply took a deep breath and left.

One step at a time.

Vilari being gone for so long exceeded Zac's expectations, but it didn't affect his original plans all that much. Zac sent a message to Calrin next, ordering a huge batch of provisions for his next outing before returning to his cultivation cave.

He spent the next week healing up, resting, and going over his plans. Zac had formed all kinds of hypotheses and goals over the past three years, and the improved clarity from his soul helped him perfect those steps even further. Only when he was completely certain he was back in prime condition did he continue with his objectives.

Zac activated his teleporter, appearing in a small empty building, a logger's cabin that hadn't seen any visitors for months. He stepped outside, finding himself in a small town, though not a person was in sight. It was a small deserted settlement that Zac had found while flying around on his leaf, looking for good grinding spots or any natural treasures left behind after the integration.

Judging by the signs and remains, the place had once been a drop-off point for a cohort of human cultivators. However, they had long died due to their unfortunate placement. The town was situated at the edge of a series of towering mountains to one side and a vast coniferous forest to the other.

Both the mountains and the forest were simply crawling with powerful beasts, and there were no other towns for hundreds of miles. The cultivators had fought valiantly against the dangerous surroundings, unlocking a Nexus Crystal and all sorts of battlements. They had all died before managing to unlock the teleporter though, leaving the town unclaimed.

Zac had quickly killed all the alphas in the surroundings before claiming the city, which gave him a small outpost far away from prying eyes, with ample prey to use as target practice. However, Zac didn't come here to just fight beasts, he had a specific goal in mind.

He walked over to the Nexus Crystal, putting his hands against its smooth surface.

[Fuse Skills?]

SKILL FUSIONS

Zac had gained his first skill upgrade quest at level 90 as expected, and another one at level 100. Both of them provided him with one opportunity to freely fuse or upgrade one of his F-grade skills, though the upgrade only allowed for upgrading Class-specific skills. The fusion could make use of external skills, but only if the first skill in the fusion was provided by the class. Secondly, only F-grade skills were useable in the fusion.

Zac had reached level 90 just two months after the events in the Mystic Realm, and he'd completed the quest in two weeks. Yet he had held off on accepting the reward based on a recommendation from Alyn. He would only get a few freebies, and he needed to make the most of them. Zac got two shots per class, which felt sorely lacking as he went through his long list of abilities.

There were many reasons to not immediately cash in the rewards. The System assisted in the upgrades, but the cultivator could actually nudge the process in certain directions as long as they had a clear understanding of the skill fractals and what they wanted to change. That was a big reason why Zac had worked so hard on shoring up his foundations over the past years, to give him a shot at creating skills suited for his cultivation path.

This was extra important for his Fetters of Desolation class, where he had several skills that he rarely used or simply didn't fit too well with his envisioned combat style. He wanted to turn the class more offensive while still maintaining some

defensive capabilities, and he hoped he had found a way to do that. Right now, the class combined Defense and Death, and Zac needed to turn that into War and Death.

He had gone over his options hundreds of times in his mind as he worked on his Soul Cultivation over the past years, and he had long reached a decision for both his classes. All four opportunities would be used for fusing skills, leaving the normal evolutions to his own hard work. The reason was simple: fusing skills was a lot harder than simply upgrading one.

It took two different skill fractals and turned them into one, combining their effects into something new. It required a high understanding of fractals, the Dao, and the skills themselves to work, along with some sort of inspiration. An upgrade wasn't easy by any means, but ultimately a lot more straightforward.

Fixing his Draugr skill set was important, but Zac wanted to work on his human side first. He figured that the fusions he had planned for his Edge of Arcadia class were more straightforward, and the accumulated experience would hopefully help him when performing the more transformative fusions of his Draugr side.

Zac looked at the prompt from the Nexus Node in front of him and took a deep breath before choosing **[YES]** and swiftly picking his first two skills to fuse. It was **[Deforestation]** and **[Nature's Punishment]**. He was very happy with both skills, but they ultimately served a similar purpose in his skill set.

So Zac had decided to fuse the two into one, creating one terrifying ultimate skill that would crush all opposition in one go. It was a combination of two of his Daos as well, the Fragment of the Bodhi and the Fragment of the Axe, the essence of his Edge of Arcadia class and his cultivation path. Now with his burgeoning ability to braid two Daos into one attack, it held even greater potential.

Zac's surroundings suddenly changed, and he found himself sitting in a vast cosmos, and his eyes lit up with expectation when he saw the familiar stars far in the distance. It looked a lot like when Yrial had imparted his Dao onto him

years ago, like he was staring into the Heavens themselves in this secret dimension.

Two streams of energy suddenly emerged from his body, turning into the fractals of his two skills, each of them as tall as Zac. Two streams emerged from his glabella next, the familiar Dao clouds that were continuously released from his Dao Avatars. The streams were unsurprisingly those released by the Fragment of the Bodhi and Fragment of the Axe.

The two fractals crashed into each other the next moment, turning them into a cloud of stardust that swirled about. It was mesmerizing to look at, but Zac didn't forget himself as he staunchly focused on the direction he wanted to take the skill in. Pure power stemming from the endless force of nature itself, paired with the unstoppable momentum of an axe. The two would turn into a single attack that would cleave earth and end a war altogether.

A rippling force shuddered within the stardust, and Zac felt certain his general idea for the skill had been accepted by the System. The stardust created from the former two skills congealed into a brand-new fractal, while energy from the distant stars poured in and gave it even greater strength. The result was a skill fractal far more detailed than those before, radiating unquestionable might.

Zac looked at it with awe, and he could quickly make some deductions thanks to his years of study into the patterns that the Apostate of Order had brought to the cultivation world. First of all, the energy requirement and strength of his new skill should be around twelve times greater compared to the old ones.

One could almost liken a skill fractal to a perfectly crafted machine, and some patterns shared purpose across most skills. For example, there were the transformers that took normal Cosmic Energy and transformed it into whatever force was needed to conjure the skill.

There were also storage patterns that allowed the skill to compress and store Cosmic Energy until it was all released in one mighty blast. The more storage patterns a skill fractal

contained, the more power the skill would be able to unleash. Of course, it also meant the skill would cost more to activate as well.

The number of storage patterns nestled into the skill fractal was a good indicator of what type of skill one was dealing with since massive finishers would obviously contain tens, perhaps hundreds, more of these types of mini-fractals compared to weaker repeatable skills like **[Chop]**. It was this that gave Zac an idea of how powerful the skill would be without even using it.

Furthermore, Zac was elated to see that the transformative patterns had a decent balance between nature and axe, though it looked to be a sixty-forty balance in favor of his Dao of the Axe. It meant that it would be a primarily axe-based skill that borrowed the elements of nature, rather than a nature skill with the cutting ability of an axe.

A fifty-fifty split might have been optimal in terms of his path, but Zac knew he was still an axe warrior first and foremost. Over the past years, he had managed to incorporate the Dao of the Axe far more into his fighting style than his other two Daos, which wasn't a surprise, as he fought with an axe. Getting a sixty-forty split was pretty good all things considered, and he might even be able to gain some inspiration in the future by studying the fractal.

The skill wasn't completely formed just yet, though, as two streams of starlight washed over the skill, each one transforming the pattern a bit. Zac couldn't put his finger on it, but the fractal looked a bit more perfect afterward. This was the benefit of the System doing the fusion rather than doing it yourself.

You did not have full control over the process, which meant that the skill might not be one hundred percent suited to your path. But the resulting skill fractal would be without flaws. A fusion reward from an Epic Class would result in a Peak-quality E-grade skill without fail, which was especially important in Zac's case.

After having studied skills for a long time, he had already confirmed that while both [**Deforestation**] and [**Nature's Punishment**] had amazing effects, they were ultimately High-quality skills. They were extremely close to Peak quality, but they were still a short distance away. In comparison, [**Profane Seal**] was a proper Peak-quality skill since both its defenses and restraining prowess were top-tier for the grade, while even including a teleportation effect to close distances.

Meanwhile, over 90% of those who fused skills on their own ended up with a skill with a lower quality compared to the source skills. For example, turning two High-quality F-grade skills into one Medium-quality E-grade skill. It would be a huge loss if Zac wasted the potential in his two signature skills that way.

Certainly, it was possible to maintain the quality of one's skill, but it required tremendous insight and talent. To improve the quality like what was happening right now most likely required some great fortuitous encounter, like an epiphany or special treasures that could aid in the process.

The skill was finally complete, and it turned into a streak of light that entered his body, and Zac waited with rapt attention for it to stabilize. A wide smile spread on his face the next moment as it settled in the position of [**Nature's Punishment**]. This was exactly what he was hoping for because that came with a special benefit.

He could get the Endurance-based defensive skill in the Dao Repository now.

[**Nature's Barrier**] was all but useless by now, leaving Zac without any real defensive options. Between his huge pool of Endurance and his Dao Fragments, he was definitely hard to kill, but he needed a skill that actually took advantage of his strengths and pushed his defenses to the next level. He had already shored up his weaknesses on his mental side with [**Spiritual Guardian**] and evolving his soul, and this was the next step.

It wasn't time to worry about that, though, and Zac pushed away any errant thoughts, as he wanted to imprint the feeling

and memorize every single change that had taken place in his body since he started the fusion process. Obviously, it wasn't as magical when doing the same thing yourself, but it could provide some guidance.

Zac soon enough found himself back in front of the Nexus Node, but he sat in meditative silence for a few minutes to imprint everything. Only then did he open his skill screen.

[E] Arcadia's Judgment – Proficiency: Early. Only judgment awaits those who encroach on the mandate of Arcadia. Upgradeable.

Zac nodded in satisfaction before he sat down and studied the fractal for another thirty minutes. Only when he felt he had imprinted the whole thing in his mind did he stand up and step onto his flying treasure. There were still a few skills to fuse, but he first wanted to see the effect of the first fusion firsthand so that he could get a better understanding of the result.

Half an hour later, he stood overlooking a vast valley from the vantage of his leaf. Thousands of beasts milled about within, some sleeping while others fought for sport. The stench of blood and death was palpable, and incessant roars full of power reached him even though he was hundreds of meters in the air.

This was a perfect spot for his experiment.

Zac soon landed at the mouth of the valley, making no attempt to mask his aura. His arrival was noticed as thousands of weird beasts turned their attention toward him. They were Truzkirs, a beast that once lived on the Zhix homeworld.

Back there, they were a small nuisance, looking like a mix of some type of warrior ants and scorpions. Nowadays, they had turned into a real threat to the surroundings, as they voraciously devoured everything around their lairs and multiplied quickly. They were both very small for spiritual beasts and agile to boot, which in conjunction with their endless numbers made it a pain to hunt them for normal people.

This particular hive was slated for eradication since it had grown too big, and there was a real risk of a beast tide if nothing was done.

The clattering screeches were almost deafening as a tide of Truzkirs rushed toward him, completely uncaring that his aura was hundreds of times stronger than theirs. Zac wasted no time and infused his new skill fractal with Cosmic Energy, and a slight frown emerged when it only stopped after two seconds and gobbling up 25% of his total reserves.

That was a huge amount considering his attribute pool, and it would cost him most of his Void Energy from **[Force of the Void]**, but that was ultimately a good thing in his book. His void pool had already increased to 27% over the past years, which meant he wouldn't be completely drained. Besides, the more energy it consumed, the greater the force the skill would exert.

Zac felt a tremendous weight assail him the next moment as an enormous hand appeared above his head. It looked a bit like the old wooden hand of **[Nature's Punishment]**, but it was over ten times larger, a mountain of bark, vines, and wood covered in glaring red runes. It was like Zac had borrowed the hand of a young treant before, but now the patriarch had showed up.

And it didn't come alone, as a massive primal axe was held in its hand. The axe was wrought from wood and stone, and it felt like it was a natural product of mother nature itself. The insect tide was almost upon him by this point, and Zac didn't want to let them surround him. Zac's hand swung down, and he felt his bones creak and groan from the tremendous weight his skill exerted on him.

The hand in the sky mirrored his action, just like **[Deforestation]** did. The enormous axe fell, and it sounded like two mountains were ground against each other as arcadia unleashed its judgment. It felt like the whole planet would get cleaved in two as the axe slammed into the ground, digging over twenty meters into the valley. Thousands of beasts were instantly crushed and ground to dust as a scar over five hundred meters long was formed.

The wound in the earth radiated an undeniable might, and the whole valley shook from the force. The vibrations turned into a full-blown earthquake, but it only lasted for a second before the whole valley veritably exploded in a chaotic jumble of broken flesh and stone.

The hidden hive beneath the ground had been destroyed in an instant, and the whole area had been transformed from a valley into a deep pit that radiated an immense aura of slaughter. The whole atmosphere had transformed as well, as it held the weight of a mountain. The occasional Truzkir still screeched in pain and fear, but almost all of them had been annihilated by one single strike. The few remaining beasts would easily be dispatched if Zac was inclined, since the lingering pressure had rendered them completely unable to move.

Zac looked down at the destruction for a few minutes, feeling that he really had delivered judgment on this whole valley. The direct force unleashed from the enormous stone axe matched and even eclipsed the third swing of **[Deforestation]**, while the scope of the secondary eruption was a lot larger than any of the punishments from **[Nature's Punishment]**. Power and scope, **[Arcadia's Judgment]** had both.

And this was just Early proficiency.

His goal was accomplished, and there was no point in him lingering any longer. The next day was spent performing one fusion after another, and Zac gained a lot of inspiration and comprehension every time. Zac also realized that he had worried about nothing, as every single fusion lived up to his expectations, even the two for his Draugr side. Then again, the great outcome might be thanks to him slowing down and gaining a deeper understanding of fractals and skills.

Zac visited the Towers of Myriad Dao once more after everything was dealt with to pick up his new defensive skill as well. He had hoped Vilari would surprise him and Brazla, but she was still embroiled in the trial. Zac could only leave for now, and he found himself in front of the Nexus Hub a few

minutes later. With his skill fusions dealt with, nothing was holding him back any longer.

The next part of his plan would take place off-world.

DEPARTURE

There was just one thing Zac needed to do before he left Earth. He looked down at the crystal in his hands, and a tumultuous wave of emotions hit him once again. He hated the thought of using something given to him by that woman, but what choice did he have? If he ever wanted a chance at taking charge of his own destiny or reuniting with his sister, then he couldn't stay in Port Atwood.

He needed the array, at least for now.

Zac took a deep breath before he pushed it against his stomach with some lingering fear. Trusting Leandra felt pretty foolish, but he relied on the fact that she wouldn't bother laying some trap with the array. She hadn't even cared about murdering Thea right in front of him. If she wanted to implant him with something nefarious, she would probably just cut him right open while talking about the importance of her undertaking.

He infused some energy into the crystal, and it quickly turned into a liquid that streamed into his body and formed a mysterious pattern on his Duplicity Core. It wasn't like Yrial's skill that was overlaid like a sphere, but it had rather fused with the Specialty Core itself. There was still no change, but that was because Zac hadn't activated the array yet.

Another stream of Cosmic Energy entered the array, and Zac felt his connection to the core weaken. A few seconds later, it was like both the core and the mysterious array had simply disappeared. Zac could still feel his core, but it was

somehow distant, like it had been moved to a different dimension.

Activating Yrial's transformation skill yielded no result, but Zac could somewhat sense that he would still be able to force the Race change if he pushed a lot harder. Of course, doing so would waste a month, so he let it be. He scanned himself over and over for the next hour, but he really couldn't sense the smallest hint of the Specialty Core ever being there. The spot it took up had even been replaced with perfectly normal energy pathways.

That meant that even if someone managed to break through Greatest's bangle, it still shouldn't yield any result. Zac changed his appearance next, turning into a middle-aged human with some distinct features that set him apart from Zac's own appearance.

With that out of the way, Zac teleported over to the Nexus Hub, and he was gone from Earth a moment later without leaving a trace.

“Guides! Guides to pass the gauntlet! Seize a better score and a better future with this great investment,” a furry gnome hollered from his spot on top of a few boxes as he waved a shimmering crystal in his hands.

Zac smiled and shook his head as he kept walking down the bustling street, heading straight for the grand castle in the distance. He wasn't the only one, as people emerged from the ten teleportation rooms every minute or so, resulting in a steady stream of people heading toward the same place. An enormous ship that had to be over a thousand meters long was slowly making its way through the atmosphere as well, and hundreds of smaller vessels followed in its path.

A large number of shops lined the main street, but Zac knew that the wares inside paled compared to the impressive treasures in the windows of the stores. **[Havenfort Base]** was

both an opportunity and a tourist trap, and it all centered around the castle in the distance.

Inside the castle was the Havenfort Chasm, a massive hole of seemingly endless depth. It had been created when a Monarch self-destructed out of despair over losing his loved one, though some rumors argued that he'd done it out of vengeance in an attempt to take out the perpetrators behind the lover's death.

As for the opportunity, it was a mostly safe trial that provided a Limited Title. The deeper you managed to walk into the depths of the chasm, the better the title would be. Simple enough.

One of the greatest benefits of Zac's huge number of teleportation locations was access to thousands of different trials that existed all over the Zecia Sector. It would allow Zac to easily fill up his empty slots before setting out toward deadlier challenges. He had already confirmed that titles didn't impact attribute limits, which was one of the reasons so many believed that titles were small bloodline evolutions provided by the System.

Zac had thousands of open trials to choose from all across the sector, though over 95% of them were low-grade trials that only provided flat attributes. There were all kinds of trials, and it had taken some time for Zac to find those that were suited for him. Some trials provided pretty great rewards, but Zac had to give up on them anyway. For example, there was a trial called [**The Riddlemaster's Maze**], which took an average of twenty years to complete.

Other trials were unsuitable for him to undergo for other reasons. Certain locations were only open once every few decades; others took a long time to reach even with teleportation access. A lot of trials were also skewed in favor of certain paths, Races, or Daos, whereas even more had other sorts of restrictions.

Trials limiting attributes were obviously the worst for Zac, since that wouldn't let him take full advantage of how monstrous his attribute pool was for his current level.

Certainly, with his high Attribute Efficiency, he'd do better than most, but his advantages would partly be nullified by people's cultivation manuals.

Instead, Zac had focused his attention on level-restrained trials and dynamic trials. Level-restrained trials had certain cut-off points, and if Zac found one close to his own level, he was almost certain to steamroll it. Dynamic trials automatically adjusted the difficulty based on the difficulty of your level or attribute pool, depending on what it wanted to test.

For example, the trial inside the castle in the distance was a dynamic trial based on level, which was perfect for Zac.

Unfortunately, the rewards for these kinds of trials were only better than average. It wasn't anything surprising. With a low risk of death and such easy availability, the rewards could only be so good.

The best Limited Titles came from unexplored Mystic Realms, where people braved unknown dangers. The second-best titles came from Grade-restricted trials, of which the Tower of Eternity could be considered one of the most famous examples.

All other trials were a notch below, and their rewards differed from case to case. Zac had asked Alyn why the grade trials were the most rewarding, and it turned out the most commonly held belief was that the System wanted to encourage pushing each grade to the limits. Only after you reached the peak of a grade and deepened your foundations did you have the qualifications to go for the best rewards in that grade.

Zac obviously wouldn't waste his time and limited opportunities in going to those kinds of trials at level 101. He would first go for a set of decent Limited Titles to fill up his empty slots so that he was as powerful as possible before setting out for his more dangerous adventures. It was obviously a unique advantage afforded to him thanks to his training quest, whereas the other trial-takers usually had to make do with what was available in their surroundings.

Some of those who arrived in this place had gotten a Teleportation Token as a reward for some quest, and it was no secret that the System often dropped tokens in the depths of Mystic Realms as rewards for reaching that far. Others came here through the Space Gate Guild, though that option was only available to the wealthier scions.

The Space Gate Guild was actually a guild that specialized in gaining access to a large number of locations, mainly targeting hubs and opportunities such as the **[Havenfort Base]**. These people's jobs were simply to take the elite to places they normally didn't have access to themselves.

This business was extremely lucrative, as the guild charged roughly ten times the standard fare to take a person to a certain location, and just as much to return. However, there were a lot of restrictions to this trade. First of all, you needed to gain access to the valuable arrays, and that was extremely hard.

Not only did you need to complete some quests in the area where you wanted to gain an array, but you also needed to be granted access by the owner. That was easier said than done too, since a Lord couldn't give those out as he wished. The first requirement was for the target to reach the System's requirement to be worthy of the connection. Secondly, the Lord could only form a certain number of connections each year for otherworlders.

Zac himself would be able to give access to Earth to one hundred people a year, according to Abby, though that still wasn't possible while the shroud was active.

Furthermore, why would someone controlling a great opportunity like the **[Havenfort Base]** give that access away for free? The Space Gate Guild no doubt had to pay through the nose for every connection to this place they formed.

Travel itself was fraught with problems as well. First, a Guide, as the workers for the guild were called, could only take on one mission every three months. The System blocked any more than that. Furthermore, they could only take one guest, which was a dealbreaker for many young scions, as they were afraid of traveling without bodyguards. Worst of all, they

weren't even allowed to operate through the Mercantile System.

So it was clearly a business that skirted at the edge of what the System deemed acceptable, but it was nevertheless a pretty common way for the elites of the Zecia Sector to get around.

The final method to get here was by Cosmic Vessels. This option was only used by locals. There were quite a few clans and sects that operated spacefaring lines, owning gargantuan vessels that took people between planets and opportunities.

That option was the least convenient, though, as travel through that method took a lot of time, and it was generally restricted to the local cluster of planets. Still, the lucky few who lived on the capital world of a kingdom could sometimes jump onto a vessel and spend a decade or two touring the local planets, gaining experience and opportunities along the way. Luckily, Zac could skip all that hassle thanks to his unique access.

Truthfully, while the Limited Title one could gain from this place was upper tier, it wasn't the best choice among the title opportunities Zac had researched over the past three years. But the story of Mandar Havenfort had refused to leave the back of his mind since he'd decided to fill up his Limited Slots.

Zac still had trouble processing what had happened back home, sometimes waking up in the middle of the night full of rage or despair, his whole body slick with acrid sweat. How would one come to terms with something like what he had experienced? His mother sacrificing his girlfriend to save his sister. It was like one of those ethical riddles with no right answer, yet he found himself repeating the events over and over.

So Zac came here in search of not only a title, but for something more. He still didn't know exactly what. This trial would tax not only the strength of his body, but the fortitude of his mind, and Zac hoped to find some sort of answers in the depths of the chasm.

The whole planet the chasm was placed on had been turned into a desolate rock after the Havenfort Monarch blew

himself up, and wild energies still ravaged the outside. The thick barriers protecting the town no doubt cost a bundle to keep operational, so the town only housed the bare essentials; a wide variety of establishments where trial-takers could waste their money. The actual metropolis where the massive Cosmic Vessels stopped was on another planet, with ferries taking the trial-takers here.

Zac soon reached the square in front of the castle, and he unhurriedly entered a grand building outside the castle gates. There was a line of warriors emitting decent auras to his left, and three cultivators radiating the aura of Hegemons to the right. The Hegemons got personal and immediate service, whereas the E-grade cultivators had to stand in line.

He didn't really mind, but he was rather amused about how it all felt like he was on a vacation to a theme park or something, with concession stands and ticket booths. The desk itself was blurred, and Zac realized they were using an isolation array for some reason.

"One person," Zac said when he eventually reached the front.

"Certainly! Do you have a Heaven-bestowed token in your possession?" the gnome clerk asked.

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"One ticket is 10,000 E-grade Nexus Coins." The goblin smiled. "The estimated waiting time is currently sixteen months."

"What?" Zac blurted, losing his equanimity for the first time.

The price was pretty steep, 10 billion Nexus Coins, but Zac had known about that already. In his mind, it was definitely worth it, considering that it would provide a title. The same went for most cultivators. If they had the money, purchasing a Limited Title was one of the most efficient ways to strengthen yourself since it had no drawbacks.

The real problem was the waiting time. He didn't have time to wait over a year, and he definitely didn't want to do so

in this price-gouging little town.

“The Havenfort Chasm is a unique marvel of the whole Reputtin Domain. A lot of elites come from all over, even from other parts of the Zecia Sector, to test their mettle against the pressure below. However, the Heavens themselves have limited the number of trial-takers. Naturally, this has caused a line to form,” the fuzzy gnome said, and Zac inwardly groaned when he saw the pointed look she gave him next.

Were all gnomes the same?

“I don’t have time to wait that long. How much to... expedite... the process?” Zac sighed.

“Now and then, a trial-taker backs out for one reason or another. It would be a shame to allow precious slots to go unused, so we have a few people standing by. Of course, this comes with the slight premium of an additional 250,000 surcharge,” the gnome said, her smile wide enough to brighten up the room.

Zac understood what she was saying all too well: Want to cut the line? Well, pay up! They weren’t holding back either, with the ‘slight surcharge’ being 25 times higher than the original price. It really proved how small his original wealth was, even if he was a Planetary Leader. If not for the wealth Leandra Atwood left him, he wouldn’t even have been able to afford the expedited trial.

But now, a quarter of a D-grade nexus Coin was no big deal.

“Fine,” Zac snorted and transferred the funds, along with a few dozen D-grade Nexus Crystals. “A little something for your troubles.”

“This way, young master. I’m sure an opportunity will show itself sometime soon. A few hours at the latest,” the gnome said as the crystals disappeared in a blur.

A hidden door opened to the side, and the gnome indicated for Zac to enter. No wonder the gnomes had people buy tickets in private; the VIPs were actually led right inside the castle while the others had to wait outside the gates for over a year.

“I’m sure,” Zac snorted as he walked through. “Otherwise, I might come back for my crystals and try my luck at a different gate.”

The hidden gate led to an opulent room full of artwork depicting the history of the Havenfort Monarch, but Zac wasn’t interested and instead stepped onto the teleportation array, which activated automatically. The next moment, he found himself in front of a gate, and there was a large plaque detailing a few hints about the trial next to it.

Most of it wasn’t news to Zac. The trial put everyone in a dimension of their own, or at least hid the other participants from sight. The task was exceedingly simple as well; you only needed to walk down a spiraling path cut into the edge of the chasm, trying to get as far as possible.

Every so often, you would reach a marker that acted as a checkpoint for the trial. It both held a teleportation array to leave, and it denoted the level of your limited title. You could try going further, but you had to turn back if you found yourself starting to lose to the pressure. Safety wasn’t guaranteed, and there were people every day who fell down the chasm and died after overestimating their capabilities.

There were five levels in total, with most people reaching the second layer, from what Zac had gathered. The thing that prevented most people from going further was the mental pressure, and now that Zac had arrived at this place, he understood why.

It turned out that mental defensive skills and similar items didn’t work in this trial, which hadn’t been mentioned in the information missive at all. It might even have been omitted by design, as exposing that would scare away a lot of meathead trial-takers who never worked on their spirit. Zac actually felt like he benefitted from this, and it was an opportunity for him to test his recently evolved soul.

Zac pushed open the gate, and walking inside put him face-to-face with an impossibly large chasm hundreds of times larger than the castle he had entered.

EQUANIMITY

On the other side of the door was a small balcony overlooking the enormous crater left behind after the Havenfort Monarch. Zac had been prepared for the hole to be big after reading about it in the missive, but even then he wasn't mentally prepared for the staggering scene.

The chasm was endlessly vast, possibly having a diameter that eclipsed Zac's whole island. As for the depth, it was even greater. Zac fought off his vertigo and walked over to the edge of the balcony, but he immediately regretted peering down. There were protective barriers preventing anyone from falling into the chasm, but Zac fell back and had to sit down even with those measures in place.

It was endless.

It felt like the chasm reached all the way into the abyss itself. Had the whole planet been pierced through when the C-grade cultivator fell? It almost seemed like it. Zac couldn't imagine the force that would be required to create a crater like this. And this was even after the Monarch allegedly controlled the eruption and directed most of his force toward the Heavens, which explained why the chasm was almost perfectly circular.

Zac shuddered at the thought of someone like this targeting Earth.

His mental state soon calmed down, and his gaze turned to the right. The balcony led to a pathway, thankfully five meters wide, that seemed to stretch along the edge of the tube-formed

crater down into the depths. On a second look, there were hundreds of similar balconies as his own, each of them leading down a path of their own.

Judging by the incline and circumference of the crater, Zac guessed that each checkpoint might be one single loop around the chasm. He couldn't spot a single trial-taker, though, but Zac figured that was because there was some force or array preventing people from seeing and helping each other.

There was a barrier blocking access to the pathway, and Zac figured that there was someone already using the current path. But since he had been teleported to this specific balcony, he guessed that the one currently on his path had almost finished his or her run. So Zac took out one of his prayer mats and sat down, slowly steadying his mind.

As expected, it only took two hours before a soothing bell woke Zac up from his meditation, and the shield dissipated. Zac saw no point in loitering about, and he took a steadying breath before he stepped onto the path. However, he only took a single step before he stopped, as a quest prompt had appeared in front of him.

Depths of Despair (Limited, Trial): Descend into the chasm. Reward: Havenfort Chasm Limited Title. (0/5)

Zac read the description, but there wasn't much to go by. The (0/5) in progress no doubt referred to the five checkpoints on this trial. The situation was straightforward enough, and he started walking down the pathway.

He walked for a few minutes, and the only sounds in the area were his steps and the occasional moaning echoes created by wind swirling around in the chasm itself. There was definitely an odd energy suffusing this place, which Zac hadn't noticed before. He did feel a heaviness on his body, but it was barely noticeable at this point.

Not only that, Zac did feel slightly dour, but he honestly wasn't sure whether that could be blamed on the trial. The surroundings were dark, the atmosphere was oppressive, and he wasn't in the best state of mind himself. It would be weird

if he felt exuberant in a place like this. Still, there was a mental component to the trial, so he didn't relax his focus.

The minutes soon turned into four hours as Zac progressed further and further down the chasm, and the pressure eventually turned palpable. However, the first checkpoint was still nowhere in sight, and Zac decided to speed things up a bit. Unfortunately, it turned out that his movement skill was blocked. Perhaps he shouldn't be surprised, as there were all kinds of odd movement skills.

What if someone started moving through the ground itself, shooting straight down toward the final checkpoint?

Zac also noticed that the suppression turned a lot more powerful if he sped up, and he was eventually forced to slow down to a brisk walk. No wonder the missive he'd bought said that the trial was expected to take up to ten days. You needed to slowly and gradually make your way down.

There was not much to do except walk in silence, and Zac's thoughts eventually started wandering. Zac tried to focus on the future, to plan out his next steps, but his thoughts kept returning to those he had lost. His father, Alea, Ogras and Billy... Thea. Some were dead, others lost where he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to meet them again.

After all, the Million Gates Territory was vast, almost as big as the whole Allbright Empire. Finding a Mystic Realm in that place would be like searching for a needle in a galactic haystack. And if the existence of the Dimensional Seed became widely spread, that was even worse. How would Ogras and Billy survive when Hegemons and perhaps even Monarchs made their move?

The sea in his mind was growing erratic, and the clean line between life and death became blurred as dozens of whirlpools erupted. Even the island in the middle, the very core of his being, was assailed by powerful waves that crashed into it. The small ocean had turned into a mirror of his mental state, and it didn't look good.

An errant thought was all that it had taken for it to spiral out of control, and Zac realized that he might not even make it

past the first checkpoint unless he started to take things seriously. A trial that blocked mental defense skills would test one's soul, but also one's willpower and focus.

The trial thankfully wasn't timed, so he stopped for a moment and took a few deep breaths as he tried to enter a meditative state. With the pervasive pressure in the air, Zac was unable to completely turn off his mind, but the chaos in his mind slowly calmed down as he forcibly focused on the task at hand.

After a few more minutes, his soul sea had returned to the previous state with a clean line of demarcation. Zac took a deep breath and continued down the endless chasm. His body could barely feel the effect of the trial's physical pressure, but he was shocked at how fragile his mental state was.

Zac didn't let his thoughts stray any longer, and he kept a constant vigil as he pushed forward. He soon passed by the first checkpoint, but he didn't even stop and catch his breath as he continued further down. There was a qualitative change in the pressure in the second layer, but Zac wouldn't give in at all. The second checkpoint arrived just a day later, and two days later, the third, which meant he had gained a better title than most trial-takers.

By this point, the pressure was immense, and Zac was unable to think about anything but moving forward. Right foot, left foot, rinse and repeat. The slightest loss of control could be extremely dangerous, to the point that his soul would get hurt. The pressure on his body was bearable by its innate power alone, but he knew that he was in trouble in regard to his mind.

He was moving forward on pure willpower by this point, but his soul wouldn't be able to go much further. He had just passed the third checkpoint, but the pressure was more than twice what it had been after the second. It was no wonder that most warriors only managed to reach the second stop. Even with a reincarnated soul, he was no Mentalist, and he knew that his willpower wasn't as strong as some warriors who had tempered themselves for centuries.

Yet he felt it was too early to give up now. Eventually, he had taken three days in the third layer. He was like a zombie by this point as he stumbled forward, his eyes red from strain and veins covering his forehead. It felt like the harder he tried to fight the pressure, the stronger it got. It was like an annoyance that just increased in severity the more you focused on it.

Eventually, it came to a tipping point, where Zac simply couldn't keep going as he was. The pressure was too great, and his whole mind aperture vibrated ominously from the invisible pressure. The two oceans were extremely chaotic even when he desperately tried to impose order, which was a telling sign of his mental state.

Zac stood in place, looking down at the depths with mixed emotions. Should he give in? This was ultimately not a life-death situation for him. Passing just three checkpoints would give him a pretty bad title, but there was no point in risking cracking his soul for a slightly better one. He could always go for another trial instead.

Zac didn't immediately leave, though, but rather looked down at the chasm with reluctance. He had come here in search of more than just a title, yet he had gained nothing. He walked up the path for a bit, but only to the point that his mind wasn't shaking any longer. He sat down and slowly relinquished his strict control over his emotions.

A thousand thoughts flashed through his mind, and his mind shook from the onslaught, but it soon calmed down as Zac started to impose order on the chaos. He didn't let his mind run haywire, but he also didn't shut any thought down. He slowly started to go over everything he had encountered and done over the past months, trying to find some closure.

Zac soon realized that he had fallen into the same state as he had soon after the integration.

One trauma after another had kept accumulating back then, each one turning into a scab that had numbed his soul. Eventually, he had almost turned into a utilitarian killing machine who could weigh lives against benefits without

blinking an eye. The first months after the Mystic Realm had been a confusing blur when he suddenly didn't have anyone to unleash his bloodlust on.

Only when he stopped running did he realize what he had turned into. It had taken a long, long time for him to regain a sense of his humanity, and Thea had been a huge part of that process. Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that he had jumped into the same pitfall the moment tragedy struck, where he got completely consumed with his cultivation and plans to reap resources.

But there had to be a balance.

It was true that the Multiverse followed the law of the jungle, and being soft would cause more harm than good. But losing one's humanity on the path to power, discarding all attachments as though they were weaknesses, would strip away the core of your being until you were only a ball of violence striving for power.

Zac kept going over everything, but he was suddenly startled awake when he realized that the pressure on his soul had lessened by a significant degree. He slowly got up and resumed his descent. Time turning into a blur, as he was now more focused on his inward journey. The pressure kept increasing, but the waves in his mind were actually slowly growing weaker. It was like the suppression on his mind forced him to confront some things he had kept at bay for so long.

One step after another took him deeper and deeper into the abyss. It felt like his mind was being honed in a completely different way than when he cultivated it with his Soul Strengthening Manual. He was making a spiritual journey, where his willpower was sharpened through processing years of pent-up trauma. That wasn't to say that he was reveling in his suffering.

There were no two ways about it, he had gone through some messed-up things over the past years. Friends and family had fallen, and his hands were completely drenched by blood by this point. Pushing everything down wasn't the right way to

deal with it, and tears had started pouring down his cheeks at some unknown time.

The fourth checkpoint suddenly lit up the path around him, but Zac didn't care in the slightest as he kept walking. The pressure was getting pretty extreme by this point, and he was steadily losing Cosmic Energy to just walk forward. Black swirls of unidentifiable energies occasionally passed Zac by as they danced at the depths of the chasm.

But a smile started to emerge on his face even as the pressure threatened to crush his mind entirely.

Memories kept coming back, but they were no longer all of self-loathing and doubt. He remembered the happy times, the intimate moments between just him and Thea. He no longer focused on the fact that he had failed to reach his father in time, or how Leandra had muddied the issue of paternity. He remembered those years before when Robert Atwood had raised him and Kenzie alone.

He was being baptized by his own experiences, and he felt like he was in a trance. Each step was a herculean task by this point, but at the same time, it felt like it was someone else's struggle. He didn't know if hours or years had passed as he was swept up by the past, but suddenly, the pressure disappeared.

The world shifted, and his soul shuddered. And then there was just tranquility.

Zac knew he had somehow passed the trial, but he still didn't open his eyes. He was immersed in his current state, and he didn't want to let go just yet. But eventually, he opened his eyes and looked, only to realize that he actually had reached the bottom of the chasm. Zac's heart thumped for a second, but he soon quashed any errant thoughts.

It was clear he wasn't the first one, since he was looking at a vast graveyard. Or perhaps it was more correct to say it was a shrine, with thousands upon thousands of small memorial items left below. There were headstones, statues depicting all kinds of races, small trinkets like rings or necklaces, all kinds of items left on the ground. Zac wasn't surprised at the scene

after going through the trial, and he walked for half an hour until he found a spot.

He first took out a thin wooden sword and stabbed it into the ground. It was the training sword Thea often had used while practicing in his courtyard. He took out his axe and carved “Thea” on the hilt before he stood and watched the sword for over half an hour.

Only then did he keep walking for a while, at which point he found another spot. He took out a framed picture and a boulder pedestal from his Spatial Ring, and carefully put the picture down on it. It was a picture of himself, Kenzie, and Robert. He looked at his family for a few minutes more until he walked toward an illuminated spot in the center of the graveyard.

Zac stepped onto a teleporter a while later, and he soon appeared in an opulent chamber. Right in front of him was a large plaque with just two lines written.

The night is the mother of the day

Chaos is neighbor with order

The words were simple, but every stroke was full of meaning. Whoever wrote it was definitely a high-grade cultivator, as it echoed with a Dao far beyond his own. Zac looked at the line for a few seconds until he turned to a meditating gnome he had spotted sitting to the side. She looked cute and fuzzy like a plush toy, just like the other natives he had met, but there was an unfathomable power hidden within her diminutive frame.

Zac was surprised to sense an aura almost as powerful as that of Greatest’s as she opened her eyes and looked back at him. This was a real Hegemon, probably at the late stages or even at Peak D-grade, and Zac couldn’t help but tense up a bit.

“Congratulations, trial-taker,” the gnome said. “It has been a while since someone reached the bottom, which requires you to hold on to your mortal heart. Those who discard all sentiments in the pursuit of power will reach the fifth checkpoint at best. Only the trees that can bend to the wind

will survive the harshest storms. Our ancestor, Mandar Havenfort, never bent in his life, and he only realized this truth when it was too late.”

“Elder,” Zac slightly bowed before he asked curiously, “why don’t you advertise the truth about the trial, that there’s a second way to complete it?”

“Our Grand Elder won’t allow it,” the gnome said with some helplessness. “He said that catharsis is something that should be chanced upon on the journey of life, not something actively sought for benefits. It was he who wrote those words.”

Zac nodded in agreement and left the building soon after taking another look at the sign. The hidden powerhouse seemed benign, but it was still uncomfortable to be alone in a room with a being that could eradicate him with a slap. There wasn’t anything else keeping him on this planet, and he turned toward the Teleportation Hub as he opened his status screen.

[Equanimity: Reach the floor of the Havenfort Chasm. Reward: Base Attributes +2%. Wisdom, Endurance +2%.]

Zac looked at the title with surprise. The trial was supposed to give 0.5% to Endurance and Wisdom along with flat attributes for the first four checkpoints, and then 1% for the final level. But it looked like the whole title had changed by reaching the foot of the chasm, turning it into a far superior title that provided a boost to all base attributes.

The title was a far cry from the titles provided from ordeals such as the Tower of Eternity, but there was also very little danger involved. In fact, any titles providing over 5% to any base attribute in the E-grade came with a real risk of death, and they also weren’t publicly open like the **[Havenfort Chasm]**.

With his two previous Limited Titles, Zac now had three of his slots filled up, which would be the limit for most. That obviously wasn’t the case for him, so Zac gave it some thought before he stepped onto the teleporter, heading toward the next trial.

BLOODWIND

The second trial went without any surprises, and Zac added another title to his growing repertoire after suffering inside a volcano for three weeks. Zac would probably have been able to reach the core of the volcano in two, but he had decided to move slowly as he digested what he had gone through in the chasm.

The second title only gave Strength, Vitality, and Endurance, but it did provide 4% to all three, which was even more valuable compared to the previous title, in Zac's book. He had considered swapping out his Weight of Sin title as well, but he eventually decided to skip it.

Getting a marginally better title wouldn't make much difference, and Zac felt it more worthwhile to move on to the next step of his plan. That meant there was just one final slot to fill, and Zac had saved the hardest one for last. He was currently in the darkness of mid-teleportation, but he soon found himself on top of a teleportation array in the middle of a desolate wasteland.

Zac looked around with wonder, feeling his heartbeat speed up while adrenaline coursed through his veins. It almost felt like he was standing on the middle of a battlefield since the air was rife with killing intent. However, Zac knew it wasn't someone targeting him, but rather a result of endless battles.

The planet he had decided to visit was called the Bloodwind World, and it was one of the greatest worlds made available to him by the System. The planet itself was at the

very peak of D-grade, and it was apparently hundreds of times larger than Earth even after the integration. The history of the planet was extremely rough, though.

The Bloodwind planet was once considered a cultivator's haven, and a lot of factions wanted to make it their own. One bloody war after another erupted on its surface, an endless slaughter that lasted for tens of thousands of years. It was just like the vision Zac had seen for that bloody lotus, but here there was no supreme treasure to swallow all the killing intent and foul air.

It eventually got to the point that the very attunement of the planet changed, and the Cosmic Energy was now suffused with bloodlust. Cultivators with weaker mental strength would slowly go mad in an environment like this, turning into bloodthirsty maniacs. It was almost like the effect the Miasma had on people living at the edge of the Dead Zone, but there was no escape here.

The change to the planet made most factions lose interest, as it was impossible to house a clan on a world like this. It was no problem for the upper echelons of a clan to survive here, but the younger generations would all turn insane. But one man's trash is another man's treasure, and other factions jumped at the opportunity to set up shop on this corrupted world.

And Zac's purpose in coming to this place was to visit one of these factions, the Big Axe Coliseum. In fact, this world was his absolute first choice when it came to Limited Titles, but he had left it for last to improve his attributes first.

The Big Axe Coliseum was both a battle arena where cultivators could pit themselves against other cultivators or ruthless beasts collected across the sector, and a loose organization for axe cultivators. Loose organizations were different than sects or clans in the sense that there very few restrictions when joining such a faction. In return, they didn't nurture their members or provide any benefits without payment.

Still, there were a lot of benefits to joining this kind of faction. Most of these organizations had merit systems just like Port Atwood, and they held all kinds of items, some of which were very hard to get your hands on through normal channels.

The treasure vault wasn't that big a deal to Zac since he had the benefits of hundreds of thousands of teleportation connections. What was scarce in one part of the Zecia Sector might be attainable in other parts. That was how he and Kenzie had managed to collect so many rare treasures in just three years. For most cultivators, that would be simply impossible.

Zac was more interested in the information that this organization held. The Big Axe Coliseum had reportedly been founded by a proper C-grade Axe Warrior, and while the founder was long dead, it was still a proper C-grade faction with at least one Monarch ruling from the shadows. There were also thousands of D-grade Hegemons who were members of the organization, and Zac felt he might be able to make some unexpected gains in this place.

The Big Axe Coliseum probably had one of the most complete Heritages when it came to cultivating with the axe, be it classes, skills, or upgrade methods for Spirit Tools. Even better, the test to become an outer member of the Big Axe Coliseum was a Limited Title trial, which gave both fixed and increased Strength and Dexterity if you passed.

It was among the best of what an E-grade open trial could provide, though it only provided it in two of the attributes. Zac headed out, a bit surprised at the fact that there were no people around him in an extremely popular place like this. Millions of people in the sector reportedly came to the coliseum, and not just Axe Cultivators. Yet the teleporter took him to an empty tundra, with only a sign pointing in the direction of the coliseum.

It was completely different compared to the bustling scene outside the Havenfort Chasm, but it didn't matter to Zac as he started to make his way toward his destination. Part of him wanted to take out his flying treasure, but he ultimately

decided against it since a lot of worlds had restrictions regarding things like that. Flying was usually considered a privilege of Hegemons and not something that piddling E-grade cultivators should do.

The surroundings were pretty desolate, with rock formations and the occasional twisted tree the only break in the dour surroundings. The lack of people was starting to get to him a bit, but he kept moving forward until he suddenly sensed a presence not far away.

“Ah, a human?” a deep guttural voice exclaimed with surprise. “It’s not often we get your kind in this part of the sector. Haha, like the taste of the air?”

Zac turned around and spotted a huge Ogre reaching over twelve meters into the air. He was sitting with his back against a large rock a few dozen meters away, and there was a smell of blood and alcohol around him. His head was adorned with six short horns, and his bare round chest was covered in fractal tattoos. His legs seemed pretty stocky, and his arms were of such grotesque proportions that he would make Billy look scrawny in comparison.

Where had this guy come from? Zac was certain that he had looked at that rock just a moment ago, but at that time, there hadn’t been anyone there. Still, Zac didn’t worry too much since he clearly wore the token of a member of the Big Axe Coliseum attached to his belt.

More importantly, while his appearance was pretty scary, his aura was not. Zac estimated his strength to be somewhere in the Early E-grade, a common level of greeters.

“It’s not bad. It feels like I’m standing on a battlefield.” Zac smiled. “Is this really the Bloodwind World? How come there are no people?”

“Not bad? Haha, good!” The Ogre laughed. “Some feel pressured and fearful. They are no warriors. Others lose themselves in the fervor. They are nothing but animals. As for why there are no people, you’re standing inside an array.”

“I am?” Zac blurted as he looked around without spotting anything amiss.

“You’re too weak to notice it. Don’t worry, it’s just an illusion array. Some weaklings who come to this planet lose their minds from the atmosphere and attack anyone in the vicinity. This way, we avoid a mess at the teleporters. Of course, I can tell that you’re barely affected at all. You have potential. Do you use the axe?” the Ogre asked curiously.

Zac thought it over for a second before he took out **[Rakan’s Roar]**, a brutal axe that was made from a singular serrated tooth. The handle was made from a pristine white bone as well, except for a red gemstone that was embedded at the bottom along with some leather for a grip. He infused the axe with Fragment of the Axe as he showcased it to the Ogre.

He had come here to take the test, so there was no point in hiding.

“High Fragment Axe, not bad.” The gigantic cultivator nodded. “Primal series axe, and it seems to have been fed well. It’s emitting a pretty fierce aura.”

“You’re familiar with the Primal series?” Zac asked with some interest.

The Primal series was the name for the equipment group that **[Verun’s Bite]**, Billy’s **[Bonker]**, and **[Rakan’s Roar]** belonged to. It wasn’t that uncommon thanks to the System often rewarding low- and medium-quality Spirit Tools of the Primal series upon completion of quests.

Zac was honestly a bit unsure whether **[Verun’s Bite]** could still be considered a part of the Primal series, though. It had undergone multiple transformations since he got it, from the mysterious stone that he still couldn’t identify after three years, to swallowing all that dragon’s blood. Both its aura and appearance were very different from before.

However, Zac was worried that his main axe might still be recognized if scrutinized while traveling outside. Thankfully, he had already acquired a similar but visually different spare long ago. **[Rakan’s Roar]** was a far cry from **[Verun’s Bite]**,

and it didn't even have its spirit awakened. But it felt familiar to use, and it worked well enough for a simple showcase such as this.

“Well, it is a pretty common reward from the Boundless Heavens, but I might not have been able to tell if I didn't use one myself.” The Ogre grinned, and Zac's eyes widened when the huge humanoid produced a somewhat similar axe as his own, though his was a double-edged war axe. “I got this one a long time ago after performing well in a sanctioned war.”

Zac nodded in understanding. The System thrived on conflict and very seldom limited it. Most of the time, it didn't involve itself at all. Two sides would fight, one side would fall, and to the victors went the spoils. However, sometimes the System provided extra incentives, which usually blew up the conflict to the next level.

It turned the war into a sanctioned event where participants could gain war credits. It made the war doubly profitable, and even outsiders flocked to join in on the carnage. In fact, that was exactly what had happened in Zac's case during the beast waves with the contribution store.

“I used this guy for a few years.” The Ogre grinned. “But nurturing these guys is a pain in the ass. They just get pickier and pickier. I eventually gave it up and entered the path of Blood and Steel.”

He took out another massive axe the next moment, and Zac found himself under an immense pressure. It was like the air itself bent around the weapon, and Zac felt like he was drowning in a sea of blood the moment the weapon's aura was unleashed. Even Verun was startled awake inside his Spatial Ring, but the roars in Zac's mind were those of prey trying to scare off a much-greater predator.

Zac realized that he had severely underestimated the power of the Ogre in front of him. He was using some sort of skill to mask his true power. Zac himself wasn't confident he'd be able to wield such a powerful weapon, and it was definitely impossible for an Early E-grade cultivator.

Still, he wasn't too worried about being attacked. It felt more likely that this was a test, and Zac soon straightened his back as he calmed the churning waves in his soul ocean. It was like the axe amplified the murderous atmosphere many times over, making it feel like Zac had eaten a berserking treasure. If this had been before stabilizing his evolved soul, he might have lost himself for a moment, but now he only felt some mental oppression.

“Not bad, most E-grade brats fall on their asses after I take out [**Bloodforge**]. Are we walking the same path, human?” the Ogre asked with interest.

Anyone coming to join the Big Axe Coliseum was an axe warrior, but there were thousands of different paths related to the axe. Zac wasn't exactly sure what Blood and Steel entailed, but the aura of the weapon made Zac think of a gladiator reveling in battle. It also wasn't impossible that the Ogre in front of him had forged the weapon himself, considering he walked the path of Steel.

Zac looked at the huge warrior, deep in thought. Zac still wasn't able to tell his exact strength, but it definitely was in the D-grade or higher since he could wield such a powerful weapon. If Zac had to guess, then this big brute was probably part of the upper echelons of the Big Axe Coliseum. Was this axe master actually looking for a disciple?

It would explain why such a powerful guy was lazing about this close to the teleporter; he was looking for potential candidates. Zac's thoughts whirred for a moment. Should he give it a try? As Yrial had said, there was nothing unusual about taking multiple masters, and this guy definitely knew all kinds of helpful tricks.

This was just a chance encounter, so Zac wouldn't expect anything more than an in-name discipleship where the cultivator in front of him gave some small pointers to clear his confusions. In fact, if the Ogre was too enthusiastic, then it would probably be cause for suspicion.

As for himself, Zac believed he was an unmatched candidate when it came to potential. But their paths were

ultimately different, and that was sometimes even more important to cultivators when searching for disciples. So Zac decided to just be upfront and see what the Ogre thought.

“No,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “I follow the Path of Conflict.”

“Hm, a shame.” The Ogre sighed with some disappointment in his eyes, and Zac understood he had lost his chance for some tutelage. “Conflict is a difficult path, but it is not a bad decision for your generation.”

“For my generation?” Zac asked with confusion.

The Multiverse was beyond ancient and essentially unchanging. There wasn't really any difference between generations in the path of cultivation. It was simply some who started out earlier than others. So it was a bit odd to hear that his direction of Axe cultivation was especially suited for a certain generation.

“War is coming to Zecia.” The Ogre grinned. “You will get ample opportunities to hone your path over the next centuries.”

“What?” Zac blurted, but the Ogre was suddenly gone like he had never been there to begin with.

Zac looked back and forth, but there was no sign of the cultivator anywhere. The Ogre had probably nudged the array to hide him after talking with Zac for a bit, so Zac could only shrug his shoulders and continue on.

However, Zac made a mental note to look into what the Ogre had talked about. It sounded like he was talking about the whole sector, which had to mean something extremely big was brewing beneath the surface. Was one of the peak factions planning on conquering the whole sector? Things like that sometimes happened when a faction gained a leader at the level of the Eveningtide Asura. Or was it an even rarer event, a war between sectors?

In either case, it was a huge deal that would impact everyone, from the cultivators on Earth to the big shots in the established factions.

ZANDA

Boje's back was slick with sweat as he hurried down the vast hallways. Being summoned by the Supreme Ancestor could only mean one of two things. You had either made such huge contributions to the clan that the matriarch actually ended her perennial cultivation to commend and reward you, or you had screwed up by such epic proportions that it might implicate your entire branch.

Of course, Boje knew he hadn't accomplished any grand feats as of late. Furthermore, his father walked next to him, and his pallid face was ample evidence of which of the two scenarios was more likely. The steely demeanor of the two deacons leading the way did not give indications to the contrary either, causing the group to move through the Zethaya headquarters in oppressive silence.

From what Boje had heard, the last time Zanda Zethaya had left her seclusion was over ten thousand years ago. A few select elders were responsible for supplying the endless materials required for her experiments into the Dao of Alchemy, but not even his great-grandfather had spoken to her for millennia, from what he had heard. Let alone him, a member of the younger generation.

The group soon reached the gate to the Mystic Realm and passed through, and Boje could barely breathe from how immense the energies were on the other side. Unfortunately, he had no chance to take in the grandeur of the Everseed Gardens, the heart of the Zethaya Clan's Alchemy foundation. Countless priceless herbs grew under the constant care of

intricate arrays and watchful deacons, but both Boje's and his father's attention were trained on the walled-off area far in the distance.

The matriarch's private quarters.

The distance was too far for an Early E-grade cultivator like him, so his father lifted him with his spiritual force. The world around him turned to a blur, but it still took twenty minutes before they reached a set of gates. The energy was even denser here, and Boje felt himself quickly losing grip on reality.

A surge of his father's Cosmic Energy traveled through his body to expel the power, waking him up. Boje hurriedly closed his pores so as not to get himself accidentally killed before taking a steady breath.

"Remember, mind your manners," his father urged him as the gates slowly swung open by themselves, and Boje's heart sank when he saw the trepidation in his eyes.

This was his father, a proper Late-stage Hegemon whose alchemical skills would make him an honored guest in most places in the Zecia Sector. Yet here he was like a scared child. There was no escape, and Boje nodded and walked inside. He kept his eyes on the ground, afraid to look at anything he wasn't supposed to. Finally, he sensed a presence in front of him, and he immediately stopped in his tracks.

"Boje Zethaya of the 1,837th generation greets the matriarch," Boje said as he bowed deeply, and he remained unmoving out of a mix of reverence and fear.

In front of him was Zanda Zethaya, the direct descendant of the founding patriarch of the Zethaya Clan and likely the foremost Alchemy expert of the Zecia Sector. She was once the third clan leader, but now maintained the identity of Supreme Ancestor, delegating the running of the clan to the younger generations.

She had taken a thriving but unimpressive faction and pushed it straight to the peak of the sector roughly eight hundred thousand years ago, and she had made sure it never

lost its glory in the time after. Anyone in the sector could understand the reverence people held for her, but the ones who knew the reason to fear her were a lot fewer in number.

The terror rather came from her second identity, Thousand Mile Death, one of the deadliest poison masters in the sector. It wasn't a real secret, but it was also not something that you spoke openly about because of the sinister reputation of poison wielders. After all, almost all of them belonged to the unorthodox path.

Zanda was one of the greatest geniuses of the sector in the past million years, and most put her shoulder to shoulder with peak experts like the Void Priestess and just below the Eveningtide Asura. Some even believed she would've had the potential to reach even further if she hadn't chosen a hybrid path.

"Rise, child." A soothing voice drifted over, and Boje hesitantly stood up and glanced at the legendary figure he would normally have no business meeting.

She looked just like the paintings, like a young woman in her twenties exuding infinite charm. She sat on a swirling cloud of pure medicinal essence, and the only tool on her was the large unadorned wooden spoon on her lap. Next to her was a small Alchemy cauldron, a perfect copy of the far larger one behind her back.

It was golden and reached almost fifty meters into the sky, an enormous monstrosity that hummed with the Dao of Nature. It was covered in dozens of pictures of the wild, or was it just inscriptions? Boje had a hard time telling, and it felt like the cauldron's surface kept shifting as he looked at it.

It was the Cloudsoar Cauldron, the defining treasure of the Zethaya Clan, an ancient relic dating all the way back to the Limitless Empire. Much of the Zethaya Heritage was derived from the mysterious runes covering its surface, and not even a Peak C-grade Monarch would have an easy time breaking through the defensive shields it could summon.

If he could just meditate in front of that cauldron for a few days, then he would no doubt make enormous strides on his

Dao...

“Tell me about your encounter with the one calling himself Zac Piker,” Zanda Zethaya suddenly said, which was like a bucket of cold water that brought Boje back to reality.

Sweat once more started pouring down Boje’s back. It was just like he feared; this was related to that lunatic and the events in the Tower of Eternity. He had waited, steeped in anxiety, for three long years. The elders’ response to his handling of the situation had been excruciatingly ambiguous, to the point that Boje had even wished to be punished so he could get on with his life.

But now that he stood here in front of this celestial being, any such thought was replaced with abject dread.

“It’s my fault,” Boje cried and fell on his knees, slamming his forehead into the ground with enough force to bloody himself.

The instructions from his father and grandmother were clear: if things started to go sideways, pray and beg like your life depended on it. Because it did. And not only his but his whole family’s life was hanging by a thread. He could only hope to elicit some sympathy for the younger generation from the ancient matriarch.

“Calm down.” Zanda laughed. “Do I have such a bad reputation among the younger generations? After all, I am essentially your great-aunt. Come, sit.”

“N-No, not at all,” he hurriedly said, but he inwardly cried from fear.

Who didn’t know how this smiling “great-aunt” had once annihilated a whole pill house, from lowest clerk to the branch director himself? She’d waved her sleeves and fifty million people were dead a minute later, including hundreds of Hegemons. It had happened eighty thousand years ago, but the memory was still all too fresh in the clan’s collective memory.

And that was just one of a hundred bloody tales that detailed her exploits during her long tenure as the peak figure of the Zethaya Clan.

Still, there was nothing to do but to sit down and give the same exhaustive report he had done upon returning from the Tower of Eternity. He hid nothing, knowing that his only road to survival was complete honesty. The matriarch occasionally added some questions of her own, often about the Deviant Asura's beliefs and motivations.

That only served to worry Boje even more, as it seemed she tried to sound out his character. Whether he would come back in a hundred thousand years and wash their clan in blood like the Eveningtide Asura had done with so many factions. The Zethaya Clan had escaped that calamity unscathed, and their rise to prominence was partly made possible due to the power vacuum the Eveningtide Asura had left behind. But what if Zanda Zethaya decided he had brought a similar calamity to their door?

However, it didn't feel like this was what worried the Supreme Elder. But at the same time, it felt like there was something else at play. She didn't look completely satisfied with the answers, and she even had him repeat some parts.

"I—" Boje stuttered, trying to think of anything else to say. "If the Supreme Elder could point me in the right direction, I might be able to remember some additional details?"

Zanda sighed as she knocked the meter-long spoon in her hand against the small cauldron next to her. A clear clang echoed out, completely emptying Boje's mind as the enormous cauldron behind her started to hum. Another tap from the spoon brought Boje back to reality, and he felt his mind cleansed and stabilized. He hadn't felt this relaxed since before that unlucky star had crashed into his life and turned his fate sideways.

Billowing clouds of black gas suddenly started spewing out from the humongous cauldron. Boje's heart once more clenched, but he quickly calmed down when he saw that it wasn't a poisonous mist or a failed concoction. It rather looked like the black cloud was a piece of the vast sky, with stars and nebulae swirling about inside.

“The Stele of Conflict has appeared, and the heavens have shifted. The ancient factions are gathering their strength while outside forces are eyeing our riches. We tried to fight it, but it has been sanctioned by the Heavens. War is coming to the Zecia Sector, and no one is safe,” Zanda said as she looked at the sky.

“The Zethaya Clan is a peak faction with vast connections; surely we...” Boje said by instinct.

“Child, do not be mistaken. Alliances, friendships, even external elders. It’s all hollow strength, not something that can be relied on when an era turns. This is doubly true for a force like ours. Our wealth has long surpassed our strength. One misstep and we’ll be lost in the river of time,” Zanda said with a shake of her head.

“I’m sorry. This descendant is useless and doesn’t understand how this relates to Lord Piker. He is just at the E-grade and cannot impact the fate of the large factions,” Boje hesitantly said.

“War is the motor of progress, and a convergence of fate of this scale will last centuries, perhaps millennia. Zac Piker is the first harbinger of change. It might prove lethal to underestimate his role and importance in this mess,” Zanda muttered. “The strong will prosper, and the weak will become fertilizer.”

Boje looked at the sky with a mix of apprehension and excitement. There were already talks of this being the era of heroes. Zac Piker was the star who shone the brightest at the moment, but there were many more who stood out.

He had witnessed the strength of the young miss of the Peak Family and the Void Priestess’ terminal disciple. There was also Prince Reoluv and that mysterious Draugr. All four of them had reached the eighth floor of the Tower of Eternity, something that should be an extremely rare event. The Draugr had even reached the last level of the eighth floor, falling just one level short of the Deviant Asura.

And these were just the people Boje had encountered in the Tower of Eternity.

There were also rumors of eonic geniuses appearing in many of the ancient factions, though these individuals were fiercely guarded and hidden from public view. The Zecia Sector was really heading into a golden age. Those who survived would no doubt make enormous progress.

But what was this about war? Boje was more connected than most, but hadn't heard anything.

“Well, it is still early,” Zanda said as the cloud was swallowed back into the cauldron. “We still have some time to make arrangements. Prepare yourself. I am opening the Primal World for the young generation in one month. One hundred slots will be awarded.”

Boje looked at his ancestor with shock when he heard the news. If the Cloudsoar Cauldron was the defining treasure, then the Primal World was the defining Mystic Realm in their possession. It contained an ancient piece of a Peak C-grade continent, a pocket of land that eclipsed any of the continents in the sector.

The realm had been refined and improved for over a million years, and the amount of resources that had gone into it would bankrupt most C-grade factions. Cultivating there was apparently like having a direct connection to the Heavens itself, and it was usually reserved for the elders and peak talents on the precipice of reaching Hegemony or Monarchy. To open it and expend its riches on the younger generations was unprecedented.

“Boje will strive to live up to the ancestor's expectations,” Boje said, and he hesitated for a few seconds before he decided to give it a shot. The ancestor was even opening the Primal World for the young generations, and she didn't seem upset with him. If he could learn a thing or two from the ancestor... “With war coming, I am thinking of studying the art of poison. Is th—”

“My Heritage does not suit you.” Zanda cut Boje off with a shake of her head, dashing his hopes. “You have passable talents, but you do not have the heart to walk the Path of Poison. But you can consider walking the road of life instead

of the road of death. I think it might suit you. Besides, you have formed a weak thread of Karma with the Little Deviant Asura, and this might be your road to strengthen it.”

Boje was disappointed to be shot down, but not overly so. He knew his talents well, and he knew that the matriarch hadn't taken a disciple for over two hundred thousand years. It was a long shot to begin with. Still, the fact that the ancestor said he was suited to become a healer was a boon by itself. Those few words alone would open a few doors for him. It might even allow him to get access to one of their better Heritages.

His mind was already churning as he went over the matriarch's words while making his way outside, but he was stopped just as he was to exit through the gates.

“One more thing,” Zanda said from behind him, making Boje stop in his tracks and look back inquiringly. “What do you think is best? Young flowers or mature aunties?”

“Ah?” Boje stuttered, his mind going blank from the unexpected question.

Zanda laughed as she waved her sleeve, and the familiar scene of the uncategorized insectoid meeting with the Zerathar representatives appeared. That encounter had become a legendary piece of gossip by now, known by essentially all peak factions of the sector.

“That scene where he held that Tsarun brat's head was somewhat dashing, and who would make a better Dao Partner to the next Eveningtide Asura than me? He is still a bit young and tender right now, but a few centuries steeped in bloodshed should do the trick. I only need to help him quash those deviant interests first.”

BIG AXE COLISEUM

It took Zac another hour of walking before he finally spotted the coliseum. In fact, he had seen it long ago, but he had assumed it was a mountain range judging by its size. He didn't immediately head over, but first looked at the building in awe. It was simply massive, far eclipsing the enormous containment building that had held the Dimensional Seed.

It continued for tens of kilometers, a fortress of epic proportions. The majority of the structure was no doubt private sections meant for the inner members of the coliseum and their families, though any stage meant to have Hegemons fighting would have to be pretty huge.

The main gates were not far from where Zac arrived, a hundred-meter-tall entrance with two enormous axes forming an arch. Zac started walking toward it, but he soon stopped again as the world shifted. The desolate surroundings were suddenly replaced with a scene even more bustling than the Havenfort Town.

He realized that he was standing on a street over a hundred meters wide, and thousands of warriors were streaming back and forth toward the coliseum. Furthermore, Zac spotted more streets and entrances just like this one further away, making him realize that the traffic in this place was just insane. It wasn't surprising, though.

The Bloodwind planet was simply enormous, and tens of billions of people lived here even with the harsh environment. Furthermore, it was no doubt the most prosperous planet in its local cluster thanks to the Big Axe Coliseum and a few other

notable factions, and the planet was definitely the main hub for all stellar lines traveling the local cluster.

Zac turned around curiously, but the only thing he saw was a blurry desert, though warriors kept appearing one by one. Some passed him by and walked into the main building, whereas others headed for a series of side structures that emitted strong spatial fluctuations. Those were probably the local portals that took the members to various hunting grounds of the planet.

Part of Zac wanted to jump into one of the teleporters and start a slaughter of his own, but he ultimately held himself back. First of all, you needed to buy access or become a member of the coliseum before you could use the local teleporters. Secondly, he wasn't in a position where he could freely gain a bunch of levels.

There wasn't even any money to be made from heading out, not that he needed it. It had been a big shock to realize that a vast majority of all beast carcasses were mostly worthless. Zac had always equalized hunting beasts with big money after his grind-fests back on Earth, but you could easily buy an Early D-grade carcass for 50 million F-grade Nexus Coins or so.

Only a few extremely rare beasts were worth any real money, for example, beasts that had extremely pure bloodlines that made them far stronger than normal beasts of their grade. However, those kinds of beasts were as rare as valuable herbs, and fighting them was like fighting a peak genius cultivator.

It was no wonder the prices were so low; the Multiverse definitely didn't lack high-grade beasts. There were reportedly millions and millions of D-grade beasts on this planet alone, all of them more powerful than normal because of the unique environment. Perhaps he'd test his mettle against the wilds of this world another time. But for now, he had a trial to take.

Zac entered the coliseum, and he saw that there were three paths to take, one for each purpose of visiting. The largest gate was for spectators who had come to witness the matches and perhaps do some betting, with the second biggest being for

warriors who came to enter the ring. Fighting against other cultivators or ferocious beasts was a dangerous but effective way to cultivate.

There was never any lack of warriors willing to risk their lives for breakthroughs, especially when it could also mean wealth and fame.

The third corridor was for actual members of the Big Axe Coliseum, and that was where Zac headed. He was curious about the place, but he figured he could look around after he became an outer member. Zac only got fifty meters in before he was stopped by a guard.

“Members only, buddy,” a gruff devil humanoid with a bulky build said as he glanced at the lapel of Zac’s robes.

“I’ve come to apply,” Zac said.

“Oh? Outer or inner member?” the attendant asked.

“Outer,” Zac said and released some of his aura.

“High E-grade? Could be a good fight...” the man thoughtfully muttered and took out a token. “Here. The fee is 10,000 E-grade Nexus Coins. You’ll get the money back if you pass.”

“And if I fail?” Zac smiled as he transferred the money, surprised at how generous the coliseum was compared to the two previous spots.

“Then you’re dead, and we keep the money.” The man grinned. “Fourth door to the right. Don’t worry, the Heavens will arrange your enemies; it will be absolutely fair.”

Zac soon found himself in a resting room as he waited for the coliseum to set things up. If one fought in the Big Axe Coliseum the normal way, you’d have to expose some of your strength to get paired with the right level of opponents, but it was different for the Limited Trial. The System wouldn’t allow any cheating since it was handing out Limited Titles, so it teleported beasts into the arena, from what Zac had heard.

The Big Axe Coliseum only needed to pay for the activation of the trial and transportation fees.

It was a win-win for the coliseum. If the contender won, they'd gain a new member. If he or she lost, they'd still make money on the down payment, tickets, betting, and perhaps salvaging rare beast carcasses. The trials were especially popular, as the beasts teleported here were often ones they'd rarely see. Furthermore, the System essentially guaranteed a satisfying fight.

Normally, Zac would have a huge advantage in this type of trial thanks to his high Attribute Efficiency, but he had read that the System actually based the opponents on true strength in this particular trial since it wanted to test for skills with the axe. That wasn't a detriment in Zac's book, though, but rather a boon. After all, it wasn't easy to find opponents matching your strength exactly.

However, Zac found himself in a conundrum as he pressed his hand against a crystal hovering in the middle of the room. He needed to leave his Spatial Ring behind, along with any hidden weapons. He could only keep his robes and main weapon. Zac hesitated for a bit, but he eventually took out **[Verun's Bite]** instead of **[Rakan's Roar]**. Staying undercover was important, but surviving the trial even more so.

His main axe looked pretty different from the time he'd visited the Tower of Eternity, and he didn't even have his more defining skills like **[Nature's Punishment]** or **[Chop]** any longer. It should be enough.

He also needed to choose a name or moniker. He didn't want to use his real name for obvious reasons, but neither was he comfortable giving himself a Dao Name like "the Life-Death Primarch" or "Arcadian Master." He eventually settled on Arcaz, a handle he had used in some online games back before the integration.

Zac thankfully didn't need to wait for long for his trial to start. The platform flashed to life after just an hour, and Zac found himself standing in the middle of a massive arena a moment later. The roars of tens of thousands of people made the atmosphere rife with bloodlust. Zac couldn't see any

specific faces when he looked up at the stands, though; it was all a bit of a haze.

He guessed the coliseum used some sort of array to obscure the features for some reason.

“Give a warm welcome to Arcaz, our latest trial-taker. The Heavens tells us his power is at the peak of the E-grade, so we will hopefully have five exciting battles to look forward to!” a gruff voice echoed out across the arena, which was met by another wave of roars.

There was no time for Zac to ponder about the construction of the arena as hundreds of flashing lights illuminated his surroundings. He realized his first fight was a horde battle, which suited his class perfectly. A moment later, the enemy combatants had been teleported in, and Zac saw they were some sort of two-headed devil-rabbits with long rakish claws on their front legs.

“Oh! Our prospective member finds himself faced against 108 [**Twinruin Hoppers**]. Anyone who has spent some time in the Twinruin Gorge no doubt has some *fond* memories of these aggressive bastards! Hard carapaces, nimble legs, and endless aggression. Will our trial-taker fall at the entrance test like a fool? Will he emerge victorious, and if so, how quickly?! Place your bets!”

Zac wryly smiled at being used to make money this blatantly, but the commentator at least provided some clues. This was just the first trial of five, and Zac didn't plan on forming some sort of special strategy. If he couldn't simply crush this trial, then he could forget about completing all five battles.

A storm of Cosmic Energy streamed into an intricate fractal on his hand, but no fractal edge formed after activating the skill that took the spot where [**Chop**] was once housed. Instead, a large swirl of emerald energies suddenly surrounded [**Verun's Bite**], and Zac unleashed a swing in the direction of the most concentrated clump of [**Twinruin Hoppers**].

It was like he unleashed a storm with his swing, but that storm quickly congealed into a dozen two-meter-wide leaves

that radiated not only an immense amount of life force, but also an overbearing sharpness. The leaves were long, thin, and slightly curved like the blade of a scimitar, and they swirled around as they shot into the pack of beasts.

A few of the hoppers jumped forward with their sharp legs, both their heads trying to bite into the leaves and rip them apart. Others used the large claws on their front legs to swipe back at them with enough force to make the air scream.

But it was all futile.

Those that bit into the leaves were instantly killed as the upper halves of their heads were lobbed clean off, their bodies crashing down onto the arena floor with wet thuds. One storm of leaves after another shot out, and only a gorefest was left behind a moment later. The so-called hard carapaces couldn't survive a second against Zac's new E-grade skill, though he had empowered the leaves with the Fragment of the Bodhi.

A small pang of danger warned him of an imminent attack from behind, but Zac wasn't worried in the slightest. His free hand shot out as he rapidly turned around, and he caught the last hopper by one of its throats. Zac crushed its throat before slamming the stocky beast down onto the ground.

The second head yowled in pain and rage, and it desperately clawed at Zac as it tried to get up. But the emerald swirl around **[Verun's Bite]** moved to the front of the axe edge and congealed into a singular thin leaf that looked as real as a physical one. A moment later, the whole hopper was sliced in two, its blood disappearing into a deep scar in the ground.

"Oh my god! Six seconds to clear the first wave! Haha! A big thank-you to our friend Arcaz; you just made us a lot of money! But will he be able to clear the second trial? Let's find out!"

Zac sat down and took a breath as the hundred corpses were teleported away. He wasn't exhausted in the slightest, but he rather wanted to go over the result of his new skill **[Nature's Edge]**. He had already tested the skill back on Earth, but these **[Twinruin Hoppers]** had been a lot stronger than the animal packs back home.

They had all been at upper-middle E-grade in power, yet they had been cut apart without providing much resistance at all. This was exactly what Zac had wanted to see, and he was extremely relieved to see that his fusion of **[Chop]** and **[Nature's Barrier]** had worked out just as he hoped.

Part of him had hesitated about fusing two of his “basic” skills, wasting the opportunity. For example, he had considered fusing **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** with **[Forester's Constitution]** to form an amazing domain skill, but he ultimately didn't feel that would bring much to the table. **[Loamwalker]** was a skill he was keen on bringing into the E-grade as well, but he decided that an E-grade equivalent of **[Chop]** was of the highest priority.

It was the bread and butter of his class, the very foundation of his fighting style.

He did have **[Conformation of Supremacy]**, but that was ultimately a skill that didn't really conform to his path. Also worked better as a medium-power attack aimed at singular enemies or small packs. Meanwhile, **[Nature's Edge]** was a perfect fusion between Nature and Axe, using the form of **[Nature's Barrier]** and the function of **[Chop]**.

Losing his only real defensive skill was a bit of a shame, but **[Nature's Barrier]** had long lost its ability to protect him. Besides, the reason he dared to complete this fusion was thanks to creating **[Arcadia's Judgment]**. It had freed up the Skill Slot where **[Deforestation]** formerly was, which allowed him to learn the defensive skill he had waiting for him in the Dao Repository.

Unfortunately, the battle had been too short to gain any new insight into his skill, but he saw that he was about to get another opportunity as new golden lights appeared around him.

“Oh? Thirty-six **[Twinruin Rocklings]** this time? Will all the fights set our challenger against the beasts of the gorge? Will that mean we might have a chance to see a fight between a cultivator and a **[Twinruin Tyrant]** today? And perhaps even the true terror of the Twinruin gorge?” the announcer

mused, which caused a huge ruckus to erupt. “Who knows? In either case, place your bets!”

The rocklings looked like mottled eight-legged boulders, and he felt they reminded him of those spiderling bots he’d fought in the Mystic Realm. These guys were a lot stubbier, though, and Zac wondered if they were even mobile.

The ground suddenly started to shake as one sharp stalagmite after another sprang up with amazing power, which forced Zac to dance around in an ungraceful manner. Zac considered activating [**Hatchetman’s Spirit**] for a moment, but he eventually decided against it. He wanted to take this opportunity to get acquainted with his new skill. Besides, he didn’t want to show too many of his cards in a public setting like this in case someone figured out his identity.

Zac once more activated [**Nature’s Edge**], and a cascade of leaves shot out toward the slow-moving targets. However, Zac frowned when the attacks only resulted in shallow scars appearing across the bodies of the golemoid beasts. They had clearly activated some sort of Bloodline Talent that boosted their defenses tremendously, and the skill by itself simply wasn’t strong enough to get through.

Another gust of leaves shot out a moment later, but this time, the leaves almost looked like they were made of metal, having gained a slight silvery sheen. Zac looked on with interest as the leaves cut into the rocklings with their incredible sharpness, and the ground rumbled as the beast collapsed one by one.

Only three of the rocklings managed to survive the onslaught, but Zac flashed forward with [**Loamwalker**] and cut them to pieces in short order. One of them forcibly exploded upon its death, turning itself into a shrapnel bomb. But Zac had plenty of kill energy to use [**Surging Vitality**] with, and the shallow wounds started wriggling as they rapidly healed up.

He hadn’t had much use for his E-grade healing skill over the past years, but it had still moved to Late mastery thanks to his increased understanding of skills in general. The upgrade

mostly improved the skill's ability to heal tougher wounds, such as injuries caused by Dao-empowered attacks.

Of course, the healing capabilities of such a skill were still pretty limited and cost a huge amount of energy, but it was impressive for a skill that someone like Brazla had managed to get his hands on.

“Two rounds down, and we haven't been able to see the depths of our challenger's prowess!” the announcer exclaimed. “But the Heavens never gives out anything for free, especially not titles! Let's see what it has planned for our friend Arcaz next!”

TYRANT

Zac didn't mind the announcer's tone since he understood that the man was just playing things up to elicit more bets. He was more interested in the results of the last battles. The effect of his two Dao Fragments on his new skill was pretty interesting. The Fragment of the Bodhi increased the number of leaves, and Zac felt that they also contained more energy, which would make them harder to destroy.

Meanwhile, adding the Fragment of the Axe actually decreased the number of leaves compared to no Dao infusion at all, but it did instead drastically increase the lethality of the individual leaves. That left the Fragment of the Coffin, but Zac wasn't too certain he would be able to infuse that skill with his third Dao Fragment.

Besides, Zac wanted to avoid using that Dao in his human form if possible. It was something Zac had decided upon over the past years as he had arduously worked on incorporating his Path into the way he fought. He'd initially tried to incorporate everything he had envisioned, the trinity of life, death, and conflict, but it quickly became apparent that it was simply too huge a task.

So Zac came up with a plan. His first step would be to better mix Bodhi and Axe, Life and War, in his human form, while focusing on Coffin and Axe in his undead form. It was based on the creation of his bronze and pink flashes, or rather his Annihilation Sphere and Origin Mark. One half of him would delve into the depths of life through conflict, while the other into death and conflict.

That was why he had focused on only creating skills that followed these fusions. Both [**Nature's Edge**] and [**Arcadia's Judgment**] followed this rule, as did his two new skills for his Fetters of Desolation class.

The second step would then be trying to somehow fuse these two battle styles into one coherent system that could fit across both his classes, using his Dao of the Axe as the bridge. It would be the equivalent of creating the Chaos Pattern in the Tower of Eternity. Of course, there was a long road ahead, and it might not even turn out as he envisioned right now.

The first step was simply shoring up his understanding and his foundations, but he still hadn't reached the point of how Adcarkas had somehow merged with his Dao. Zac had made some inroads, but cultivation was an endless path of self-discovery. Three years simply wasn't enough, at least not when cultivating in absolute safety as he had.

Zac was soon dragged out of his thoughts as a golden light appeared in front of him. This time, there were just five beasts. They looked like huge creepy alien kangaroos with two sturdy legs keeping them upright and one ten-meter-long tail. They had no sharp claws, though, and neither did they have any large fangs.

It made Zac a bit leery, as it made them seem like magical beasts, which often meant they were more powerful than common beasts.

“Oh! [**Twinruin Battlecaller**] quintuplets! These mentally linked beasts are quite a handful, and the larger the pack, the greater the danger. Meeting quintuplets is both a blessing and a curse! A blessing because you get to see a rare marvel of nature, a curse because it means you'll probably die! A real terror of a challenge this time, and the last hurdle for membership! Place your bets!”

There were still three battles to be had, but that was just for the best version of the title. Zac could bow out after this fight and still become an outer member of the Big Axe Coliseum. Keep going, and you might get a better title along with a reputation. Fail, and you'd die since the battles were to the

death. Zac was obviously aiming for a perfect run since he still hadn't been pushed very hard.

He also tried to understand what kind of beast a Battlecaller was, but neither their appearance nor the announcer's description made it very clear. Then again, Zac guessed that it didn't really matter, and he shot forward. He wanted to end this quickly, so a splendid halo appeared behind his back. A simple yet powerful axe hovered in its center, and **[Verun's Bite]** was imbued with a huge force.

“Oh my god! Our contestant has borrowed the image of the Heavenfall Autarch's cleaver! Is this a testament to his ambition? To follow in the path of the father of axes?” the announcer screamed, his voice an octave shriller compared to before.

Zac only snorted. He had already learned that the axe-man in his vision was a real person: the Heavenfall Autarch. He wasn't from the Zecia Sector, and he'd died tens of millions of years ago. Yet he still held fame all across the Multiverse thanks to one of his fights being used to impart the Dao. That was something quite a few aimed for.

After all, true immortality was just a myth, from what Zac had gathered, but being accepted by the System was a way to live on forever in the hearts of cultivators. There were even rumors of some sort of rewards to the descendants of Dao Teachers like the Heavenfall Autarch, as though the System were paying them licensing fees.

The distance between himself and the beasts was quickly shrinking, but the air suddenly started to vibrate before Zac found himself on a massive battlefield, frenzied cultists all around him. The fury of battle coursed through his veins, and his heart beat in sync with the drums of war. The war against the Church of Everlasting Dao had reached a fever pitch, but Zac only snorted as he flashed forward and swung at empty air.

It turned out the Battlecallers were illusionists. They used the unusual attunement of the planet itself to deliver insidious and almost unnoticeable mental attacks. But how could Zac

completely fall into confusion after evolving his soul? He still couldn't completely block out the illusion even with his defenses, but he could still somewhat discern the truth like a superimposed reality.

The empty air was actually the closest Battlecaller, whose sharp tail was already piercing toward Zac's heart. Zac had sidestepped the attack and flashed forward with the help of his movement skill, and he was aiming to destroy the heart of the beast in return. However, he found his axe impeded by a powerful barrier that didn't even crack when attacked by **[Conformation of Supremacy]**.

That was saying something, considering that he had already reached Middle mastery for the skill, which had kicked its offensive power up a notch. Add to that the increased power of his axe, and the barrier had to be something else to not even crack.

“Oh! What powerful mental defenses! The contestant can even withstand a five-layered mental attack!” the announcer screamed, though his voice sounded muted and far in the distance. “But will it be enough?! The Battlecallers are not dreaded just for their mental attacks!”

Zac soon found that the announcer wasn't speaking out of turn as the five Battlecallers encircled him. They were an extremely tricky enemy. They combined powerful illusions, sturdy arrays, and powerful tails into a full combat system. Furthermore, their cooperation was so perfect that Zac suspected they were rather one entity than just mentally linked.

Another wave of dizziness hit him, but it was like his mind held multiple layers. Only the surface layer of his mind was steeped in the madness of the Battlecallers' abilities, whereas the core of his soul maintained perfect clarity. **[Verun's Bite]** cut through the air in a ruthless arc, aiming straight at an incoming tail.

Their bodies might be guarded by a fierce shield, but would they really be able to maintain such strong defenses around their long tails? The Battlecaller desperately retracted

its tail by pivoting with almost impossible speed, but it still got a deep gash as Zac's swing left a huge scar in the arena.

A pang of danger cut through the illusions assailing Zac's mind as a second, then a third tail shot forward, taking advantage of the extremely minute opening. Zac was barely able to dodge the second stab by pivoting his torso, but he simply wasn't quick enough to avoid the third one. A huge force slammed into his back, and Zac was lunged forward as the wind was knocked out of his lungs.

Only a shallow wound was left on his back even if the stab contained enough power to easily pierce through his body. It was all thanks to his new skill, **[Innate Ward]**. Just like the other skills from Brazla's depository, it was a simple skill but with a strong direct effect. It formed a second layer of protection right beneath the skin, its power based on one's Endurance.

It was simple and unadorned, but that also meant that the skill fractal fit with most classes. It was the same with Zac, who had no problem using the skill to over 85% of its full potential even when his human side was a Strength-Vitality class.

Another wave of illusion hit him as he righted his body, but Zac didn't even try to push it away as he resumed his battle. In fact, he welcomed the illusion. Between his evolved soul, the unique attunement in the atmosphere, and the illusion, he felt himself making tremendous progress on his efforts to integrate War into his combat style.

This battle alone was more effective than months of secluded cultivation, and Zac felt his technique subtly change. The swings became more forceful, more intractable. It was like his axe was a unit of seasoned warriors, piercing into enemy ranks. They always found a weakness in the enemies' lines, mistakes rife for exploitation. When it appeared, the soldiers struck without remorse, as there was no mercy in war.

Zac rushed toward the closest Battlecaller, barely avoiding two piercing tails as **[Verun's Bite]** keened with battle lust. Zac leaped forward but suddenly disappeared as he activated

[Loamwalker] in midair to appear in front of another of his foes. The axe ripped through the air in an upward trajectory that seemed to change every second. The teeth on its axe-head caused whistling sounds to spread through the arena, but for some reason, it sounded like trumpets heralding a charge.

[Conformation of Supremacy] empowered the swing to a new height, fully taking advantage of Zac's massive reserves of Strength as he slammed into the defensive barrier of the Battlecaller. The first swing wasn't enough, but the second swing immediately followed the first, and it was enough to finally crack the shield. The axe bit into flesh, and blood rained down on him. Rather than feeling disgust, the shower only spurred Zac on even further as he completely bisected the large beast with a third and final attack.

The four remaining Battlecallers screeched in pain, but Zac moved on them like a tide of cavalry, seizing the victorious momentum to win the war. It was clear the beasts were mutually empowering each other, and with the first one down, there was an obvious weakness in their War Array. The second beast fell to just one swing even after the four desperately tried to gore Zac to death.

His movement was turning more and more inscrutable as one beast after another were sacrificed to his path, and **[Loamwalker]** gradually harmonized with his Daos as well. Zac felt himself on the precipice of something, but he suddenly found himself without opponents to test it on. The quintuplets were lying in ten large pieces around him, the blood staining the arena.

The heat of battle quickly died down, and Zac quickly lost the feeling. He swore in annoyance, but he knew it wasn't the end of the world. He was right at the threshold, and it wouldn't take him long to take that final step.

Zac sat down and closed his eyes to go over the battle in his mind. He heard the announcer shouting something, but he was more focused on his inward journey.

It wasn't like he suddenly gained a boost in attributes out of nowhere, but it was rather that his will, his Dao, and his

body had moved as one. It probably wasn't an exaggeration to say that he might only use 60 to 70% of his attributes normally, with the rest of it wasted on inefficiencies and the inability to draw on his full potential.

But finding a combat style that resonated with the truths of the Heavens would remove some of these inefficiencies, which was a pure power-up with no demerits.

A guttural roar suddenly echoed through the arena, and Zac frowned as he opened his eyes. There was, unfortunately, no time for him to absorb the lessons of the last battle, because the next enemy had already appeared. This time, the target was a hulking beast reaching over eight meters in the air. It looked like a mix of a bull and a tiger, with two grisly horns that radiated terrifying sharpness. The air itself crackled at their tips, and that was only one of its weapons.

The beast almost seemed to be bred for war, with a thick hide that looked like plating covering its body. It didn't even have any eyes, nose, or ears, removing those weaknesses from its head. Instead, it was just one massive jaw filled with three rows of sharp teeth. Its legs ended in sharp claws rather than hoofs, and even its tail ripped through the air with enough speed to cause small sonic booms.

“It's really a [**Twinruin Tyrant**]! Generally considered one of the nastiest critters below the D-grade, these hulking beasts are tools bred for carnage. Powerful defenses! Deadly claws! Powerful Bloodline Talents! These bastards have it all. Is this the end of the line? Is our friend Arcaz getting too greedy by staying behind? Place your bets!”

The beast roared with bloodlust, but another roar of similar intensity echoed out in Zac's mind. It was actually Verun, which seemed extremely keen to battle the daunting beast. Zac gave it a thought, and he felt why not? Verun had been stuck in its axe for three years, and sending it out shouldn't really be a problem.

The primal dragon-hyena appeared next to Zac the next moment, its legs shaking from restrained battle lust as swirls of blood danced around its paws.

“What! Such a corporeal Tool Spirit! Amazing! The resources that have gone into this axe are nothing to scoff at!” the announcer exclaimed, but he paused when some people started to boo in the stands. “Are you angry? Think this is cheating? Too bad! The Tool Spirit of an axe is naturally part of an axe warrior’s strength. No refunds for bets!”

Zac smiled a bit as he turned to Verun, which growled as it kept the tyrant in its sights.

“Have fun,” Zac only said and sat down and instead focused on his insights.

“What confidence, daring to ignore the presence of a tyrant! I think we’re in for a treat!” the announcer hollered, and the hecklers were soon drowned out by cheers.

Verun roared with bloodlust as it shot forward, shooting straight toward the **[Twinruin Tyrant]** with mad abandon. The tyrant tried to bite down on Verun’s throat with its oversized jaw, but the dragon-hyena was extremely nimble, effortlessly dodging the bite while returning a ruthless swipe.

Three deep gashes appeared on the tyrant’s throat, and three streams of blood were extracted, each of them floating toward a gleeful Verun. Seeing a Tool Spirit feeding on its blood made the bull delirious with rage, and its muscles rippled as it started emitting a fearful aura.

Zac was initially barely paying attention, as he was fully focused on his experiences from the battle before, but he was soon mesmerized by the carnage a few hundred meters away. Claws, bites, tackles, swipes. Feints and full-on aggression. Blood, dust, and roars. The two beasts fought with everything they had in a primal war of supremacy.

Wounds accumulated on the tyrant’s body as the energy radiated from Verun steadily weakened. Yet neither backed down. In fact, the fervor of the battle only increased in intensity. Four sanguine rivers swirled around Verun, each of them rife with cutting intent. Meanwhile, black crackling lightning appeared on the horns of the tyrant, and it soon covered the whole beast’s body.

Their energies surged.

The rivers were like the cutting edges of an axe, and any time they drew blood, they were empowered in an endless cycle of carnage. Meanwhile, the crackling bolts caused Verun to take damage every time they clashed, and any errant bolt was powerful enough to rend huge scars across the arena. Even Zac was forced to move even further away unless he wanted to eat those attacks head-on.

Finally, the tyrant slipped up due to blood loss and exhaustion, and Verun seized the opportunity. It bit down on the tyrant's muscular throat, and with a tremendous tug it ripped out half the bull's neck to bathe itself in a cascade of blood. The tyrant took a shaky step as it tried to gore Verun with its horns in one final act of defiance, but it fell on the ground with a thump.

Hundreds of liters of blood were dragged out from the bull's body, and it joined blood on the ground as it turned into a storm around Verun. The Tool Spirit raised its head toward the sky, and unleashed a roar with such force that the air trembled. It was full of bloodlust, pride, and victory.

TERROR OF THE TWINRUINS

The whole stadium was silent for a few seconds before it erupted in raucous cheers.

Zac gazed at his Tool Spirit with rapt attention until the blood storm swallowed Verun whole. It was back in his axe a moment later, the first fractal on its handle dimmed down.

“Amazing! What a Tool Spirit! Even I am getting a bit tempted to get my hands on a Beastcrafted axe. Who would have any regrets when walking into battle with a companion like that?!” the announcer screamed. “Of course, we know that any such tricks won’t work for the final round.”

Zac snorted, but he knew that what the announcer said was true, and he cracked his neck as he readied himself. This final stage was why the rewards for the trial were so good, why it could provide both flat and increased attributes. Until now, the battles could only be considered a warmup. After all, the final battle had special rules, rules enforced by the System.

No consumable items, no skills.

Just your body, your weapon, and your Dao. It was a real test of one’s fighting capabilities, where external things were blocked. Every cultivator in the world could get skills for free from the System, but that didn’t make you a warrior. Talent and comprehension were both needed to become a true gladiator of the Big Axe Coliseum.

To get anywhere on the road of cultivation, really.

The minutes passed as Zac prepared himself. This would definitely be his hardest challenge so far. He didn’t fear death

since the Remnants were just like his Specialty Core, considered a part of his body. But he wasn't sure that his actual skills were up to snuff. He had cultivated for less than five years, and his general fighting style had been to rely on his superior attribute pool.

He had chosen this test as a challenge for himself, an opportunity to hone his path and hopefully make a breakthrough in the heat of battle. A golden shimmer finally appeared in the arena, and Zac frowned when he saw a humanoid standing in front of him. The final challenger was actually a cultivator?

“It happened! The Heavens really brought out a [**Twinruin Bloodstalker**] from the depths! We only get to see these terrifying beasts when they leave their nests for their baptism of blood. This one is an adolescent, just shy of having formed its core! These beasts are the perfect killing machines, and even Monarchs would think twice before entering their nests!” the announcer shouted, and the excitement in his voice didn't seem feigned. “This is what we have been waiting for! The deathmatch of the year!”

Zac listened to the announcer with rapt attention. It was actually a beast? Humanoid beasts were extremely rare. They normally moved away from the Heritage of the Beast Progenitor to instead become integrated as cultivators over the eons. In fact, the last humanoid beasts he had encountered were the imps back during the demon incursion.

Humanoid beasts often had superior affinities to most normal beasts since their bodies were made for cultivation. It was often a bestial bloodthirst that overpowered any burgeoning sapience that kept them as beasts. From what Zac understood, it was almost impossible for them to reach Atavism, the process where high-grade beasts could keep their bestial path but also take humanoid form and embark on the path of cultivation.

But the few who did manage to transform were all terrifying powerhouses that small sectors like Zecia couldn't contain.

The **[Twinruin Bloodstalker]** was roughly the same height as Zac, and it looked a lot like a beastkin with fur covering its whole body. Its proportions were pretty similar to a lanky human's, except slightly longer arms and a sturdy tail that was reptilian rather than simian in shape. Its hands were larger than normal too, and it had long sharp claws whose sharpness Zac could feel even from a distance.

Its feet reminded Zac of the Torrid Demon's, though its claws were longer and more distinct. Its face was the only part without any fur, and it looked pretty terrifying. Its skin was pitch-black like its fur, and two red orbs for eyes screamed of malice. It had no nose, but a wide mouth full of sharp teeth.

The beast looked in Zac's direction and released a roar as its aura started climbing. It was extremely condensed, and its killing intent even put Zac's own to shame, especially now that it had been weakened after three years of inactivity.

But that didn't mean Zac wasn't up to the challenge, and he rushed forward with his axe at the ready. The ground cracked beneath the bloodstalker's feet as its thin form turned into a blur, and it was upon Zac before he knew what happened.

Danger screamed as four sharp claws ripped through the air, aiming straight at Zac's throat. Zac narrowly dodged as he countered with a quick and furious swing with his axe, but he didn't even get the chance to land the hit before a thick tail slammed into his thigh with enough force to make him lose his balance. The bloodstalker used the counterforce of the collision to reverse its spinning momentum, and another swipe aimed for Zac's eyes just as he managed to stabilize his form.

Zac growled as he intercepted the swipe with his free hand. A burning pain erupted in his arm as two deep lacerations appeared, but he ignored the hurt as he thrust forward, aiming to push the beast off its balance to land a killing blow. However, the beast's tail actually slammed into the ground and acted like a pillar that kept the beast upright.

A high knee appeared out of nowhere before Zac had a chance to react, and Zac realized that it actually used its tail as

only support while spinning in midair. The beast tried to keep him in place with a viselike grip, but Zac forcibly lifted his right arm with a roar. A painful attack slammed into his shoulder, where his head had been half a second ago.

It hurt like hell, but Zac knew he had finally found an opportunity, as the beast was in midair while he was primed to attack.

A murderous edge infused with the Fragment of the Axe cut down, aiming to disembowel the beast in one quick go. The beast screeched and a dangerous aura started to leak from its body. It was definitely some sort of murder-related Dao at a level that matched Zac's own, but Zac wouldn't stop from something like that.

Axe met flesh, and the ground shook an instant later as the bloodstalker was slammed into the ground.

Normally, that would be the end of the battle, but Zac frowned when he saw that the beast was pretty much fine. It had managed to block Zac's swing with its forearm and almost looked like it bounced off from the ground as it backed away a few steps. It looked like a thick metallic bone hid right beneath its furred skin, and it had to be extremely durable to block out Zac's attack like that.

The beast's hand shook a bit from the impact, but it mostly seemed infuriated rather than hurt from the counter. Zac sighed, but he had known that the final challenge wouldn't be so easily overcome. He knew he'd be able to end everything with an Annihilation Sphere, but that wasn't why he was here. This was a real challenge where he would be pushed to the limits.

The wound hadn't weakened the bloodstalker at all. It rather looked like it possessed some sort of inherent berserking bloodline where the wound had turned its killing intent and aura even more congealed. It shot forward, its claws aiming to rip Zac's midsection open, and Zac answered with a cruel strike of his own.

Just activating his Dao was not enough against this target. Zac did not only continuously activate Fragment of the Bodhi

to allow his body to endure the extremely forceful strikes, but every single swing was imbued with the Fragment of the Axe. But the beast was just too nimble. It almost felt like it reacted before Zac's attacks even began, like they were following some sort of choreographed dance without Zac knowing.

Zac fought with everything he had, and his aura slowly transformed as he followed his instincts to incorporate his Dao Insights into his combat style once more. However, even as he desperately fought for his life, his mind kept turning back to the brutal melee between Verun and the **[Twinruin Tyrant]**. That battle between two apex predators wouldn't have been out of place out in the forests of the Bloodwind planet or anywhere else in the desolate wilderness.

Wasn't nature ultimately the source of the most ruthless wars of all?

Endless living creatures fought not only with each other for survival, but also against the elements themselves. Any weakness would be destroyed and discarded, replaced by something new. As the seasons passed, those suited for survival would thrive, while everything full of imperfections would be left by the wayside.

This was the fusion he was looking for, the fusion between life and war.

Zac moved as though he were possessed as one inspiration after another washed over him, and he found that his fighting style gradually transformed. His swings had previously contained the desperate echoes of a war between armies, but now it started to become reminiscent of another battle. The battle of the seasons, of evolution, of survival in the wild.

Weaknesses and imperfections were slowly cut away, replaced by swings and strikes that better took advantage of his attribute pool. The dinosaurs might have been the largest and most powerful beasts that walked Earth before the integration, but they definitely weren't the most perfect. They had all fallen while other animals flourished.

It was the same with his brutish fighting style. His wide swings full of killing intent might contain a world-ending

force, but what good were they when they couldn't even strike the bloodstalker? His attacks got more and more in tune with his envisioned path. Imperfections were discarded without a second thought as Zac kept trying new approaches.

Sometimes it worked and the bloodstalker received a new wound; other times it failed and Zac was wounded instead. His fighting style was like the everchanging seasons. But with every revolution, the overall number of weaknesses shrank, and his attacks started to change as well.

His swings got quicker, more ruthless. If there were no openings to vital organs, then he'd attack something else. Anything that could push the fight in his favor. There was no such thing as honor in the wild, and neither was there any in the way Zac fought. This wasn't a boxing match; this was life and death.

His path was gradually fusing with his body, and the bloodstalker started to lose ground. All the small improvements stacked on top of each other until disadvantage was transformed into a small advantage for Zac. The bloodstalker was desperately fighting back, the large number of shallow wounds doing nothing to slow it down.

But while it had amazing instincts and attributes that were a match to Zac, it didn't show any indication of making any improvements throughout the battle.

Blood and tufts of fur soon covered the ground as the wounds accumulated across the beast's body. The same was true for Zac, but he was willing to take a few hits if he could deliver in kind. He had always been ruthless to himself, and this wasn't any different.

The bloodstalker suddenly twisted as it once more tried to lash Zac with a tail full of momentum. But Zac moved as though by instinct, narrowly ducking while stomping down at the foot that the beast used to pivot. His leg was infused with the Fragment of the Bodhi, and it was like a huge tree slammed down on the bloodstalker's ankle. A loud crack was quickly followed by a huge bang as cracks spread on the ground.

The beast's foot was broken, and the pain seemed to have cut through the bloodlust as it shuddered in agony. There was no mercy in the wild, and Zac pounced. His whole being felt aligned with his path, and **[Verun's Bite]** started radiating a supreme might of the untamed wilds as it ripped through the air. The bloodstalker sensed the danger and tried to dodge while countering with a kick, but the axe was upon it before it had a chance to move out of the way.

Bone was split, and dark blood flowed like a fountain as protective bone and arm were cleanly cut off. From there, the gleaming axe-head continued into the torso of the beast. The whole arena echoed with the deep thud, and a massive explosion erupted as a twenty-meter-deep scar cut into the ground behind the bloodstalker.

The beast fell onto the ground, completely unmoving.

A storm of Cosmic Energy entered his body, but Zac stood unmoving as he imprinted his current feeling into his body. Mind, body, Dao. It had all converged into a singular entity, and two streams had been braided into a strike of unmatched might. It was the first time he had managed to infuse an attack with his reverse Dao Braid. He had succeeded in forming the twinned energy before while practicing, but never quickly enough for it to be usable in battle.

But now it had all crystallized somehow, though Zac honestly wasn't sure whether he'd be able to replicate the deed unless he was pushed like he was in this fight. In either case, he had confirmed that his theories were correct and that this was a viable way to cultivate. His braid was as crude as they came, but it did work.

It might display less than half of the boost compared to the intricate braids Kenzie had managed to create with her own Dao Fragments, but Zac was just on his first reincarnation. He would probably be able to create proper braids by the time he evolved his soul the next time, and even Dao Arrays weren't an impossible goal.

He heard roars from the arena, and the announcer kept harping on something, but Zac was occupied by the

experiences of the battle. He had long managed to incorporate some of the insights from the Fragment of the Axe into his fighting style, but this was the first time he was touching upon a true fusion of concepts.

It was still rudimentary, and he felt that his Axe insights still stood for over 90% of his actions, but it was definitely a move in the right direction. He had set the foundations; now he just needed to polish his techniques through battle.

He stood completely transfixed, and he only opened his eyes after feeling his body being teleported. He had been sent back to the same waiting room as before. His items were waiting right next to him, and he picked them up before leaving. Outside the room, another devilish axe cultivator waited, and Zac felt he should either be an early Hegemon or a strong Peak E-grade cultivator.

“Congratulations,” the three-meter-tall devilkin said with an appreciative nod. “I saw your battles; you’re a tough one. Your early fight was kind of shitty, but you were impressive by the end. Are you self-taught?”

“Uh, thanks, I guess.” Zac wryly smiled. “Yeah, I just kept swinging until I got to this point. I am trying to refine my technique.”

“Haha! A lot of us are wandering cultivators like yourself. But you know what? Those prudes over at the Sword Palace look down their noses at us, but we still win over 60% of the battles in the coliseum.” The man guffawed. “Technique isn’t everything.”

Zac nodded with a grin, agreeing to a certain degree. He had gotten quite far with just grit and pure force, though he knew that he had to refine his battle style if he wanted to reach further heights.

The Sword Palace the devil mentioned was another of the factions on the Bloodwind planet. He didn’t know a lot about them except that this world was just one of their training grounds. Those in their sect who favored flying swords often came here to temper their mental strength.

“Here, your token,” the devil said and threw over a bronze token and an information crystal. “We have five levels of membership. Outer members can reach the third level at most, with the final two levels reserved for inner members. You completed the whole trial, so you can reach the second level as soon as you pass a trial period and generate enough contribution.”

“How is that different from others?” Zac asked with confusion.

“There are various ways to gain contribution. You can essentially buy the points if you have access to enough sought-after treasures and materials.” The devil shrugged. “Normal outer members will also have to complete actual tasks for the coliseum to elevate their status. You can just buy your way there. You’re a true gladiator; you’ve already proven yourself.”

“What’s the difference between the levels?” Zac asked.

“The second level gives access to better things to trade for, like some decent information Heritages. Third-level members can even have the elders give one-on-one pointers once every century, along with an even better selection of items to buy,” the gruff attendant explained.

“Alright, thank you.” Zac nodded.

“Oh, I guess you impressed some big shot in the coliseum with your fight against the bloodstalker. You have been given two weeks with Big Boss’ Big Wall.”

BIG BOSS' BIG WALL

“The Big Boss what?” Zac asked with confusion.

“The founder once tried to forge a huge axe, but he failed spectacularly and even blew up his forge along with most of the materials. He got so angry that he went on a rampage and hacked away at the core metal he was planning on using.” The devil snickered.

“Ah?” Zac said with a confused smile, his image of powerful Monarchs somewhat ruined.

“Well, the material was no longer suitable for crafting after that, but it was a unique C-grade metal sheet, after all. It stored some of the Founder’s Dao insights. Looking at the scars he left behind can give some inspiration into the Dao,” the devil said. “I finally managed to form my Branch of the Axe after studying it for three months. Crazy expensive, but worth it.”

Zac’s eyes lit up in excitement. He hadn’t made much headway on improving his Dao over the past years, and this might be an opportunity to find some direction. Besides, he didn’t need to worry about accidentally breaking through to Peak mastery for his Fragment of the Axe and losing a bunch of attribute points. With his odd constitution, he also needed to consume some Dao Treasures to power his breakthrough.

“Where do I go?” Zac asked.

“I’ll take you.” The devil shrugged as he led the way.

The two chatted a bit on the way, and Zac realized that the devil attendant, whose name was unpronounceable but went by Woz, was a Half-Step D-grade wandering cultivator who

still hadn't given up on breaking through. In contrast to the impression Zac got during the Eastern Trigram Hunt, he had found that it was actually possible to take that step even with a defective core. However, it was far more difficult than forming a core normally.

You needed to completely disintegrate your defective core and immediately form a new one. Fail, and you'd blow up from the rampant energies. Very few people had the guts to make that attempt. After all, if they really had the ambition to become a true Hegemon, they normally wouldn't form the Half-Step Core in the first place. Zac guessed that Woz had encountered some sort of opportunity soon after becoming a Half-Step cultivator, which made him change his mind and give it a go.

Woz was currently trying to accumulate experience and inspiration, and he had become an inner member of the coliseum to get access to restricted resources. It meant he was giving up most of his freedom, but the Big Axe Coliseum restrained inner members a lot less compared to most clans and sects.

In his case, his employment would last a thousand years, but it would be renegotiated if he managed to break through. Managing to form a Dao Branch was a huge improvement for him, but he still didn't feel confident since he had already failed to form his core once.

The raucous atmosphere of the arenas was soon replaced by a solemn silence, but the combative attunement in the air just kept getting more condensed until they reached a huge courtyard. A few Hegemon guards were standing by, but they had obviously been informed of Zac's arrival, as they let him and Woz through without a word.

There was not much happening in the courtyard. There were just roughly fifty cultivators and a massive slab of scarred metal.

"What kind of axe was the founder trying to make?" Zac exclaimed as he looked at the enormous sheet.

It was over a hundred meters tall and three times as wide. It was like Zac was looking at a city wall rather than a block of metal meant to be turned into a weapon.

“The Big Boss had a berserker state where he grew to three hundred meters,” the devil said. “The axe needed to match that size in its original form, and then it could simply be shrunk to match his normal size. It would be cheaper to make an axe based on his original size, but then the weapon would become a lot weaker when he grew.”

Zac nodded thoughtfully. It was true; he had noticed a similar issue in his undead form when his axe grew into a three-meter bardiche. However, the difference there wasn't too big compared to its original form, and it wasn't causing a problem. But Billy probably lost some of his lethality with his huge club, though [**Bonker's**] true size might be larger than Zac realized.

“So how does this work?” Zac asked as he looked at the fifty-odd cultivators sitting in meditation.

“Those guys can't hear us. The mats they are sitting on have isolation arrays,” Woz said. “You can walk freely back and forth until you find a scar that resonates with your Dao. Then simply take a seat on a free mat and see what you can gain. Someone will wake you up when your time is up. Oh, don't bother anyone who is sitting in meditation, and don't walk forward from the mat.”

“I understand.” Zac nodded and stepped inside.

He didn't know what made some big shot donate two weeks in front of this wall, but he wouldn't say no to this opportunity. Part of him screamed that this was all a conspiracy, but he forcibly stilled those thoughts. The Multiverse was ruthless, but not everything was a plot, and not everyone was out to destroy him.

Passing all five trials in the first go wasn't that common, and it was possible that some elder simply wanted to give Zac a good impression of the faction. Perhaps it was that Ogre from before who had taken a liking to him, and Zac guessed

that he could easily fork out the cost for two weeks if Woz had been able to study the scars for three full months.

Zac didn't want to waste a minute of his allotted time, and he quickly walked over to the walkway behind the prayer mats. It was odd, some of the cultivators in front of him were warriors over ten meters tall, but Zac could still see the wall in its entirety as long as he stood on that road.

He slowly walked back and forth, and his eyes lit up as he looked at the wall. It had just looked like a broken mess from where he and Woz stood before, but now it felt like all the scars contained some clues to the Dao of the Axe. A few scars gave Zac an impression of furious momentum powerful enough to split the world in two, others an undeniable bloodlust that made his eyes water in pain.

Other tears seemed to be filled with the fundamental aspects of the Axe. There were Heaviness and Sharpness, the two Daos that he had fused to create the Fragment of the Axe. But there were also a few others. There were a few with hardness, one that Zac felt was related to steel. There were a few that made Zac think of the bloody swirls around Verun's legs.

All in all, there were over fifty concepts that made up the Big Boss' understanding of the Dao, from what Zac could tell. Some resonated with him, and others didn't. Finally, Zac settled on one particular set of scars. It was two seemingly simple marks that formed an X on the metal sheet. They weren't as deep as some marks and not as large as others.

But they gave Zac a mysterious feeling, and he felt like he was looking at two clashing armies when he looked at the scars. Luckily, there was no one sitting in front of that particular section of the wall, and Zac sat down on the closest prayer mat.

The moment he sat down, a wave of tranquility spread through his body, no doubt the effect of the prayer mat. Zac's mind was crystal clear, but at the same time suffused by the pervasive battle lust in the air. That was just what Zac wanted,

and he let the killing intent permeate his whole being as he gazed at the axe scars.

The rest of the universe soon disappeared, and there were only the crossed lines on the metal sheet, or rather the two opposing armies locked in an endless conflict. It felt like the air around him was drenched in the Dao of the Axe, like he was sitting in a purified version of the Dao Chamber Kenzie had constructed for the Dao Funnel.

He soon took out **[Verun's Bite]**, but he simply held it in his hands for most of the time. Sometimes he slowly swung it in various directions as though he wanted to confirm something, but most of the time, he was lost in thought. New impressions replaced the previous in an endless cycle, like an everchanging battlefield in his mind. He had long lost any concept of time, only stopping occasionally to take a fasting pill and go over the insights.

“Brat, it’s time.” A powerful voice suddenly resonated in his mind, startling Zac awake.

Two weeks had passed that quickly?

Zac didn’t tarry, and he quickly got up on his feet after taking one last look at the two scars. He hadn’t broken through, but Zac was certain that he was right at the precipice of pushing his Fragment of the Axe to Peak mastery. He just needed to incorporate what he had gained over the past two weeks into his own understanding and then eat some treasure that could be used as fuel for the breakthrough.

He didn’t plan on staying on the Bloodwind World much longer, but he was pretty curious about the information Heritages Woz had mentioned. Besides, if trouble would come to find him in this place, it should have done so a long time ago, like when he was in the middle of his epiphany. So Zac made his way into the private areas only for coliseum members, and he was soon surrounded by a sea of meatheads.

Humans were by no means rare, but they definitely didn’t belong to a majority in this place. If the Base Town had been a perfect cross-section of the Zecia Sector races, then this place clearly gravitated toward devilkin, Ogres, Orcs, and certain

beastkin. Part of the reason definitely was that these races leaned toward brutal weapons like axes, clubs, and various two-handed weapons.

But another reason was that the Bloodwind planet was placed in what was called the Tribal Constellation, where these races were more common. It wasn't a force, but rather hundreds of forces spread out across an area even larger than the big empires. It was a pretty chaotic part of Zecia, but there were a few powerful C-grade tribes that kept things somewhat in order and helped gather the forces in case of outsider pressure.

“Newcomer! I saw your fight! Big balls!” a clearly drunk minotaur Hegemon suddenly roared from his seat on a balcony of a large bar as Zac walked along the street.

Zac only laughed and waved as he moved on. There were actually quite a few people who recognized him as he walked, and he guessed that these people were all members who were currently taking a break in their cultivation. Most people took time-outs for a few months now and then to clear their heads and destress, and these meatheads probably watched some fights and got drunk.

Some just praised the last battle or his axe, while others invited him to join hunting parties. Zac politely declined the invitations as he kept going forward. He only stopped once to read a sign. He saw dozens more further down the line, and he guessed it contained some important information.

[Big Axe Coliseum has entered an alliance with the Divine Chalice, Blue Moon Mercenaries, and Celestial Constellation Formation Guild.]

“Who are these factions?” Zac asked an Orc who was reading the sign as well.

“Don't know about the last guys, but Divine Chalice is a faction of healers,” the Orc muttered, excitement written all over his face. “A lot of lasses, a lot of them... If Urbuk manages to form an adventurer party with a few... Springtime is finally coming to Urbuk.”

Zac thoughtfully nodded as he walked on. One faction of healers, an Array Master guild, and some mercenaries. It looked like the Big Axe Coliseum wanted to shore up its weaknesses. But the coliseum had stood alone for over a million years; why make the change now? Was it about the war the Ogre from before mentioned? Did they want to create more balanced war parties to increase their survivability?

For now, it wasn't something that had any relation to Zac though. He would ask Calrin to look into the matter, but he had other things to deal with first. Zac soon enough reached the contribution exchange, a hall that almost looked like a gladiator arena. There were almost a hundred desks with attendants, and Zac walked over to one of the empty ones. It was manned by what Zac assumed was a female Orc.

"New guy?" the Orc asked with a raised brow as he approached.

"Yeah, just joined. Just figured I'd take a look," Zac said.

"That's fine, but not much you can buy straight away. We've had problems with newcomers clearing out some precious resources and so on." The Orc shrugged.

"I heard I can improve my level by selling things?" Zac asked as he started browsing a crystal.

"Oh, a gladiator?" the Orc said with interest. "It was you who fought the bloodstalker? Can't believe I had to work during that fight. Well, you still can't become a second-level member for the first ten years, even if you reach the contribution needed. A century for the third level. Of course, if you get an elder to sponsor you, that's another matter."

There were a huge amount of materials listed, tens of thousands of different resources meant for axe cultivators. Of course, he could only buy the basic things that he could already get through Calrin. But there were also quite a few items that were at the level of what Kenzie had planned on feeding Jeeves.

There were even rarer objects as well, but they all required level three membership or higher.

As for information, there were a lot of interesting intelligence crystals that piqued Zac's interest. There was one in particular that contained information that Zac really wanted.

[Primal Axes; Picky bastards, Trusted Friends – How to evolve your toothy companion.]

It was written by a late Hegemon rather than a Monarch, but it was still pretty detailed all the way up to High D-grade, according to the description. Unfortunately, he wouldn't be able to get it for a whole decade. He would probably be able to get some elder to sponsor him if he divulged his real identity, but that would just open a can of worms.

[Verun's Bite] had been strengthened a lot since drinking all that dragon blood, and Zac felt it wouldn't bottleneck him until he reached Peak E-grade. He suspected that ten years would pass long before he got to that point. Apart from the missive detailing evolving his axe, there were more generalized guides geared toward Spirit Tools as well.

Zac wanted to get those as well in case they divulged something useful for **[Love's Bond]**. Of course, he didn't hold much hope in that regard. He hadn't been making much headway with his second Spirit Tool, or rather any at all. He had come in contact with all kinds of treasures, but nothing seemed to have been of interest to Alea.

"Take this as well," the Orc said as she handed him another crystal. "These are requests members have put out. If you can find some of the things people are looking for, you can quickly reach the higher levels of membership as soon as the trial period ends. You can also go to the mission hub. You're a gladiator, so the Mission Points will be converted to contribution points for you, making missions doubly rewarding."

"Alright, thank you." Zac nodded as he exited the Contribution Exchange.

Zac would be able to easily complete a lot of the rare materials commissions thanks to his almost unfettered access to all corners of the sector. Materials that were almost impossible to get on the Bloodwind planet might be readily

available in another empire. The Big Boss' Big Wall and a few other opportunities such as private Mystic Realms were only accessible through contribution points, and this was an easy way for Zac to turn Nexus Coins into contribution.

He stowed away the crystals as he left toward the closest teleportation array. Part of him wanted to head out and refine his technique, but he ultimately felt uncomfortable grinding when he had to hold back on everything from levels to Dao Epiphanies. So he would return Earth before moving toward his real target.

“Are we really letting him go?” the heavily scarred human asked as he looked up at the huge Ogre who gazed at the human walking toward the teleportation array in the distance. “The Tsarun Clan—”

“Bah, who cares about those bastards? We're not so strapped for cash we need their little rewards,” the Ogre snorted. “Besides, I never liked Zinvul Tsarun, that hoary old goat. He'd sell out this whole sector if it just gave him a chance of breaking through. I'm more willing to bet on this little brat.”

“He walks the path of war and carnage, and he is the harbinger of the conflict. He will definitely find himself in the middle of the madness; chances are he will fall,” the man countered. “If that happens, we'll end up empty-handed.”

“Perhaps.” The Ogre shrugged. “But perhaps not. He might also survive, becoming the next Eveningtide Asura. And then our gains will far overshadow some random bounty. The fact that such a little monster is an axe wielder is a heaven-sent opportunity for us. I told you he'd appear here sooner or later. Obfuscate the details of his visit.”

“Already done.” The human nodded as his eyes gleamed with anticipation. “Well, his disguise is pretty decent, and he seems aware of the threats facing him. It will be hard if not

impossible for the Tsarun Clan to track him down in the vast battlefields. If he really survives...”

“Exactly.” The Ogre nodded before his brows furrowed with confusion. “However, I really thought he’d break through... He looked at the wall for two whole weeks while I personally empowered his prayer mat and improved his surroundings. I think he might be a bit of an idiot?”

BUYOUT

Zac appeared in his courtyard back on Earth, and a look outside showed that the environment was fast returning to normal thanks to Triv and the golem gardeners. His initial outing had taken just over a month, but he believed that the next one might take a lot longer. So before heading out, there were some final matters to deal with.

First things first. Zac looked inward and started to channel more and more energy into his hidden Specialty Core until he felt something change. There was no explosion or huge burst of energy, but his Specialty Core was suddenly back in plain view, which meant that the one-month timer had started. That was the earliest he could leave Earth while using the array to hide his Duplicity Core.

The things he needed to do during this month were already planned out, and Zac sent out a series of messages through his communication crystal before he opened his status screen.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 101

Class: [E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

Race: [D] Human – Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Planetary Lord

Titles: [...] Peak Power, Sovereign-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider

Limited Titles: Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star – 14th, Weight of Sin, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big

Axe Gladiator

Dao: Fragment of the Axe – High, Fragment of the Coffin – High, Fragment of the Bodhi – High

Core: [E] Duplicity

Strength: 4,385 [Increase: 105%. Efficiency: 228%]

Dexterity: 2,149 [Increase: 75%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance: 4,167 [Increase: 111%. Efficiency: 228%]

Vitality: 3,266 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 228%]

Intelligence: 960 [Increase: 69%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom: 1,844 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 187%]

Luck: 397 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points: 0

Nexus Coins: [D] 1,000,000

His Limited Titles were finally filled as well, and Zac opened another screen to get a full overview.

[Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star – 14th: Attain the 14th best all-time result in the Zecia Sector. Reward: Strength, Endurance, Vitality, Luck +6%. Effect of Strength, Endurance, Vitality +6%]

[Weight of Sin: Ascend Taboo Mountain Reward: Base Attributes +2%.]

[Equanimity: Reach the floor of the Havenfort Chasm. Reward: Base Attributes +2%. Wisdom, Endurance +2%.]

[Heart of Fire: Touch the Heart of Fire. Reward: Strength, Endurance, Vitality +4%.]

[Big Axe Gladiator: Complete the trial of the Big Axe Coliseum. Reward: Strength, Dexterity +50. Strength, Dexterity +6%.]

Zac nodded with satisfaction as he closed his screen. His attributes had increased by around 5%, most of them centered on his more useful stats. For example, his Strength had almost increased by 10%, which definitely was a noticeable boost. It

wasn't a transformative change, but it was a free improvement that had only cost him a month. Not only that, he had both stabilized his soul and made inroads with his Dao, his path, and his new method to perform Dao Braids.

After having confirmed the situation, he walked over toward his first appointment, which was located at the Atwood Academy.

The whole campus had grown by over ten times since its inception, and it had almost turned into a city within a city with blocks of student housing, whole parks, and large courtyards where the professors stayed. There were almost a hundred thousand students enrolled by this point, of which roughly 20% were "exchange students" from various subsidiary forces on Earth.

It wasn't much compared to the largest alliances on Earth, but Zac still focused on quality over quantity for his Academy. For those less talented, there were the city guards, the army, or various enterprises of his that needed cultivators. For example, there were thousands of cultivators who worked in the mine, clearing out the wildlife as they dug deeper and deeper.

Zac didn't head toward Alyn's offices, but he rather turned toward one of the secluded mansions in the faculty residence district. A few minutes later, he sat in a beautifully manicured courtyard with an elderly monkeyman opposite him.

"Lord Atwood, it has been a while. I am sorry about your loss." Hekruv Vira sighed. "To walk the path of Cultivation is to suffer. Death is all too common. But I am glad to see that it hasn't broken you."

The "official story" had already been spread by this point, that a powerful cultivator had appeared on Earth in search of the Dimensional Seed. After finding that it was gone, she had killed Kenzie and Thea out of frustration before leaving. Zac had only survived because of his hidden means. Zac only nodded in response, and the two sat in silence for a few minutes until a series of quick steps approached.

"I am sorry for the delay. You said you needed me?" Helo, the Gemling leader, said as he walked into Hekruv Vira's

courtyard.

“I wanted to talk to the two of you to let you know that I will be leaving Earth for a while,” Zac said. “This trip will probably be a lot longer than previous outings. A year if it’s short; a decade if it’s long.”

“You are doing the right thing,” Hekruv said with a nod. “You are in your prime; spending your days here would be a waste of your potential and momentum. Look at me and the other old goats whom you took in. Our momentum is all but gone, and reaching Hegemony the normal way is nigh impossible.”

Zac nodded, and he actually felt a bit relieved at the fact the old leaders of the Mystic Realm were stuck in their cultivation. It was a bit too early for D-grade cultivators to start sprouting up on Earth. But what Hekruv Vira said was true; their cultivation had pretty much locked in at their current state, and simply changing their cultivation manuals wouldn’t do.

There was also a huge mental component to breaking through. The few members of the True Sky Faction who still had reaching Hegemony as their main goal in life had bought Teleportation Tokens from him. They wanted to set out onto a larger stage in search of opportunities just like most wandering cultivators. Those who stayed on Earth had essentially given up on forming a Cultivator’s Core and instead focused on academia and their legacy.

For example, Hekruv Vira had actually married an Ishiate of the nature faction he’d met while traversing Earth two years ago. They already had a child, which felt like a miracle to Zac considering their species were so different. Then again, how was the monkeyman’s situation any different than the hundreds of half-demon infants in Port Atwood?

Zac was all for it, since forming a family would strengthen their connection to Earth and his town, and it allowed him to leave Earth with fewer worries.

“Is there anything we can do?” Helo asked.

“Just help the officials keep things under control. Try to stop any large-scale wars that will weaken the base strength of Earth,” Zac said thoughtfully.

The three kept talking for a while before Zac set off to his next destination. The meeting with the True Sky Faction and Clan Volor was partly a courtesy call and also to show he was fine after the events that had led to Thea’s death. He knew there were some rumors floating about already, and one of the things on his agenda was to travel around to make sure people knew he was alive and well.

His next destination took him to Thayer Consortia, another district that had essentially turned into a town on its own. The Thayer Consortia had kept growing over the past three years, partly fueled by the almost endless wealth they’d gained through his sister. It was like Calrin was on stimulants as he kept expanding the operations, and there were already three branches that had been opened on other worlds.

All three were on unimpressive E-grade planets, but they helped open new business channels, and they were profitable from the get-go.

The fact that Smaug had somehow disappeared into thin air while Zac was occupied dealing with the Mystic Realm was a bit of a hit, but it ultimately hadn’t hampered his plans too much. Perhaps it was for the best since Smaug had proven himself wily and self-serving from the start, without weighing it up with good features like Ogras.

Zac had wanted to use Smaug as his representative in the Consortia, but it looked like he had chosen his own connections instead. Zac had made some inquiries into the Stumpbugle cooperation that Smaug got his license from, since Calrin believed they had to be the ones who helped him escape. Zac hadn’t found much, though, and he could only confirm they were located somewhere in the sector.

Instead, Zac had hired a man named Vikram, a former Harvard graduate who would likely have become a real business star if the world hadn’t ended. Vikram was officially in charge of the expansion of Thayer Consortia to human

towns across Earth, and unofficially in charge of making sure the Sky Gnomes weren't fleecing him.

He was also the only earthling currently under a contract with him, apart from the Valkyries. It wasn't Zac's idea, but rather Vikram's own, as a method to fast-track his career. It wasn't lifelong, though, but rather for a thousand years, and it posited that Zac needed to provide the means for him to gain that longevity. Of course, the contract also contained a slew of additional provisions to shore up the kind of loopholes that Smaug had probably used.

So far, Zac hadn't found any reason to be worried, but you never could let your guard down. Zac didn't immediately head over to Calrin, but he instead visited Vikram's offices first. The two went over Zac's idea in detail over the next few hours, and the analyst helped Zac tweak and optimize the plan. Only then did the two head over to Calrin's office, where a despondent Sky Gnome barely had the energy to greet them.

"What's with you?" Zac said as he sat down.

"Do you really need to ask?" the Sky Gnome lamented, looking like he had lost the love of his life. "Your sister was such a divine spirit, full of grace and benevolence."

Zac would have laughed out loud if not for the fact that Kenzie was officially dead. Zac knew that the Sky Gnome no doubt missed his sister's moneymaking capabilities far more than the person herself, but the sentiment was still appreciated.

"How are things going?" Zac asked as he sat down, though he somewhat knew the answer.

"We made a lot of enemies through your sister's side business. She could stay hidden, but the transactions ultimately took place under our license. Now our income is negligible compared to before, and our enemies are putting the squeeze on us." Calrin sighed. "Forget expansion; we might be forced to close our branches and get pushed back to the bottom again."

"Is there anything we can do to turn things around?" Zac asked with an impassive face.

“Well, money.” Calrin shrugged. “We are bleeding right now, but so are our enemies because they undercut me on all my purchases. But with enough time, I’ll be able to find new revenue streams that will tide us over until they give up.”

Zac slowly nodded, but nothing the Sky Gnome said was honestly a surprise. He had a full understanding of the financial state after his meeting with his liaison. What Calrin said was true, though things were not quite as bad as he let on. But Thayer Consortia would definitely be unable to continue their expansion if things continued, and probably even be relegated into a native business that didn’t spread outside the planet.

“Well, I have a proposal,” Zac eventually said. “I am willing to inject capital into the business, but I want a controlling share of Thayer Consortia. Vikram would be made vice manager and get access to the license.”

“What!” Calrin exclaimed with shock. “You are trying to squeeze us out! Don’t look down at the value of a license. How do you value the infinite potential it represents? Not even your sister would be able to buy it.”

“I value the license at 5,000 D-grade Nexus Coins. I am willing to invest 3,300 right now, of which 250 would go directly to you,” Zac said, which made the Sky Gnome freeze in shock. “I would increase my stake to 51% by myself, and if Ogras’ shares get released, they would fall to me as well.”

The shares to the consortium were sanctioned by the System itself, and Ogras’ shares along with dividends were currently put in limbo. The System had various rules for this. Essentially, if Ogras didn’t come back within one hundred years, then ownership would be relinquished to descendants. Since Ogras had none, at least no official ones, the ownership would revert back to Zac and Calrin.

If the demon had been a D-grade Hegemon instead, the timeframe would be a millennium. This was a ruleset that the System had enacted since people kept disappearing in the Multiverse. Some were lost in Mystic Realms; others entered wormholes and wound up in different parts of the universe.

Ownership of protected ventures ultimately required some sort of link to the business in question. For unprotected ventures, such as holding ownership of a city, there were no safety guidelines. Anyone could attack a town or world at any time, and if the defense failed, you'd lose your ownership. Of course, you could always reconquer your town or planet in case you came back.

"Fi-Five thousand? D-grade?" Calrin muttered, his eyes almost going red instead of their deep azure. "What? How?"

"Don't worry about how." Zac shrugged. "Five thousand is most likely a fraction of its value when you were at your peak, but those days are long gone. To return to that level on your own without my help? How long will that take? Can you even do it? With an infusion of over 3,000 D-grade Nexus Coins, you'll be able to save eons of effort and immediately leapfrog to a larger stage.

"You should also know that I hold the building ordinance for a High-quality trial, but I don't plan on putting it on Earth. That structure by itself will transform the economy of the whole area, but you'd require my help to seize the opportunity there," Zac said.

Zac wasn't lying. The reward had come from completing the Second Step of Sovereignty with an S-grade performance, and the quest reward was a Limited Trial. That was actually one of the reasons why he had decided to visit the popular trial locations in the Zecia Sector. He had wanted to see how they organized things to turn the trial into a profit center.

And Zac had seen firsthand the huge business opportunity that spots like the Havenfort Chasm represented. There was an endless stream of people wanting access, many of whom were willing to spend fortunes on it. Zac had initially planned on simply putting the structure in his Academy for his members, but he was extremely happy now to have held back on receiving the reward.

He instead wanted to place it on a neighboring planet after the shroud was lifted. He just needed to jump a few dimensional layers and find an abandoned planet with a livable

atmosphere. D-grade planets were almost all taken, but E-grade planets were plentiful. The distance would be short enough for transportation to be cheap and effortless for earthlings, but it would still be hard for outsiders to pinpoint Earth's location.

The Sky Gnome got another round of shock after learning about the Limited Trial, and his face kept undergoing rapid changes.

“Owning 44% of a massive venture is ultimately far preferable to owning 75% of a small local industry,” Zac added, seeing Calrin's hesitance.

“It is indeed, but it's not about that. The consortium is the lifeline of our clan, and by giving you the majority stake, we would lose our freedom, completely tying the fate of our family to your chariot.” Calrin exhaled.

“Don't you think that ship has sailed already?” Zac smiled. “Boje Zethaya saw that ring of yours as well, and more and more earthlings will start traveling the sector over the coming decades. The peak factions might already know, so why not make a bet and swing big?”

Calrin sat frozen for over a minute, and Zac could almost hear gears rapidly turning in his head.

“Ai.” Calrin eventually sighed, and Zac's lips quirked upward. “I thought my good days would finally arrive when that demon bastard got sucked into that living Mystic Realm. But I guess that to live is to suffer. But how about 500 D-grade Nexus Coins for your friend? After all, there are some cranky elders I'd need to bribe, ah, I mean convince.”

ATTENDANT

Things proceeded quickly from the moment Calrin had taken the bait, and Zac soon found himself as the main shareholder of the Mercantile License. There was a simple reason why Zac wanted majority stakes; he needed to start planning for his cultivation early. Getting 1 million D-grade Nexus Coins was an almost unfathomable fortune to him right now, but would it be the same in a few hundred years as he was working on his Cultivator's Core?

Yrial had already said that nurturing a mortal to become a powerhouse was expensive enough to bankrupt a clan, so he needed to become wealthier than normal clans. And what would be a better investment than buying a Mercantile License on the cheap? Thayer Consortium held the greatest control of the economy on Earth by now, and this move improved his control over the planet even further.

Calrin was more than happy to supply all sides of a war, but Zac could now essentially take out whole factions through business, quelling any uprisings before they even started. Besides, he was the main reason for the survival and expansion of the Consortium, so it stood to reason that he should be the one to reap the majority of the rewards.

With that dealt with, he stepped onto the teleporter, and he arrived in a vast subterranean hall a few moments later.

“Warmaster.” A few Zhix guards bowed when they saw who had appeared in their hive.

“I’m here to see the Chainbreaker,” Zac said, and he was wordlessly led through a series of tunnels.

“Is Ibtep here?” Zac asked, thinking he should say goodbye to his oldest Zhix friend as well.

“The Breeder is working on new variants in the underworld,” the guard said, respect written all over their face.

Zac could only wryly smile and nod. If Rhubat, the Chainbreaker, and the other Anointed held the most respect in the hearts of the Zhix population, then Ibtep was a close second. The liaison had returned heroically with the Elixir of Ascension, which had helped the remaining Anointed deal with the drawbacks of their Elixir of Anointment. But that was not the only thing that garnered such respect.

The Zethaya had wanted to butter Zac up and had offered the elixirs free of charge, which Ibtep had gladly accepted without caring whether that put Zac in an awkward position. Instead, the unusual Zhix had used the billions of Nexus Coins on a high-quality Beast Pouch and thousands of different insects, larvae, and other creepy crawlies.

They now bred billions of the things down in the depths, and they provided the Zhix population with everything from “delicious” grubs to enormous worms that were extremely efficient at digging tunnels for hives. The Zhix warriors hadn’t cared in the slightest that Ibtep had used all the pooled money for their own venture. What were some intangible numbers on a status screen in comparison to tasty food?

The hobby had gone so far that it had actually skewed Ibtep’s evolution. They had been a Seeker before, a class aimed at scouting, exploration, and knowledge. Zac didn’t know the exact name of Ibtep’s new class, but it was mainly related to discovering, taming, and breeding beasts. So it still held some of its old features, but it had added husbandry to the mix, making it a proper hybrid class.

Zac soon reached the inner sanctum of the hive, and he was hit by a mist full of Cosmic Energy when the guard opened the gates to Rhubat’s cultivation cave. Inside were a few braziers, with a pond fifty meters across in the middle.

There was also some odd moss growing on the ceiling, and a single glance was all it took for Zac to understand it was a material at the same level as his [**Tree of Ascension**].

The place wasn't quite at the level of his own cultivation cave, but it wasn't too far off either.

“Warmaster, it has been a while,” a rumbling voice echoed through the cave as Rhubat rose from the pond.

The Anointed looked quite different compared to before, now only reaching three meters in height. That didn't mean they had been drastically weakened, though, but rather the opposite. Rhubat's aura was extremely condensed, like they were a bomb on the verge of exploding. Since Ibtap had succeeded with their mission during the events of the Mystic Realm, a large number of the former Anointed had long passed into E-grade.

The titanic Zhix had lost between 50% and 70% of their attributes to rid themselves of the chains that kept them in the F-grade, but Rhubat was the sole exception. Rhubat's experiences in the Hidden Realm along with their latent potential had allowed them to retain almost 80% of their former strength even after taking the antidote, and Rhubat had regained that and much more after passing into the E-grade.

Their whole appearance differed from the normal Zhix as well, as white cracks covered their whole body. They were a result of their final attack that slew Adcarkas, and they bore the jagged scars like a badge of honor. Zac thought it looked pretty good, and it reminded him of kintsugi pottery.

“Looks like you're progressing smoothly.” Zac smiled.

“The Zhix are finally learning to embrace the new chapter of our lives.” Rhubat nodded. “We have found a new methodology we like, and a lot of warriors are making impressive progress. A second revision will soon come out as well, improving it even further.”

Zac nodded, having already heard about it. The Zhix had initially completely disregarded things like cultivation manuals, and to some degree, even skills. And while most had

stopped considering Cosmic Energy as corruption, they still hadn't quite acclimatized to their new reality. However, that was quickly changing as the Anointed and a large group of Zhix scholars had started creating a unique Cultivation Manual made by the Zhix for the Zhix.

It was still pretty rough, but over 90% of all Zhix warriors had still chosen to use it, displaying the characteristic unity of insectoid species.

“That’s good to hear,” Zac said. “I came to tell you that I will be leaving Earth soon, possibly for years.”

“I think that is the right choice,” Rhubat said. “I believe I still have much to gain here in our new world, but I can feel that I will need to leave for the stars within a few decades if I want to move forward. Go without worry; the Zhix will watch over our planet. The Zhix hives all stand behind you; we know you are searching for power for the sake of us as much as for yourself.”

Zac didn't stay long, and he left just five minutes later as Rhubat sank back into the depths of his pool. Zac kept traveling back and forth, making arrangements with his allies and inner circle, though he only told those he really trusted he'd be gone for over a year. Next, Zac spent the following weeks appearing across all corners of Earth, unleashing a storm of violence on the beast populations.

He had been lying low for too long, and the world needed to remember his might if he was to leave for a long time. It also allowed him to make some more inroads into the evolutionary combat technique he had touched upon during his battle with the bloodstalker. Unfortunately, he found that he wasn't making much progress when simply crushing the opposition.

It wasn't a surprise. Progress only happened when one was pushed to the limit, no matter if you talked about the wilds or cultivation. He would have to find some more powerful enemies if he wanted to perfect his new style.

Finally, after waging his one-man war for three full weeks, Zac got a message from Triv. There were energy fluctuations

coming from the Dao Repository, meaning that his Revenant captain was finally coming out after almost two full months inside the inheritance trial. Zac hurried back, just in time to see Vilari emerge from the array.

Zac breathed out in relief when he saw her unscathed. He had been worried that a trial lasting so long would be extremely deadly, but his revenant commander came out looking calm and unruffled like she had just taken a stroll.

“How did it go?” Zac asked. “She didn’t make things difficult because of your Race, right?”

“The Tool Spirit was right. Master said that it didn’t matter. Sapience is the only thing that’s needed to understand suffering,” Vilari answered with an airy voice.

Zac couldn’t help but feel that the “Crown of Despair” was a real downer after hearing that, but how Vilari referred to the mysterious Mentalist piqued his interest.

“Master?” Zac asked.

“Master Ralz Carzood took me as an in-name disciple,” Vilari said with a nod. “She was very pleased with my performance and provided the maximum benefits the rules of the trial allowed. However, I would have to reach her main body for her to take me as a true disciple.”

“Main body?” Zac asked with confusion before his eyes widened in surprise. “She’s actually alive?”

“She said so, at least.” Vilari nodded. “She is a master of the soul, so I guess Master could still maintain a small connection even after having severed a small part for the inheritance.”

“That’s amazing,” Zac said. “What’s your next step?”

“I gained a new Soul Strengthening Method that I believe ultimately suits me better. It has a lower ceiling compared to young master’s, but I think it will be hard for me to perform more than one reincarnation with my lacking affinity to Life,” Vilari said. “I have already created a good foundation, though, so I just need to keep working for a year or two, after which I will evolve to E-grade.”

Zac nodded, happy to hear that she had found a path suited to her. Her aura had changed as well. It was more stable, deeper in a sense. It almost felt like he was talking to an old monster rather than a junior cultivator, but Zac couldn't put his finger on why. Her strength had definitely increased a bit, but not to the point for him to get that feeling. It was rather a sense of vicissitude that was the source.

“Well, I'm glad you're back. Come with me.” Zac nodded as he sent a message into his communication crystal. “There is someone you should meet.”

The two walked over to his courtyard and sat down. They didn't have to wait long until they could hear steps approaching. It was Joanna, who had hurried over at his command. She entered the courtyard, but she froze as her spear appeared in her hand when she spotted Vilari. It was hard to miss her with her strong deathly fluctuations and striking appearance.

Of course, she didn't attack since Zac just sat there, and she instead looked over at him with confusion.

“I thought it was high time the two of you met,” Zac said with a wry smile. “Joanna, meet Vilari, the commander of the Einherjar. Vilari, this is Joanna, commander of the Valkyries. I guess you could say the two of you hold the same position.”

“It's a pleasure to finally meet you,” Vilari said with a small smile as she nodded in Joanna's direction.

“You've made an army of Revenants?” Joanna exclaimed with wide eyes, but she still nodded back at the undead Mentalist. “Where? How? Why?”

“I've worked on it for a few years now,” Zac said. “Our world is changing into one of duality, and I'm kind of adapting. It would be a waste to have half the planet empty.”

“Still...” Joanna said as she looked at Vilari with mixed emotions. “People will freak out. And what about when the shroud lifts and people find a bunch of undead on Earth?”

“There are tens of thousands of cultivators who have become necromancers or have other death-related classes on

Earth. Hiding a few true undead in the mix shouldn't be too big a deal." Zac shrugged before he turned to Vilari.

"Vilari, take Joanna to your compound after this. It's high time your two armies learn to work with each other," Zac said. "The Einherjar is still my dagger hidden in the dark, though, so they can't be exposed to anyone but the Valkyries. Unfortunately, you only have ten days to figure things out. After that, I'm leaving Earth for a long time."

That caught both of their attention, and they waited for him to properly explain.

"I am setting out soon in search of opportunities," Zac said. "I will probably be gone a long time this time around. Vilari, I was thinking of bringing you along; are you interested?"

"I am afraid I would drag you down." Vilari hesitated.

"I am going to a metropolis, so it should be somewhat safe. Bringing an attendant wouldn't be out of the ordinary. However, the length of your stay would depend on what we encounter over there. You might spend just a few minutes, or perhaps over a year," Zac explained.

"It would be my honor," Vilari said with a small smile.

"Only her?" Joanna said with a frown. "How about I and a squad of Valkyries accompany you? We can't match your strength, but we can match hers."

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "Where I am going next, only the undead can follow."

Zac had gone over his options many times over, and he had long decided on his next course of action. His first real outing would be Twilight Harbor.

It was technically possible for Joanna to come with him instead of Vilari, but Zac had decided to go as a Draugr this time and hide his Specialty Core with the array. He hadn't managed to get hold of a single piece of intelligence on Twilight Harbor so far, and he was afraid that it would look odd for a human and a Draugr to travel together.

Leaving the Zecia Sector to visit the gray zone was a huge risk, but one Zac had to take. First of all, it felt like such a place might hold opportunities for someone like him who walked both the path of Life and Death. His progress had stagnated a little over the past years, and he needed something to kick-start it.

Besides, a place that even a pureblood Draugr like Catheya felt worthwhile to mention was probably even more special than she let on. After all, she had followed her Peak C-grade master as he traveled, and they had consciously made a stop there. Conversely, they'd only stopped in the Zecia Sector at all because her master had needed to enter seclusion for a few years.

That was not the only reason to head there first. Zac also needed access to items for himself and his undead warriors. The local chapters of the Undead Empire didn't trade with the living factions of the Zecia Sector, at least not openly. That meant pretty much all the resources his Revenant followers used had been foraged in the Dead Zones.

It was the same for himself. He needed something to push his undead Race to D-grade, and Twilight Harbor was his best bet. It also felt like a good place to widen his own skill repertoire. For example, he still didn't even have a movement skill on his undead side. A commercial hub like Twilight Harbor would definitely have a few repositories to peruse, and he might even find some good skills for his human side.

Part of him had wanted to set out to the Million Gates Territory to search for Ogras now that he was confirmed alive, but it didn't seem like a good idea. He was still too weak and inexperienced to travel a chaotic territory like that. A proper metropolis like Twilight Harbor should be at least somewhat safe in comparison.

Besides, he didn't even have a vessel to travel in that place full of chaotic spatial anomalies. Teleportation arrays didn't really work in that sector, from what he had gathered, so he needed a proper Cosmic Vessel. His best bet was completing the Creator Shipyard quest first and have Karunthel build him

a vessel specifically suited to traversing a dangerous place like that.

He could probably buy a ship with his fortune by this point, but he had far more trust in the Creators than some local shipwrights. Furthermore, his sister was gone, and there would be no way for Zac to tell if the salesmen left some hidden dangers in a bought vessel. And why wouldn't they leave some sort of marker if some unknown E-grade warrior appeared with endless wealth?

So until that point, he'd work hard on gaining power so that he wouldn't actually get himself killed the moment he entered that lawless territory. He at least needed the power to escape from D-grade Hegemons, preferably even killing weaker ones. Luckily, he had a decade to work on himself until that point unless Leandra was lying about the timelines.

Zac spent the next ten days resting up and waiting for the cooldown of his cloaking array to end. He tried to replicate his rudimentary Dao Braid a few hours every day as well, but progress was slow. It did work, but the activation was painfully slow. It was like his Mental Energy was turbid when he wasn't in a heated state, and it took him almost five seconds to create a Dao Braid and infuse it into a skill.

Such a delay mid-battle would almost definitely create a huge opening. But Zac hoped that if he formed his crude braids over and over, it would become an ingrained skill that would flow naturally when it had to be actually used.

Ten days soon passed, and Vilari returned to his courtyard. Zac had talked with everyone he needed to talk to, and he had prepared everything that needed to be prepared. There was also nothing holding him back on Earth any longer. In fact, part of him couldn't wait to get away from Earth for a while.

So there was no reluctance in his gait as the two headed over to the Nexus Hub in the center of the island.

NEW HORIZONS

It felt extremely weird to stand suspended in space, but the discomfort was far overshadowed by the awe as Thea looked down upon the vast continent in the distance, its size breaking both comprehension and the laws of physics.

Just how big was that place? It was endless, and planets were nothing but small marbles that hovered around it. This was what she had dreamed about when listening to the explanations of the Tutorial pixies so long ago. Visiting mysterious faraway lands, walking paths that had never been trod before. And now there was such a continent emitting an amazingly profound aura right in front of her.

If only the circumstances were a bit better.

“Where is this? And why have you taken me here?” Thea asked as she turned to the purple-robed woman next to her.

Mothers-in-law were usually a nightmare, but Leandra Atwood clearly took the trope to another level, telling her that she was not worthy of her precious son before zapping her with lightning and kidnapping her. Thea had spent almost two months locked in some weird tank, with only her thoughts and an infuriating AI for company.

Now she found herself out here, looking out at some alien world. Seeing it was truthfully a bit exhilarating, but it also felt like another kick to the chin. It was a confirmation of what she had come to realize over the past months; her old life was gone.

She had railed at the AI, desperately tried to break out of the prison she had been put inside. She had cried and raged, angry at Zac, at his secretive family, angry at fate, which seemed intent to keep toying with her. She'd even tried using her ultimate escape skill, only to find her skill fractals somehow locked.

Eventually, she had been wrung dry. She had simply let herself drift around in the viscous liquid for a month, her mind devoid of thought and direction. Now that she finally was free, part of her screamed at her to lash out, to strike at her captor with her ultimate skill. But a larger part of her was just a haze of helplessness and exhaustion.

“This is the Goldblade Continent, named after the Goldblade Divine Monarch that once unified it. Now, it's a brutal place full of danger and opportunity, away from the meddling machinations of the cursed System,” Leandra said. “Your new home.”

“Why did you bring me here?” Thea sighed. “Why not just kill me and get it over with?”

“Why would I kill you? Your ‘death’ proved a great motivational tool for my children,” Leandra said. “This is your reward. Thus, the law of balance is maintained and Karmic entanglement avoided. Besides, odds are you will fall in this place, turning falsehood into truth.”

Law of balance, my foot, Thea thought with exasperation.

How could sending her to a hostile continent be considered recompense for blasting her with tribulation lightning and faking her death?

“You know, Zac and my family have probably realized I'm not actually dead,” Thea muttered in a feeble act of defiance, though she honestly wasn't so sure. “I'll eventually escape from this place, or he'll find me one way or another. Either way, your plan will fail.”

“Your understanding is flawed,” Leandra said without raising a brow. “The Heavens struck you down; you died as far as the System is concerned. It is the same for that little

unstable Tool Spirit; it reopened your inheritance the day we left Earth. For them, you are well and truly dead.”

Thea looked at the staid woman floating next to her, realizing that she really didn't have any secrets in front of her. Had this woman read her mind, or had she planted spies around her children since before the integration?

“Why?” Thea eventually asked, which contained all the questions that had rattled around in her head over the past months.

Why kidnap her? Why would Leandra trick her children into hating her?

“I have lived for millions of years,” Leandra slowly said as she looked out across the vast continent.

It wasn't what Thea had asked about, but it still made her eyes widen in shock. She knew that Zac's mom was powerful after seeing that metal monstrosity, but to this point? A million years was approaching the limit of a Monarch, from what she had gathered, unless the Monarch was a temporal cultivator or had found some special treasures to prolong their life even further.

Leandra Atwood was actually someone who had reached even further, someone who eclipsed all the elites of the whole Zecia Sector?

“I have had over twenty Dao partners, the longest coupling lasting for three hundred thousand years. Do you know how that relationship ended? He tried to kill me for the materials in my body. He had been stuck at the peak of Monarchy so long, and he knew that I was about to step into Autarchy. It was his last chance to seize the opportunity for himself.” Leandra smiled.

“Why are you telling me this?” Thea asked. “Are you afraid that I'd rob your son of his resources if I stayed on Earth?”

“No. You aren't qualified to rob my son with that paltry strength of yours, except his momentum. What I am saying is that your relationship was doomed from the start. I think you

knew that as well. As it stands, the two of you are too different,” Leandra said before she turned back toward the endless continent.

“His potential is limitless, and you are just an above-average talent of a backwater sector. You will not be able to follow him for long in your current state. You are already too far apart, and it will only get further away,” Leandra said.

A spark of anger flared up in Thea’s heart, but it was quickly extinguished. First of all, what was she going to do to this insanely powerful cultivator? That was just asking for a beating. Besides, she knew that her kidnapper was right.

She had been relentlessly training herself for three years while Zac had been studying arrays and working on his soul, yet she wasn’t any closer to reaching his level of power. Soon, he would explode forward with momentum again, just like when he returned from the Tower of Eternity.

Even after all she had encountered, she’d barely made it to the end of the sixth floor. Even that was largely thanks to Zac sparing no expense in terms of Array Breakers, talismans, and pills to push her as far as possible. Yet he had made it to the ninth floor, a feat hundreds of times more difficult. And he had fought off half the sector the moment he got out, like an invincible god of war.

The corpse tree outside the Tower of Eternity was still imprinted in her mind, like a part of Zac she never understood. It was easy to forget that the slightly awkward guy she dated was known as the Deviant Asura, one of the most renowned youths of the sector.

“More importantly, neither of you held trust in the other. You never told him you’re not a pure human. You never told him of how you felt trapped on his little island. He never told you of me, nor did he tell you about the undead armies he nurtures in the shadows. You don’t know the truth of his power. Both of you had one foot out the door,” Leandra said. “Your dying was the most beneficial conclusion of your Karma. Look for love when you’ve given up on the Dao.”

“His what?” Thea blurted with shock, but she quickly calmed down again. He had already hidden the fact that he had a robot goddess for a mother; what did it matter now if he kept some Revenants? “So you’re telling me to just give up on my past and live on this faraway continent?”

“The situation here is far more brutal than integrated space. Murder for resources is as common as breathing, and everyone who rises to Hegemony here has walked a path far bloodier than what you can imagine. That is your opportunity. Enter this world, and be baptized and reborn through slaughter. That is your best chance to become a true pillar for your tribe,” Leandra said. “Who knows, it might even allow you to walk in step with my son.

“Though I suspect... even if you gain the power required to make it back, you two will long have forgotten about each other by that point. After all, the Dao is your foremost love.”

Thea gave her kidnapper another glare for good measure before she turned back to the continent. An enormous mountain larger than a planet stood in the core, and there were eighteen layers of clouds as large as nebulae swirling around it. There were vast forests so lush that they could be seen from space, endless oceans, and even topographies that she couldn’t understand in the slightest.

She was not sure what to think. Her future had been stolen, forcibly replaced with what sounded like a hellish meatgrinder. From the sound of it, she would be lucky if she survived a year in this place, let alone long enough for her to return to her family. All those people she had grown up with, would she ever see them again?

Why did she feel so free?

“One day I’ll make it out of this place, if just to prove you wrong.”

Minutes turned to hours and hours turned to days as Zac was shot through the Void out of the Zecia Sector. Even the

teleportation on his previous off-world sojourns had only taken up to thirty minutes before he reappeared, which made it all the more telling just how vast the distances he was dealing with were.

It was like traveling between two galaxies rather than between two star systems in a galaxy. Zac eventually let his mind drift since there wasn't much else he could do. Vilari was probably somewhere close, but it was not like they could communicate mid-teleportation. There was nothing to look at either since teleporters moved you through some hidden dimensional layer.

But on the twelfth day, the wait was finally over, and darkness turned to light.

"Welcome, travelers," a harsh voice said as Zac tried to orient himself. "Oh, imperials?"

Zac frowned at the tone, but he relaxed when he looked up to see the source. It was a massive Corpse-lord, his jaws replaced by a maw that had to have been taken from some beast. The fact that he could form words at all was pretty impressive, so there was no point in reading into the tone. The second comment was more worrying.

"Is that a problem?" Zac asked with a neutral voice as he helped an unsteady Vilari get back on her feet.

"Haw haw! Hardly." The Corpse-lord laughed. "Twilight Harbor welcomes all. In fact, you imperials are an important income source for us. But be warned, the rules and hierarchies of the empire do not hold sway here. No matter what title you have back home, you're simply an honored guest in Twilight Harbor."

"Hm," Zac only said noncommittally.

The Corpse-lord's words were a relief, as it seemed quite normal that people from the Undead Empire came here for opportunities or other purposes. Zac being a Draugr shouldn't stick out too much, though he wanted to see how things looked out on the streets before taking off the mask he wore to block his Race.

Zac knew that the Corpse-lord's words came with caveats as well: power trumps all. His warning might be true for most guests, but Zac guessed that if some empire princeling came to this remote base, they could probably run rampant while the rulers had to grit their teeth and smile.

He had learned as much as he could about the Undead Empire over the past few years, causing Triv to suffer innumerable backlashes. Its hierarchy was quite simple. The local chapter of the Undead Empire in the Zecia Sector was a peak force there, but it was ultimately just regarded as a province. Its actual name was the Kavriel Province after the ruling clan, though most of the living didn't bother with making such a distinction.

Undead provinces could be weak or strong, but they were always led by a C-grade force. The undead province in the Zecia Sector was definitely on the weaker side, just like Zecia was one of the weaker C-grade sectors. However, true undead kingdoms always had B-grade cultivators at the top. One such kingdom could directly or indirectly control dozens or perhaps even hundreds of C-grade sectors the size of Zecia.

Finally, lording over the large number of kingdoms were the Undead Heartlands, the true core of the Undead Empire. This was the cultivation mecca of all undead. Apparently, there were a number of unusually powerful kingdoms inside the Heartlands, along with the core where the Undead Princes, and perhaps even the Primo, resided.

Catheya's clan was from one of these Heartland kingdoms, by the sounds of it, which made her identity quite elevated among the undead. However, Zac guessed that most "imperials" who visited Twilight Harbor actually came from one of the outer kingdoms unless Twilight Harbor was situated close to some wormhole that somehow connected to the Heartlands.

The Corpse-lord actually seemed a bit relieved at Zac's reaction, further proving Zac's hypothesis of there being some unruly visitors from the empire. He took out two small tokens next and handed them over to Zac.

“This is the Twilight Token. Seeing as you were invited by the Eldritch Archivals, they have already filled it with one month’s worth of occupancy fees. If you want to prolong your stay, you’ll have to go through them,” the guard added.

“Thank you,” Zac said and threw the guardian a couple of D-grade Miasma Crystals as thanks.

His eyes lit up, and he immediately stashed them away, which gave Zac some clues as well. The Corpselord guard was either a decently strong High E-grade cultivator or an average Peak E-grade warrior. But his eyes lit up at a few D-grade crystals, proving that his economic situation wasn’t all that good.

This was actually not that big a surprise, as Zac had been shocked to learn that most cultivators in the Multiverse were pretty poor, often downright broke. Zac had figured that most people would be trillionaires after accumulating their gains over decades, but the reality wasn’t so nice.

It all came down to the monopolization of resources and the high cost of living. If Zac wanted to make a few million Nexus Coins, he would just kill a few thousand E-grade beasts and sell their bodies or alternatively kill one Early D-grade beast. But what if all the forests were controlled by powerful clans, clans who charged exorbitant fees to enter the hunting grounds, and even more exorbitant fees to stay in their town for protection?

Everything of value was long divvied up and taken by the powerful factions, with wandering cultivators generally living a pretty wretched life. They had to pay through the nose for every step forward in their cultivation, often to the point that they had to indenture themselves to the local forces. All that money then went to the D- or C-grade ancestors on the top, who were essentially black holes when it came to money.

“Ah, one tip, if the young master would be interested. I guess you are here for the Twilight Ascent. You should join the event through the Eldritch Archivals even if your power will allow you to do so by yourself. The Archivals have seeded slots with better starting positions,” the guard said.

Zac didn't even know who the Eldritch Archivals were, let alone the Twilight Ascent, but he still nodded in thanks before he led Vilari out of the teleportation house.

"How are you doing?" Zac asked with a low voice, knowing that teleporters did a number on most people.

"I'll adjust in a minute," Vilari said. "These Eldritch Archivals..."

"We'll deal with it as it comes." Zac shrugged. "Let's take a look at this place."

Outside was a vast square full of people, but Zac wasn't focused on that as he looked around in awe. He didn't exactly know what he had expected when thinking of the name Twilight Harbor, but it wasn't this.

Zac could only shake his head when thinking back to his conversation with Catheya all those years ago. She had made it sound like Twilight Harbor was just a little hamlet at a border sector, but the grandeur he witnessed was almost beyond his comprehension.

This was a true metropolis.

Twilight Harbor was actually not placed on a planet, from the looks of it, but rather a large number of gargantuan plateaus floating about in a cosmic cloud. Some of the plateaus were clearly earmarked for the undead, with Miasmatic clouds swirling around enormous spires that stretched tens of thousands of meters into the air. Conversely, some platforms were teeming with life, made for the living inhabitants.

In fact, one of the smaller plateaus just had a single huge tree planted, its canopy stretching across a distance measured in hundreds of miles. It was not quite at the level of the Lifebringer Tree he had seen in his Dao visions, but it was far beyond the [**Avar World Trees**] whose seed Kenzie had used in her evolution attempt.

There were hundreds of plateaus altogether, with most of them having a clear alignment of either life and death. But there were a handful that seemed to house both. These platforms were as large as a dozen of the smaller ones, and

they looked like proper continents with mountains, forests, and hundreds of cities strewn along their surfaces.

Amazingly, these platforms all formed a multilayered sphere around a mysterious light that seemed to be radiating with life one moment and the chill of death the next. Zac first thought it was an attuned sun, but it didn't look like it. It almost looked alive since it pulsed with a heartbeat, and it continuously spewed out those energy-rich clouds that suffused the whole area.

The platforms all seemed to have a gravity of their own, as he could see mountains pointing down toward him from a platform right above him, and there were platforms in the distance that stood at a 90-degree angle to properly bask in the radiance of the mysterious light source. It almost looked like the hundreds of platforms were the broken pieces of an impossibly large planet, and the anomaly was the world core that once held it all together.

Zac was almost frozen in place from the scene, and he couldn't believe how freely and seemingly effortlessly Life and Death comingled in this place. If he couldn't find any clues to dealing with Earth's dual affinities or his cultivation here, then he might as well give up.

GUIDE

“It is quite a sight,” a sultry voice commented to Zac’s side, dragging him out of his reverie.

“Dreamers living among our people. I didn’t believe my master when he told me,” Zac said with a snort as he turned toward the source of the voice.

It was a Revenant, probably a human with a bit of demonic heritage. She didn’t have any horns, but her hands were a bit clawed, and her skin had a thin pattern reminiscent of that of the Torrid Demons. She wore a tightfitting dress that looked more like an evening gown than a cultivator’s attire, but she did emit the aura of someone at Early E-grade.

He couldn’t tell whether she was a turned Revenant or if she was a natural-born undead of Peak E-grade warriors, but he guessed the latter was more common in an established place like this.

“Is young master perchance an imperial?” the Revenant asked, and her eyes lit up when Zac slightly nodded.

He had already decided to go under the guise of a random scion of an imperial Draugr clan after hearing the introduction from the Corpselord guard earlier. It felt like the safest bet, considering he still didn’t know if there were actual pureblood Draugr native to a place like this.

“May I ask if young master requires a guide? I am a native to Twilight Harbor and know all the ins and outs. I can make myself available for as long as master needs, and I’m sure young master will be satisfied by my... services.”

The Revenant was a professional guide, just as Zac assumed. It was a pretty common way for cultivators to make some extra money, especially among the weaker cultivators who were afraid to risk their lives in Mystic Realms or hunting grounds. A glance around the square showed that there were over a thousand teleportation stations just like the one he'd arrived in, and there was a small group of cultivators waiting outside all of them.

The voluptuous Revenant wasn't the only one waiting outside the station where Zac had appeared; there were actually six more undead guides. There were also five living ones: three humans, a treant, and a beastkin. However, none of the living had approached Zac when he appeared, and Zac guessed there were unspoken rules at play here.

"Ah, Triskatal is a decent bedwarmer, but her connections are lacking. Young master strikes me as a man with great purpose who has better things to do than to waste time with a mere female. I have connections with two information houses, and I can provide far more detailed accounts of events and noteworthy persons in Twilight Harbor," a Corpselord said as he donned a terrifying smile, though Zac guessed he was trying to look amiable.

The Revenant threw the competition an infuriated glance, but she didn't have time for a rebuttal before another guide spoke up, detailing the perks of hiring them. It almost turned into a brawl, leading Zac to believe there was a surplus of guides compared to visitors. However, Zac's curiosity was piqued, as one of the guides stood silent.

It wasn't that she was above competing with the others, she just lacked presence. She tried to speak up a few times, but she was quickly shot down, seemingly unable to shamelessly boast with such gusto. Of course, that wasn't really why he was curious.

"Ah, don't mind that lass. She's a novice, and she was fired by her last employer," Triskatal said when she noticed Zac's look. "She actually has the nerve to charge fifty E-grade Nexus Coins a day as well, as though she were a senior guide."

“You are Draugr?” Zac asked, ignoring the comment.

Zac couldn't stop some hesitation from seeping into his voice as he asked, though, since she looked a bit different from himself or Catheya. Her eyes were black orbs just like his own, but they were matte and devoid of the abyssal feeling that Draugr eyes naturally possessed. She also had a few traits not normally associated with Draugr, such as slightly pointy ears and an odd vertical ridge in her forehead.

“I wouldn't dare,” the young girl said with a bow. “There happens to be some divine blood in my ancestry. But I am not part of the Draugr clans living in Twilight Harbor. You can consider me a normal Revenant.”

“Hmm,” Zac said.

He was quite relieved by her words. It had been a bit of a gamble to seal his Specialty Core in his undead state since he didn't know what kind of reactions his Draugr Heritage would create in a place like this. But between how common it seemed to be for “imperials” to come here, and the fact that there were actual Draugr clans present, it looked like his appearance wouldn't create any waves.

Part of him wanted to stay under the radar as he went about his business, but his experiences in Base Town had imparted him with some valuable knowledge. Being too inconspicuous would only result in you getting discriminated against and losing out on important opportunities.

If anything, trying to lie low increased the odds of you getting in trouble with people with strong backgrounds, as no one would miss a dead wandering cultivator. Meanwhile, his Draugr appearance essentially made him a VIP by birthright, and people wouldn't randomly move against him, out of fear of whatever clan backed him. In fact, even the local clans would speak up for him if it came to it, as the nobility of the five Races couldn't be impugned.

Of course, the goal was to strike a balance. Going too far in posturing would just make you a target, like the Eveningtide Asura or Yrial.

“Ah, I-I have information connections as well!” the half-blood Draugr hurriedly said when Zac didn’t speak up again. “My father is a fact-checker for a local intelligence merchant. I am up to date on all the latest events!”

“Why were you fired by your last employer?” Vilari asked, as she understood Zac was interested.

“I don’t provide... those... kinds of services,” the girl said as her eyes darted toward the Revenant called Triskatal. “The employer thought it was implied because of the price.”

“Good, I’ll hire you. Let’s start with one week and take it from there.” Zac nodded as he took off his mask, his appearance creating some waves among the congregated guides.

“Pureblood,” one of the Revenants whispered with a mix of dejection and envy, and the other guides sighed and walked away.

They might have been willing to compete for the assignment before, but they gave up when they saw Zac’s abyssal eyes. The noble Races tended to stay with their own, and a half-blood Draugr was obviously better than a normal Revenant.

“I’m Nala. Thank you for giving me this opportunity. Where does young master wish to go?” Nala asked, clearly having some trouble looking into Zac’s eyes. Perhaps she felt a bit pressured by speaking with a proper pureblood Draugr.

“I’m in no hurry; take us to some interesting places,” Zac said with a smile. “It’s not often I get to leave the clan.”

“Ah, if young master wishes to relieve stress during his stay, I am always available to accompany you. I also have connections with various Flower Houses. Someone with your grand Heritage would be welcomed with the utmost of service,” Triskatal hurriedly said as Zac started walking away.

A communication crystal flew up from between her breasts the next moment, making its way toward Zac. However, the crystal disintegrated as Vilari sent a spiritual wave at it, making the Revenant grimace.

“That won’t be necessary,” Zac said as he walked away with Vilari silently walking in tow.

Zac emitted the aura of a Peak-E grade warrior, but he was still just in the middle stages, and his body was still solely powered by the black ichor sitting in his veins. Of course, Triv had actually divulged that there were compounds that could temporarily awaken one’s body, not only making amorous encounters but even pregnancy possible.

However, those kinds of Zombie erection pills left behind quite a bit of pill poison, and indulging too much in them could even harm one’s foundations.

“If the young master wishes to take in the sights of Twilight Harbor, how about a boat ride between the plateaus?” Nala ventured.

“Sounds good.” Zac shrugged.

“Twilight Harbor uses special vessels that are powered by the Twilight Clouds between the islands. I have a vessel,” Nala said as she took out a decent-looking flying treasure. “I borrowed my family’s ship. It is a bit low end; there are better ones for rent as well.”

“This one is fine, as long as it flies.” Zac shrugged as he walked aboard.

Vilari gave the square a last look before she walked over and sat down next to Zac. Nala hurriedly jumped on as well, instructing the small vessel to lift off. The ship rose from the platform, and Zac realized it wasn’t actually covered by a barrier. Even then, he definitely felt he was inside a proper atmosphere, making him believe the whole harbor was covered in a gargantuan atmospheric bubble thousands of times larger than Earth.

The mysterious clouds didn’t seem to be able to reach the platforms, though, but they rather formed what looked like rivers of stardust between the various islands. There were two separate types of rivers. One was the familiar cold aquamarine of Miasma, while the other was a much warmer yellow river.

It was clear that the rivers stemmed from the anomaly in the center of Twilight Harbor, but Zac was interested to note that the anomaly was neither aquamarine nor yellow, nor a mix of them. It rather was rather a murky gold that rather leaned toward green, and it didn't change whether it emitted the feeling of life or death.

Nala steered the flying vessel to float on top of one of the Miasmatic rivers. Zac could feel that it actually helped the ship pick up speed. However, they only moved for a few thousand meters before the ship slowed down until it came to a crawl.

“What’s wrong?” Zac asked.

“I, ah, haven’t really given any tours so far, so I was trying to map out a good route,” Nala said with embarrassment.

“That’s fine. That’s partly why I hired you.” Zac laughed.

Zac wasn’t lying. Some things didn’t change even when comparing pre-integration Earth and the Multiverse. The guides in metropolises like this were very much like the tourist guides back home. They would take you to all kinds of stores where they had “connections,” where their business partners waited to sell you low-quality items at a premium.

A greenhorn was more likely to bring him to proper establishments since she hadn’t had time to build that kind of seedy network. And with her father’s connections, Zac believed she should have a good understanding of the comings and goings of this place.

“How about this, take me to some place where I can sit down and enjoy some incense for an hour or two. I don’t want any of those kinds of services, just a calm environment for us to stabilize after a long teleportation,” Zac said, noting that Vilari’s aura was still a bit unstable.

“Certainly! There is a highly reputable Incensary run by the Sharva’Zi Clan not far from here. It provides a great view of the Twilight Ocean as well. I believe it would be up to young master’s requirements.”

“The Sharva’Zi?!” Zac blurted with surprise, but he quickly reined himself in. “Do you know if any of them are

here?”

“That is beyond me. Perhaps some have come for the Twilight Ascent, but the imperial clans usually only have a few branch members stationed here to run their businesses,” Nala said, clearly trying to avoid reading into Zac’s reaction. “Most of those who work there are natives.”

Zac finally understood what had brought Catheya here while traveling with her master. It sounded like she had stopped by to look into their interests before moving on. Meeting Catheya was not something he had planned, but he also was a bit curious if she was here. He guessed it depended on whether her master had emerged from his seclusion back in the Zecia Sector.

He had a completely different aura while undead and a new appearance with the help of **[Million Faces]** to make him look more like a natural Draugr, and Catheya shouldn’t be able to recognize him even if they came face-to-face. He also had one simple thing working for him: the fact that it was so ludicrous that someone could be both a Draugr and a human that no one would even think of such a possibility.

But even then, there was no point in playing with fire.

“I am here incognito under my master’s orders, and I don’t want to make my presence known. I think it’s best if we visit another establishment,” Zac slowly said.

“Certainly, I know of many more such establishments.” Nala quickly nodded. “Millions of people have come here for the Twilight Ascent, and many are using temporary identities. After all, when there are benefits, there will be competition, and no one wants to bring grudges back to their clans.”

“Good.” Zac nodded.

The boat moved slowly toward a plateau two disks over, and it was clearly controlled by the undead. Occasionally, Nala would have the flying vessel fly over to another river heading in the right direction, and she rarely flew through the void itself. Zac first felt they were moving quite slowly along the

energy rivers, but he soon realized that the speed was deceptive.

They passed a whole disk in just thirty minutes, and even the smallest disks were dozens of times larger than his island back home. The one they had passed was large as well, and he had seen whole mountain ranges flash by in under a minute. That meant Nala's dingy flying treasure was actually flying more than one hundred times as fast as his own leaf, something that was hard to believe considering the guide's apparent economic situation along with her strength.

"The leading clans have installed special arrays in Twilight Harbor," Nala explained as she looked down on her flying treasure with some embarrassment. "This treasure is just average, as young master guessed. Instead, space is shrunk a hundred times along these Twilight Rivers, and the river itself generates a powerful thrust forward. It's thanks to this even us low-grade cultivators can move between disks without spending months on travel. There are teleporters as well, but outsiders cannot use them."

"I'm surprised to see these kinds of arrangements in a frontier sector," Vilari said to hide Zac's ignorance.

"It is because a lot of the factions here have powerful backing from elsewhere. Their economic background can't be compared to normal local factions in a frontier sector. The Twilight Ocean is what truly makes it possible, though, since it unceasingly expels energy into the area," Nala said and pointed to a glowing object beneath them.

"How about you introduce this place to me? My master simply handed me a Teleportation Token and told me there would be opportunities in a place called Twilight Harbor, but he didn't say much else," Zac said. "What's the Twilight Ocean?"

"Ah, so it's like that," Nala said with surprise. "The sphere down there is the Twilight Ocean, or rather the entrance to it. It's closed right now, but it is still discharging enormous amounts of Miasma and Cosmic Energy. That's the whole basis of Twilight Harbor."

Zac hummed in understanding, a bit surprised to hear that the star itself was the ocean. He had just assumed the nebulous clouds and the Twilight Rivers were the oceans, and the platforms the harbor.

“Is that star why this place holds mixed races?”

“Yes,” Nala said. “The Twilight Ocean expels both life-and death-attuned energies, and unless both sides are present to absorb it, then the atmosphere will slowly become imbalanced.”

“What is the Twilight Ocean?” Zac asked curiously. “A Mystic Realm? Or an aberrant star?”

“It is a supreme-grade Mystic Realm, from what I have heard, and the place where the Twilight Ascent is being held. The Twilight Lord founded this place, and his descendant is still officially in charge of the ocean,” Nala said before she lowered her voice. “Of course, many of the ancient clans have great influence in this place, with the current generation Twilight Lord mainly focusing on his cultivation. He hasn’t actually been seen for almost thirty thousand years now, and many think he is preparing to assault Peak C-grade.”

Zac was about to ask some more questions, but they had almost reached their destination by that point – one of the world disks that had to be the home of billions of cultivators.

OLD FRIEND

Nala had taken them to a medium-sized disk with millions of elegant spires reaching toward the stars. There were also whole towns and enormous settlements erected on platforms between some of the larger spires, forming a multilayered society that stretched thousands of meters into the air. It looked like a normal metropolis for people of mixed heritage, rather than something belonging to a singular force.

Interestingly enough, the disk had structures built both on the top and on bottom surfaces, and it had a far greater slant compared to most disks to allow both sides to be angled toward the Twilight Ocean. On the bottom, there were even more towers that were reminiscent of stalactites. There were some hanging cities as well, though Nala flew toward a particular tower that looked like a hanging garden basking in the radiance of Twilight.

“This is Gaun’s Escape, a mixed disk controlled by a consortium of twelve undead factions, six local and six foreign. That’s a rule set by the Twilight Lord. Foreign factions are only allowed to control a third of the disks, but they can have control of up to half ownership on another third. That way the power balance between local and foreign is evenly divided,” Nala explained, after which she lowered her voice. “Of course, if it comes down to it, the foreign factions are more powerful, and there are many hidden alliances.”

Zac nodded, not being too surprised. There was the saying that even a dragon can’t suppress the local snake, but Zac didn’t feel it to be true. If those imperial clans really wanted

this place, they would long have seized it, but the benefits likely didn't match the costs.

"I'll wait outside, young master," Nala said as she stopped in front of the grand entrance to the Incensary.

"Come with us," Zac said with a shake of his head. "How will you explain the situation in this place from out here?"

"Ah, but this establishment." Nala hesitated as she glanced at a plaque.

Zac looked over, and he understood what she was talking about. Just a balcony cost 100 E-grade Nexus Coins, and ordering some Spiritual Incense was even more. A short visit to this place would eclipse Nala's whole salary.

It looked like a metropolis really had metropolis prices.

"I'll pay, of course," Zac said as he walked inside.

His appearance caused some waves, and the regular waitress was recalled to let a head waiter lead Zac to a beautiful private balcony at the edge of the plateau. It was over a hundred square meters and furnished to look like a celestial garden full of white and black flowers Zac had never seen before. Zac and Vilari sat down at a table close to the edge, where they could overlook the Twilight Ocean and the ships sailing by on the hundreds of rivers.

Zac exchanged a few words with the waiter, and he came with a packet a minute later and carefully started a small fire on a stove in the middle of the table. An azure flame lit up from the brazier, and Zac felt a soothing sensation spread throughout his body as he was inundated in a herbal haze.

The undead had truly mastered the art of incense after being locked out of most other vices until later stages. The herb mixture he had ordered not only smelled amazing, but it also had impressive medical properties. It felt like his cells were covered in a soothing stream, allowing them to calm down and stabilize after the extremely long teleportation.

Nala didn't seem as calm, and Zac had to exhort her to sit down at the table.

“So give me a rundown of the major factions in this place,” Zac said after having enjoyed the smoke and the view for a few minutes.

“Yes, certainly. As I mentioned, the Twilight Lord is the supposed leader of Twilight Harbor, but he does not control a real faction. He has a few thousand ‘brothers’ as he calls them, various wandering cultivators who run errands for him. However, even the weakest of among them is an elite E-grade cultivator.

“But the actual controlling organ is the Twilight Council, an executive branch made up of thirteen native clans. They are in charge of security, tax collection, and so on, though they are officially under the Twilight Lord himself.

“These thirteen clans are all C-grade forces with five undead factions, six living factions, and two aberrant factions. The aberrants are the necromancy council and the Rox’At Elementals. The members of the Necromancers’ Guild are technically living, but they naturally lean toward our side. The elementals are their own type of life-forms and could be considered neutral.”

“How many C-grade forces are in this place?” Zac asked with a small frown.

“Around fifty, with the council members being the strongest. Of course, that’s just officially. There are both wandering Monarchs living here temporarily and hidden Monarchs among the foreign factions as well,” Nala explained.

“We imperials should be putting some pressure on the living even if we are outsiders. There should be a counterforce to our presence here,” Zac said. “Who is it?”

“You’re exactly right.” Nala nodded. “There are two forces, actually. One is the Radiant Temple, and the other is the Havarok Empire. Both are B-grade factions with their headquarters in more prosperous sections of the Multiverse. Their presence here is actually a bit greater than the Undead Empire’s, but they are not of one mind and have some internal disagreements.”

“But if the empire makes a move, these two will band together to resist us,” Zac muttered, receiving an affirmative nod.

“Just what’s so alluring about this place?” Zac eventually asked. “Why do these factions waste that sort of effort?”

“Well, one reason is that Twilight Harbor has become a major trading hub of the frontier sectors. All sorts of interesting items pop up as the Boundless Heavens integrates the uncharted reaches, and many of them make their way here. It’s a convenient place for those above to extract the true treasures of these sectors without having to travel all over the frontier,” Nala said. “The second reason is the Twilight Ocean.”

“Isn’t it just another Mystic Realm trial ground?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Well, it does present a good opportunity for people like the young master to temper themselves, along with the opportunity to gain a high-quality Limited Title,” Nala said. “But the Mystic Realm also has some rarely seen properties that attract cultivators from far and wide.”

“Does it have to do with how it expels both Miasma and Cosmic Energy?” Zac asked.

“Just so,” Nala said as she looked down at the glowing orb. “Many believe that the Twilight Ocean was created by two enormous Mystic Realms colliding, one life-attuned and one death-attuned. It resulted in the Twilight Ocean.

“That by itself is a miracle, but more interestingly, it created new energy, Twilight Energy. It is a mix of life and death,” the guide continued.

“Is that really possible?!” Zac asked, barely able to contain his excitement.

“Perhaps only the Monarchs know how it is possible,” Nala said. “But the Twilight Energy can’t leave the Mystic Realm. The moment it escapes the spatial tunnel, it splits up into normal energy, which is what enriches this area. The

energy is then funneled to the various platforms through the Twilight Rivers.

“The Twilight Energy has given birth to various treasures that are useful for both the living and undead,” the guide explained. “Most notable are the Twilight Fruits.”

“What’s their effect?” Zac asked curiously.

“They are used as an ancillary product for pill and incense making. They contain the odd reconciliatory effect of Twilight Energy, and they are extremely useful in helping fuse incompatible materials,” Nala said. “They can both make impossible recipes possible, or increase the success rate of recipes with high failure rates. They are a favorite among Alchemists in the inner sectors.”

Zac’s eyes widened when he heard about the properties of Twilight Fruits. Having that kind of effect was amazing, and he could understand how it was so sought after. It might not matter much for random healing pills, but supreme pills often had extremely high failure rates. Add to that the cost of materials, and you could save a fortune by using these fruits.

“What grade are the fruits?” Zac asked.

“The Twilight Ocean has been grade restricted by the Boundless Heavens, and the Twilight Fruits match the grade. And the grade of the fruit has to match the grade of the pill. The most precious fruits are therefore the C-grade Twilight Fruits, but they rarely appear on the market,” Nala said.

“What does an E-grade Twilight Fruit go for?” Zac asked.

“Around 100 E-grade Nexus Coins after a Twilight Ascent,” Nala said, and Zac’s interest was quickly extinguished. “But the price can rise to almost 300 if it has been a long time since the last opening.”

It was a lot of money, but it would barely make a dent in Zac’s finances. Nala seemed to understand his thoughts, and she quickly continued.

“The use of E-grade Fruits is limited because there is no lack of D-grade Alchemists who can concoct even difficult E-grade pills with high success rates. The value of D-grade fruits

is exponentially higher. However, there is another reason to pluck the fruits,” she added.

“What?” Zac asked curiously.

“The council and the large mercantile unions all want to make sure that as many fruits as possible are extracted during every opening. So they have something called the ‘Fate-Plucking Ladder.’ The more fruits you pluck, the higher your placement. As is customary, there are also extremely valuable rewards for those who perform well,” the guide explained.

“Can you kill others for fruits inside the Mystic Realm?” Zac asked.

“Yes, there are no limitations except the grades. Weaker cultivators usually stay closer to the entrance. There are fewer fruits and other treasures, but the odds of running into a dangerous foe is a lot lower,” Nala said. “In fact, I have a crystal here with the information my father has prepared as part of my services.”

“Oh?” Zac said as he accepted the information crystal.

He briefly scanned the crystal and saw that it contained all kinds of tips and tricks for the Twilight Ascent, and he felt that Nala’s relatively high price might actually be pretty cheap when it came down to it. There were even old ladders provided, and Zac was a bit surprised to see that you needed to gather over ten thousand fruits to make it into the top ten of the E-grade ladder.

That by itself was over a D-grade Nexus Coin, a massive fortune for most E-grade warriors. Of course, those who managed to gather that many fruits were definitely extremely powerful cultivators at the peak of E-grade, just one step away from evolving. For them, the real reward would probably be the items from the event itself.

Vilari and Nala sat in silence as Zac perused the crystal, but he didn’t manage to get far before he frowned and quickly put on his mask again.

“I’m sad. I heard an old friend had come to this corner of the universe, yet he chose to go to this place instead of visiting

me.” An all-too-familiar voice suddenly emerged from the entrance to the balcony, causing Zac’s hair to stand on end as he looked up from the crystal.

It looked like some things really couldn’t be avoided.

Zac looked over toward the door to his balcony, and it truly was Catheya Sharva’Zi, who had appeared out of nowhere, with Varo silently standing behind her. This time, she was also accompanied by a female Revenant who looked bulkier than most Corpselords. She even had a foot on Billy, and Zac suspected that she might actually be a turned pureblood Titan.

The muscular cultivator was definitely not in the D-grade, but she should be at the very precipice with great accumulations. Even Zac didn’t feel confident in a contest of pure strength against her, though that was just one of his advantages.

That wasn’t the only surprise, as both Catheya’s and Varo’s auras had taken a drastic turn. They might not be at the peak of E-grade, but they had to be at High E-grade, from what he could tell. Zac could only inwardly lament the difference it made to have a C-grade master. He had no doubt prepared some sort of course for his disciple to rapidly push her and her follower through the early stages of the grade.

After all, that was how most elites did it, from how Zac understood things. Levels were easy to gain in the early grades, and they helped increase survivability in Mystic Realms. So people rushed through levels to gain the class quests and attributes, then slowed down to work on their Daos and cultivation path.

The only detriment to that tactic was that some lost their momentum while working on their Daos, but elite cultivators had enough discipline for that to not become a real issue.

“Nala, could you give us a moment,” Zac said as he looked over at his guide.

Nala already seemed to want to shrink through the floor upon being stared at by Catheya and her followers. She

quickly nodded and scurried out of the balcony, only stopping to give a deep bow toward Catheya before hurrying out. Catheya only glanced at her as she waited for Nala to leave the area.

Only then did Catheya walk forward and sit down. She did give Vilari a curious glance, but she soon turned her focus to Zac.

“I expected to find a human named Zac Piker resting here, yet I’ve run into two undead. Tell me, who are you?” Catheya said with a slight smile as she looked Zac up and down, but there was a dangerous glint in her pitch-black eyes. “And don’t play dumb. The dust left over from the token is still all over you.”

Zac sighed as he took off his mask, exposing his abyssal eyes and a finely sculpted pearl-white face. It had almost perfect proportions, a mix of masculinity and grace. Zac had aimed for “warrior elf” when he’d crafted his current features with **[Million Faces]**, forming a more believable appearance with the help of Triv. He was also almost a decimeter taller than his real stature, which was the limit he could change without feeling it affect his combat strength.

It turned out that Zac’s normal appearance was simply too ugly to pass off as a proper pureblood Draugr, even after having pushed his human Race to D-grade and enjoying the slight natural boost to his features. Real Draugr weren’t really at the level of vampires in the movies, but they definitely wouldn’t be described as “average-looking.”

Zac had eventually landed on a particular look that was distinct from his human face. He was completely clean-shaven since Draugr apparently didn’t have beards, and he had changed his hair color to a steely gray, which was held back in a warrior’s knot. It made him slightly different compared to the bright silver of Be’Zi and Catheya.

His transformation skill physically altered his bone structure and skin, so there was no risk of his real appearance being exposed. At most, someone might figure out his appearance was modified without spotting the original. And

Zac had practiced giving himself this particular face hundreds of times to make it his own.

He felt confident that not even the members of Port Atwood would be able to pick him out looking like this, let alone Catheya.

“I suppose you are Catheya Sharva’Zi, the one who assisted my junior brother?” Zac said with a sigh. “We should have guessed you branded the token.”

In fact, Zac had seen it as a distinct possibility that they would do something exactly like that, which was why he had changed his appearance and come up with a lie in advance. Of course, he had also believed that if he was marked, he would have been visited by some of Catheya’s followers rather than Catheya herself.

There was always a small chance of Catheya actually being here, but he figured that someone like her wouldn’t visit the same place in a frontier sector twice. But he should have guessed she would pop up here after learning about the Twilight Ascent.

Meeting her as his undead persona would complicate things, but there was not much to do about it. He needed to come to Twilight Harbor as an undead because he needed resources, and it was definitely the right call after seeing how segregated Twilight Harbor was.

“Pureblood,” the Titan Revenant muttered with surprise before she glanced speculatively at her master.

“Who are you? I can’t recognize your aura at all. There’s no way you’re part of those half-blood clans in the Zecia Sector,” Catheya said with a frown. “But I don’t remember any Heritage from back home giving off the same scent as you either.”

“Well, I’m not part of the Empire, so I’m not surprised.” Zac smiled, but he was surprised at how strong a reaction Catheya and her followers had. “And you can call me Arcaz Black.”

“Impossible!” Catheya spat. “You’re a true pureblood, nothing like these unattached half-blood clans. How do you not have the mark of the Primo?!”

Zac knew he would have been exposed in no time if he pretended to be part of the Undead Empire since his knowledge was just at surface level. He figured it wouldn’t be a big deal considering there were Draugr clans native to Twilight Harbor. But it looked like there was a stark difference between pure-blood and half-blood clans.

In either case, there was no stopping now, so Zac could just brush it aside.

“Well, my background is a bit complicated. I see no reason to go into detail. What brings you here?” Zac shrugged.

“Where is Zac Piker?” Catheya asked in return.

“Busy cultivating, I assume,” Zac said, trying to appear laidback.

“Well, that’s a disappointment, but it was just a spur-of-the-moment thing anyway,” Catheya muttered thoughtfully before she looked at Zac with a spurious smile.

“So why shouldn’t I turn you over to some enforcers of the Empire?” Catheya asked with a smile. “A pureblood Draugr of unknown heritage running around without any connection to his roots. Who knows what kind of trouble that might bring?”

LIES AND PROPOSITIONS

“Turn me in?” Zac smiled, though he inwardly didn’t feel as confident.

He had already confirmed with Triv that not being attached wasn’t a crime, but that was just the official ruleset. Zac wouldn’t be surprised if some hardliners within the Empire wanted to eradicate everyone who didn’t pledge allegiance to their god emperor the Primo.

Zac tried to gauge whether Catheya was serious or just probing him in search of information, but he didn’t get anything from her smiling facade. Varo, her staid attendant, didn’t provide any guidance either, as his face was as wooden as when they’d met in the Base Town. Only the Titan displayed open hostility, but Zac felt it was more of a character trait than a testament to her true feelings.

It looked like he would have to channel his inner Ogras for a bit, and if that failed, he could always book it with his escape talisman.

“Are you sure that’s in your best interest?” Zac shrugged with a lazy expression. “Are you really willing to become the sinner of your clan? In fact, I think you’ll become my most ardent protector.”

“Ardent protector? The sinner of my clan?” Catheya said, her glistening smile widening. “How bombastic. Perhaps I should just drag you back to the clan to let the elders decide your fate? That way I won’t be responsible for the fallout.”

“Don’t you think it’s odd I dared come to this remote place alone, even with my complicated background?” Zac sighed. “I knew there was a risk using your token, so I made some preparations of my own. If something happens to me or Vilari here, a few very damaging information missives will find their way to various intelligence houses and clans.”

“Missives?” Catheya repeated with a raised brow.

“Missives detailing an illicit affair between an Aetherlord and a Draugr Autarch from the Heartlands. Giving up on the commandments for love and pursuit of their boundless path.” Zac laughed. “I don’t know if Mistress Be’Zi’s actions can be considered illegal, but I am sure the facts can be used against Clan Sharva’Zi by competing factions.”

“And you would just be willing to throw my ancestor under the bus?” Catheya snorted as the brows of the Titan furrowed. “Are you not afraid you’d become an exile?”

“She casts such a long shadow, I’m sure she wouldn’t mind me using her name to protect myself.” Zac shrugged.

The situation had been tense ever since Catheya had entered the balcony, but it was like the temperature dropped over twenty degrees as the group sat steeped in silence. What he was doing was a calculated gamble based on what little he knew of the Undead Empire. They all followed Heaven’s Path, as far as Zac could tell, and someone becoming an unorthodox cultivator was probably not as simple as just changing path.

He was betting that Be’Zi had somehow managed to cut her connection to the Primo and the Empire, allowing her to take a path of her own.

“Alright, alright. No need to get so tense over a little joke. After all, aren’t we all friends?” Catheya said with a helpless sigh, like she was trying to entertain an unappreciative audience. “We are connected; that’s why I gave your... junior brother the token.”

“In fact, I think I understand things a bit better now,” Catheya added as she pointedly looked at the markings on Vilari’s face.

Zac inwardly breathed out in relief, feeling he had passed the first hurdle. However, he was still primed for an ambush, ready to conjure a deadly Annihilation Sphere at a moment's notice. The energy had been expended upon his first reincarnation, but he had already accumulated a decent stockpile of energy. He was confident that he would be able to blast these people to kingdom come if needed.

“Well, I guess I don't understand the humor of imperials.” Zac shrugged. “You came looking for my junior brother. Why?”

“Well, most of it was curiosity. I heard some interesting things before I left the Zecia Sector.” Catheya coughed, which caused the Titan to snicker. “I also came here to give him a proposition if his strength matched the requirements. But I feel you might be an even better fit.”

“A proposition?” Zac frowned, but he quickly understood what was going on. “The Twilight Ascent?”

“Just so. I am looking for a few skilled members to join me in exploring the Twilight Ocean,” Catheya said. “I think you'd fit the bill perfectly.”

Zac was a bit thrown off by how quickly Catheya went from threatening him to extending an olive branch, but he soon found his bearings again. Exploring the Twilight Ocean was already something he had set his sights on, but he hadn't planned on teaming up with others. Especially not people who might be a threat to him.

“Why would I want to do that?” Zac asked skeptically.

“Well, first of all, I can give you a spot through my clan, allowing you to skip that time-consuming tournament to win a spot. I think that would be preferable to you as well, since the big shots are actually scanning those participants for all kinds of things. I guess you want to stay incognito since you technically aren't on either our side or the side of the living, no?” Catheya smiled.

“Not being part of the Empire doesn't mean I'm not on the side of the unliving. And what interest do you have in the

Twilight Ascent? I don't believe that the disciple of a C-grade Monarch is so hard up for cash that she needs to go risk her life for some Twilight Fruits," Zac asked.

"Well, those fruits are something with constant demand and no steady supply, making them something useful to have. But I am more interested in something else. The real treasures can be found in the depths of the Twilight Ocean. There are all kinds of valuables there. Some of them are so rare, they'd even result in a bidding war between Hegemons," Catheya explained.

Zac's interest was immediately piqued. The rewards for the Fate-Plucking Ladder were pretty good, but Zac wasn't sure if spending years desperately trying to get a good position was worth the time investment. But someone like Catheya probably knew the real scoop that couldn't be found in Nala's crystal, the hidden benefits that made even wealthy scions such as her interested in taking the plunge.

"I am aiming for one particular natural treasure, Life-Death Pearls. They are treasures that can't be taken outside, but they can allow you to save years of meditation into Daos related to Life and Death, making them especially valuable to us undead," Catheya explained.

"So it's a Dao Treasure?" Zac asked.

"Well, not quite," Catheya said. "It's more like a Dao Impartment. You have greater control over the inspiration you'd gain."

Zac was barely able to keep his face impassive when he heard about their effect, and he was lucky his heart didn't beat in his current form. Life-Death Pearls; weren't they essentially specially tailored Dao Treasures for him? With his progress having come to a stand-still since Earth ran out of Origin Dao, these were exactly the kind of items he needed.

However, nothing ever came for free, and it was suspicious that Catheya was looking for helpers to farm these pearls. Why share if you could keep them for yourself? There was definitely something going on.

“Since we’re fated, I can let you in on a secret only known to the peak factions,” Catheya added with a mysterious smile, clearly well aware that she had him on the hook. “The Twilight Ascent’s internal quest for a Limited Title is random, but it is always related to one of four categories: Dao, slaughter, treasure, exploration. This time, it will be related to Dao, which makes the pearls doubly valuable.”

“Why would you need my assistance? You already have helpers,” Zac asked, forcibly restraining himself from jumping on board blindly. “What’s the catch?”

“Well, for one, there are dangerous beasts in the depths of the Twilight Ocean. Secondly, there are the other trial-takers to worry about, and you need some allies to make sure you don’t get overrun.” Catheya shrugged. “But more importantly, there are some unique restrictions in place in the Twilight Ocean, and I need some capable helpers to deal with it.”

“Oh?”

“Twilight Energy is not natural; it’s a fusion of life and death. Absorbing it is like drinking tainted water,” Catheya explained.

“Why not just block it out and live on Miasma Crystals?” Zac asked skeptically.

“It is pervasive, and for some reason, invasive to boot. Keeping it away for any stretch of time is nigh impossible; it keeps finding ways back as though it were alive. It also grows stronger the further you travel.” Catheya sighed. “Thankfully, my master has provided me with something to help weaken the effect. But that treasure is too difficult to activate alone, so I need to assemble a small group of elites. Each person will run the shielding array for a few hours before we switch.”

“Why not switch between the three of you?” Zac asked as he glanced at Catheya’s two companions.

“We need multiple different Daos to cycle through the array. Too few, and the environment will adapt,” Varo spoke up to explain.

“That’s pretty weird,” Zac muttered.

“The world is full of weird unexplainable things.” Catheya shrugged in response. “My master estimates that it would take us three months to reach the location of the pearls, provided nothing goes wrong. After that, you’d be free to look for opportunities of your own.”

“What’s in it for me?” Zac asked with a raised brow. “What’s the split? And why shouldn’t I just go alone now that I know about the pearls and the quest?”

The Titan glared at Zac like she wanted to rip him apart, but Catheya only smiled as she patted her follower’s arm.

“You’re free to walk away.” Catheya smiled. “But there are usually less than a hundred pearls per trial. Without any special methods of locating them, you could swim back and forth for decades without any results. Besides, even if you reached the depths, you would probably be pretty weakened by the environment. What if you met a group like mine, where we have a handful of members who are not weakened by the restrictions?”

Zac ignored the thinly veiled threat and instead tried to sort out the information. It was a shame that Catheya hadn’t arrived an hour later, after he’d been able to learn more about the trial. But provided she was telling the truth, going in a small elite group might be the best way to get his hands on the better items inside.

Of course, he could always go at it himself and pray that his high Luck would pull through for him again.

“Going with us, you have a good chance at getting your hands on a good number of fruits. Our side will take the first ten fruits, after which we will split the remainder equally,” Catheya continued when she saw Zac hesitate. “A handful of these fruits will give you a leg up on the rest of the trial no matter what your plans are.”

“You can go alone, but with your current strength, you wouldn’t make it past the middle reaches of the ocean,” the hulking revenant added with a raised brow. “The best treasures would be out of reach for you.”

“How do you figure?” Zac asked.

“I can tell that you are somewhere between Middle and High E-grade, with extremely deep accumulations. But you are also definitely young, even younger than me. I doubt you have any Dao Branches yet. What if you meet a level 150 elite from one of the three empires, one who’s wielding a Middle-stage Dao Branch? Can you deal with that alone?” Catheya asked.

Zac wanted to say yes, but he inwardly knew the truth. It was impossible, at least unless he managed to hit them with an Annihilation Sphere. An Early-stage Dao Branch was more powerful and provided more attributes than all three of his Daos combined. A Middle-stage would absolutely steamroll him even if he had an attribute superiority.

Not to mention that someone sitting on such Dao insights in the E-grade definitely had a slew of other advantages.

“That’s why people like us need to team up if we want to enter the inner reaches. There is safety in numbers,” Catheya said.

Zac was full of hesitation, but he eventually made a decision. He’d go along with Catheya for now. If things seemed suspicious, he’d make a run for it, no matter if it was in ten minutes or after they had entered the trial. But first, there were some benefits to eke out.

“Well, I can join your group, but you’ll have to provide me with three things in addition to the deal you proposed,” Zac slowly said.

“Don’t overextend yourself,” the Titan Revenant growled. “It’s not like you’re irreplaceable.”

“She’s welcome to say no, but something is telling me that I’m not as replaceable as she says. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be looking for some random stranger like me or my junior brother to assist her.” Zac grinned.

Catheya neither confirmed nor denied Zac’s guess, but he felt he was onto something. The Twilight Ascent was a System-sanctioned trial, which meant that the realm was most

likely slightly adjusted to create a better testing ground. From his quick scan of the crystal, Zac had already confirmed that the trial was grade restricted, but he guessed that elites had some sort of advantage.

Perhaps Attribute Efficiency helped reduce the restrictive properties Catheya had mentioned, allowing them to fight more efficiently in the depths? Or perhaps she was looking for outsiders since the elites in Twilight Harbor might hold hidden alliances of their own.

“Remember, you are still here as a guest of Eldritch Archivals, and you would need to prolong your stay through them,” Varo added, clearly to put some pressure on him. “Without mistress’ blessing, you would be forced to leave Twilight Harbor before the event even started.”

“That leads me to my first requirement. Seeing as you want to employ me, you will have to provide me with basic amenities along with taking care of the costs to prolong my stay,” Zac said.

“That is no problem,” Catheya agreed without hesitation.

“Secondly, I want to choose three of your E-grade skills from the VIP section of the Eldritch Archivals. Free of charge,” Zac said.

Zac had already learned of the true nature of the Eldritch Archivals after covertly probing Nala. It was actually one of the top five public Dao Repositories in Twilight Harbor, among the undead forces, that is. It was no doubt one of Clan Sharva’Zi’s main businesses in the harbor, considering it was their token Catheya had provided him with.

“Audacious! The VIP section only holds High-quality skills and greater! They’re almost priceless,” the Titan roared.

“They’re still ultimately just E-grade skills. They can’t be considered priceless,” Zac snorted.

“One. I can give you three skills in total, but only one can be from the inner sanctums. You can also pick two of the best skills of the normal high-end section,” Catheya slowly said. “Not even I have free rein of the skills in the sanctum. All of

them are single-use inheritance crystals to guarantee originality. I can't just hand them out left and right. I need to pay with family contribution points."

Zac was inwardly elated to hear he could actually get his hands on one of the top-tier skills of what was either a B-grade force or at least a Peak C-grade clan. He wasn't surprised to hear the skills were single-use inheritance crystals either. After all, who would want to pay an arm and a leg for a skill if the skill repository kept selling them as quickly as they could replicate them?

Inheritance crystals were something he had learned about from Calrin not long ago after he started preparing for his skill fusion. The most common skill crystals were the small ones that someone, or the System, had imprinted with a copy of the skill fractal. It usually worked one to three times, after which it broke apart.

More than a few cultivators created these crystals as a side income, though copied skills almost invariably lost some of their quality compared to when they were provided by the System itself or if they were self-created.

Second most common were the crystals Zac had in his Dao Repository. These much larger skill crystals could be used continuously, as long as the crystals were allowed to slowly recuperate and absorb energy after every use. Both these crystals had one thing in common though; with enough time and effort, you could create an endless number of these skill crystals.

It was different for inheritance crystals. To create an inheritance crystal, you needed to physically take your skill fractal and infuse it into a crystal while splitting off a part of your soul, the part containing all your insights and comprehensions of the skill. In other words, you would lose the skill forever, and you would even ruin the skill slot in your body.

These crystals provided various benefits compared to normal skill crystals. First of all, you were pretty much guaranteed originality. It was like you inherited the skill from

a predecessor, and no one else would be able to buy it. These crystals weren't transcribed as well, so there was no loss in quality like with the other two types of crystals.

Furthermore, the skill came with a lot of insights from the get-go. If your comprehension was good, you might even be able to push it to Middle proficiency in one go.

The downside was obviously the huge cost of creating them. They would essentially cripple a cultivator, and apparently, it wasn't possible to create them on your deathbed when your soul was weakened and your memories of the skill were blurry. It required you to do it yourself when you were at your peak.

There was one more method to acquire them, though, and this was the most common method of gathering them. There was an extremely small chance of an inheritance crystal forming inside the body of a corpse. So massive factions would continuously gain a few inheritance crystals as the previous generations departed, but the demand always far outstripped the supply.

For Zac to get his hands on such a rare commodity was an unexpected gain, but he understood he couldn't push it much further, judging by the look on Catheya's face. Still, there was one more thing that he desperately needed, something he wasn't confident that his Draugr heritage was enough to provide.

“Third, there should be some top-tier auctions taking place before the Twilight Ascent. I want access.”

“There is one next week.” Catheya smiled. “I was planning on going, so how about we make an outing of it. So do we have an agreement?”

“Happy to work together.”

PURSUIT OF ETERNITY

Exquisite chimes danced in the air and echoed with the hints of the grand Dao as Va Tapek walked into the vast hall that doubled as an observation deck. He was met with a refreshing gust of medicinal aroma after taking just one step inside. Va briefly scanned the hall, seeing there were four Perennial Braziers burning, each of them releasing smoke of a different color.

Va Tapek took a deep breath and felt his cells opening, greedily swallowing the dense medicinal and spiritual energy that suffused the air. Ylavian Bloodroot, Gelasan, dried bones of Abyssal Dominators. And those were just a few of the dozens of valuable materials that had been turned into incense for an empty hall.

Of course, materials like these wouldn't be enough to improve the cultivation of an advanced Monarch such as himself, but most E-grade warriors would explode after just taking a whiff of this mist. Even if they survived, they would probably become lunatics, their minds broken by the extremely dense Dao markings hidden in the scent.

"I'm jealous. I knew that becoming an Earl was a lucrative venture, but I didn't expect it to be at this level," Va snorted as he looked at the closest brazier. "Burning a mountain of Nexus Coins every second even when you're just here as a spectral projection. Don't you have some disciples or descendants to waste all these treasures on?"

"Well, I have to maintain appearances." A masculine laugh echoed through the hall. The next moment, a cultivator

congealed on top of a mat close to the enormous floor-to-ceiling window on the opposite side of the hall. “Besides, it is not like the Sharva’Zi Clan has been mistreating you all these years. Come, sit.”

Va Tapek only rolled his eyes as he teleported over to the other side of the room, his movement causing a series of abstruse runes to appear among the medicinal clouds. He looked over to his benefactor, or rather the projection of him. Whether his real body still existed, not even Va Tapek knew.

The projection looked a lot like how Va Tapek remembered his old friend, though. Chiseled features that spoke of indomitability and conviction. His robes hung loose and exposed a densely muscled torso covered in scars, and he sat in an unrestrained manner as usual. He still radiated that same haughty yet slightly lonely aura of a peak wandering cultivator who had emerged at the top after innumerable bloody encounters.

But there were some differences as well.

Most notably, his skin had taken on a slight greenish tint, like gold mixed with black. A second look proved that it was actually two sets of extremely minute runes that covered his skin, each of them smaller than a dot. One of the patterns held the secrets of Death, and the other seemed to be speaking to the heart of Life.

Va Tapek’s aquamarine eyes turned to the star that took up most of the vision of the enormous windows in front of them, the Twilight Ocean. They were slowly becoming one.

“If you wanted to discard your human ancestry, why not just come over to our side? I’m sure we’d be able to find a Blessed Land for you to awaken without giving up on your past,” Va Tapek said as he sat down.

“Bah, what’s so good about being undead?” the man snorted. “Besides, if I did that, how would I be able to complete my plan? Speaking of, how did things go?”

“It took me some time, but I found it. The Zecia Sector has changed a bit since you hid this thing,” Va Tapek said as he

took out a box from his Spatial Ring.

“Great!” the man said, his eyes lighting up. “I was afraid it would have managed to break out after all these years. You didn’t get spotted, did you?”

“Shouldn’t have,” Va Tapek said with a shake of his head. “I was required to check in with the local province, but I pretended to have an epiphany to not get entangled. I left a clone there in seclusion while my main body searched for the item. By the way, things are getting a bit heated over there.”

“I heard. Who would have thought that someone would conjure the Stele of Conflict in a frontier sector?” The man laughed. “It’s fine. Some bloodshed will cut the chaff and help purify the Heritages. Did you arrange someone to assist me in marking the ley-line?”

“Hm,” Va Tapek just said as he took out a bottle of liquor. “It is done.”

“Oh? How certain are you? Where did you find the helper?” the man asked with interest.

“It’s my disciple. She already has two passable followers, and she is currently in the process of hiring a few more,” Va Tapek said as an indulgent smile spread across his face.

“Your disciple? Isn’t she an imperial? Will she really complete the task?” the man asked with a frown as the huge anomaly outside shuddered.

“She doesn’t know the purpose of why I sent her. She thinks she is fulfilling a task for the undead factions. You just need to provide the path she has to follow,” Va Tapek explained. “I’d appreciate it if you gave her one of the less precipitous paths.”

“Of course. But even then, there will be dangers, and not just from the natives,” the man said with a pointed look. “You know my situation. I can’t intervene as I wish. Just creating these paths and divulging the treasures is pushing it.”

Know your situation? Va Tapek thought with some exasperation. How is that possible? I’ve never heard of anyone doing what you’ve done, what you’re about to do.

“It’s fine. Little Catheya has been a bit too carefree lately. She needs to take some risks if she wants to reach the next step,” Va Tapek said with a sigh. “Besides, you’re the one who’s truly in danger. Your plan is crazy, even for you. Both the local clans and the empires will try to stop you. Others will try to seize the opportunity for themselves.”

“That’s what makes things so exciting.” The man laughed before he gave Va Tapek an inscrutable look. “What about you? Having last-minute doubts?”

“Always,” Va Tapek snorted as he got back on his feet. “But it’s worth it. Where else will an outsider such as myself be able to witness someone defending their Dao while building the first step to Eternity?”

He looked at the celestial anomaly in the distance once more, and he couldn’t help but smile with excitement. These kinds of chaotic events were rare. Those who survived would definitely have gained something.

“Besides, the frontier is growing a bit boring. Perhaps the reemergence of the Eveningtide Asura will shake things up a bit.”

A boisterous laugh echoed through the hall as Va Tapek left.

“Can we trust him?” Qirai asked with a frown as they entered the private areas of the Eldritch Archivals. “There’s something off about him.”

“What do you think, Varo?” Catheya smiled as she turned to her assistant.

“He’s dangerous... very dangerous,” Varo said after some thought. “But as long as our interests align, it should be fine. If we want to kill him... All out and without hesitation.”

“That guy? Dangerous?” Qirai snorted. “He is a pureblood, but his aura wasn’t anything special. One smash and he’s done for.”

“Hopefully, it won’t come to that. The Twilight Ocean is big enough for everyone to drink their fill.” Catheya laughed, but she inwardly felt that Varo’s estimate was more incisive. There was something ancient, something dangerous about his smell.

The group soon entered her private courtyard, and Varo activated a series of protective measures. Her branch might be the ones in control of the interests in Twilight Harbor, but there were definitely spies in the mix. No one would have expected that a place in a frontier sector would be so lucrative, rivaling even some of the core businesses back home.

Greedy eyes were definitely eyeing their wealth, and Catheya couldn’t let anything happen. Her performance in the Tower of Eternity should elevate her status from a second-seed to first-seed talent within the clan, perhaps even as soon as she returned.

But she was still lacking the accomplishments to cement her status as a talent to nurture. She believed that her performance in the Twilight Ascent could be the ticket to gaining the top treatment among the Draugr youth.

And this mysterious Draugr might even be the key to becoming a Heaven’s Chosen, someone wholeheartedly nurtured by the empire. She couldn’t explain why, but she trusted her instincts.

“It’s odd,” Catheya muttered.

“He felt like Zac Piker, yet not,” Varo said, understanding his mistress’ thoughts all too well.

“Exactly,” Catheya agreed.

“Was it a human in a disguise?” Qirai asked curiously. “I couldn’t tell.”

“Possibly.” Catheya nodded thoughtfully. “I couldn’t sense anything off with his bloodline, and mimicking a Draugr is no easy feat. However, there were some points of suspicion. Also, his smell is off. Zac Piker was a pureblood human who carried the scent of Draugr, while Arcaz is a Draugr with a lingering stench of humanity.”

“You and your smells,” Qirai muttered. “Perhaps it was that Deviant Asura who was a Draugr disguised as a human? That little attendant of his was very pretty, in a damaged kind of way. Perhaps that’s why he asked for young females?”

“My nose is seldom wrong,” Catheya said. “And Zac Piker was definitely not undead. His skills, Dao, and energy teemed with life. He’d kill himself holding those kinds of energies inside his body. Well, we know where he lives now. I’ll ask Master to scan him to make sure.

“The important thing is whether he can help us complete Master’s task. Arcaz has definitely cultivated his soul, and he seems to have the multipliers of either a peak second-seed or even a first-seed cultivator. You’ve seen the list of requirements Master gave me. He’s the fourth candidate fulfilling them all after three months of searching, and the most promising one at that.”

“In regard to his demands...” Varo probed.

“Fulfill them,” Catheya said with a lazy wave. “It will cost a large chunk of my contribution points, but our gains will far surpass the cost as long as this mission is successful.”

“Even if he turns out to be a Dreamer?” Qirai asked hesitantly.

“It does not matter. He might be Zac Piker, a human with a connection to my ancestor. He might be Arcaz, a pureblood Draugr with an attendant marked by the same primal type of destruction that Zac Piker released in the Base Town.” Catheya smiled. “In either case, it’s a promising investment. If the matriarch ever returns, I think this connection might be enough to transform our fates.”

“I’ll arrange everything.” Varo nodded and started sending a few messages with a communication crystal.

“What do you want to do about the other candidates?” Qirai asked.

“Two more should do it if Arcaz is as useful as I feel he is, but it’s best to get three,” Catheya mused. “What about the letters I sent out?”

“Ravan has accepted. A few have expressed interest, but most haven’t put forth any clear commitments. They seem to be holding out for greater benefits. Troker has declined,” Varo said.

“What, why?” Catheya asked with a frown.

Troker had been her first choice for a group member until this Arcaz appeared. He was a powerful Mentalist, and they had worked together before when she visited this place last time. He had both powerful scouting capabilities and his spiritual Domain Skill could lessen the effect of the suppression of the Twilight Energy.

“Someone from the Eternal Clan has hired him as a guide,” Varo said. “They seem to have agreed to take him to the Heartlands afterward. We can’t compete with their offer with our current resources.”

“Ah, those bloodsuckers are here?” Catheya exclaimed with some shock. “I thought most of them were busy warring against the Buddhist Sangha all the way over by the Cosmic River?”

The Eternal Clan had few members, just a few percent of the Draugr population, but they wholeheartedly nurtured each and every member. The average strength among their youths was at the second tier, and the degree of supreme talents who appeared in their ranks was far greater than most Draugr clans.

There was not much to be done about it. Their ancestors required less than half the cultivation resources compared to the Draugr ancestors for some reason, which meant that they had massive reserves to spend on their young. The reason for this advantage was a secret those bloodsuckers guarded with their lives, much to the annoyance of the other Noble Races.

“Supposedly, one of the branches returned to the Heartlands to attend some family event and learned about the opening of the Twilight Ocean. A few youths decided to come here for a quick adventure before returning,” Varo said.

“Like hell they are,” Qirai snorted with anger. “Those crafty bastards would never do anything just for the fun of it.”

“There are more reports,” Varo added. “There are rumors of Heaven’s Chosen from the Radiant Temple having arrived. I have not found any clues about movement from the Havarok Empire, but if two of them are moving...”

Catheya nodded with a sigh. If the Eternal Clan was coming, then they were planning something. The Eternal Clan and the real peak factions among the Draugr had never cared about this remote sector, which was what had allowed a mid-tier family like the Sharva’Zi Clan to quietly reap the rewards. Now one big shot after another was coming for some frontier trial?

What had her master gotten them mixed up in?

The droplet drifted through the hidden pockets of space. It was completely unassuming, and not even the most intrepid scanning array would spot anything special about it. Yet it moved with mind-bending speed, surpassing most C-grade Cosmic Vessels as it made its way toward its destination.

Inside, a small world was hidden.

“We’ll arrive in one month, which gives us ample time to prepare,” the steward said as he refilled the goblet for the young girl gazing at the cosmos flitting by outside.

“What a desolate place. It feels like the Heavens have forgotten this wretched corner of space. Is there really someone who will reach Autarchy here?” Uona asked. “Is it even possible?”

“One shouldn’t completely discard these small frontier sectors. Their average power and heritage are quite wretched, but with enough numbers and time, some terrifying beings will be born here. For example, the Bloodmoon Autarch.”

“Lord Bloodmoon had the help of our family, though,” Uona countered.

“By the time he joined our family as an elder, he had already set his foundation and confirmed his Dao. He would

likely have reached the same height without us; it might just have taken a few hundred thousand years longer.” The old man smiled. “Besides, one family or another of the Eternal Clan was bound to pick him up, with his talents. We were just lucky to form a connection first.”

“Well, there will always be aberrations,” Uona muttered.

“It is precisely such an aberration that has appeared,” the old man said. “He is known as the Twilight Lord now, but he was once known as the Eveningtide Asura.”

“It’s that guy?” Uona exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. “I thought he was dead. I have read the reports. I can’t believe Lord Eveningtide survived all that. For one of the Dreamers, he’s pretty amazing. Killing a Havarok prince and even destroying one of their Ancient Realms? Crazy.”

“He must have been pushed to the brink, but that led him to a fortuitous encounter. He found that the Mystic Realm we are heading toward was actually two opposing Dao Realms that had fused together and survived. He has somehow managed to merge with the resulting anomaly, and has slowly gathered momentum to form the steps to eternity,” the man said.

“That’s possible?” Uona said with surprise.

“Everything’s possible, child.” The old man smiled.

“Do we really need to make a move against that guy and steal his opportunity, though? Seems a bit low class,” Uona said with some reluctance.

“You know how rare the opportunities to form those steps are.” The old man sighed. “Even the peak clans need to accumulate for eons to make an attempt. So any time an opportunity like this appears, we can’t be picky. Gaining a second Autarch of our own bloodline, even if he ends up a One-Step Autarch, will elevate our branch to a whole new level within the clan.”

“Well, all that is Grampa Nether’s problem. I just need to go inside that trial and kill some people, right?”

“Yes, but don’t get careless. Everyone in the know is trying to keep the information under wraps, but the truth always leaks out. These kinds of events always turn into a bloody affair. The natives from the frontier sectors shouldn’t be a threat, but the empires of the living will definitely get involved.”

“Twilight Ascent,” Uona muttered as streams of blood danced around her hand. “I am starting to look forward to it.”

The story continues in [BOOK EIGHT](#).

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DEFIANCE OF THE FALL,
BOOK SEVEN.

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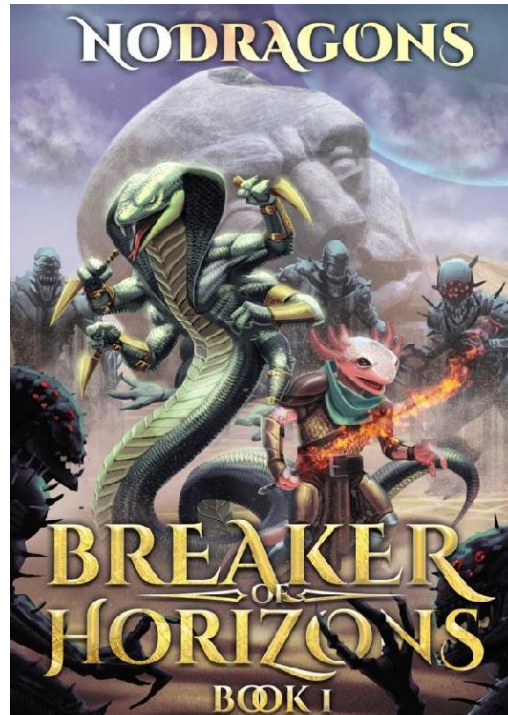
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Looking for more great books?



Nic has been Selected.

Chosen to leave his own body behind and become a monster.

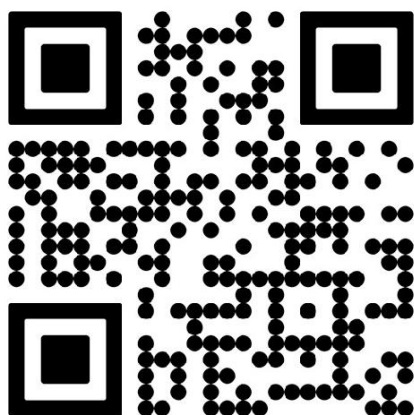
Chosen to live or die on his own wits. His own strengths.

He'll adventure out into a new realm as a footsoldier for the System's relentless integration of new worlds. Fighting to break the natives into submission.

But Nic has never loved the System, or cared for his home planet, a depleted husk of a world that the System forgot long ago. With blue skies overhead and green forest to the horizons, he might just fall in love with this strange planet named Earth...

That would leave him with few friends and a thousand enemies. That would leave him clawing, biting, scratching to survive.

GET BREAKER OF HORIZONS NOW!



The blood of dragons pumps through his veins. Greatness awaits!

Kobolds cower at the bottom of the foodchain, forced to eke out a meager existence in the most wretched of caves.

Most have made peace with their lot in life; one of eating scraps and carrion. They hide and run from predators, delaying the inevitable day when they aren't fast or sneaky enough to make their escape.

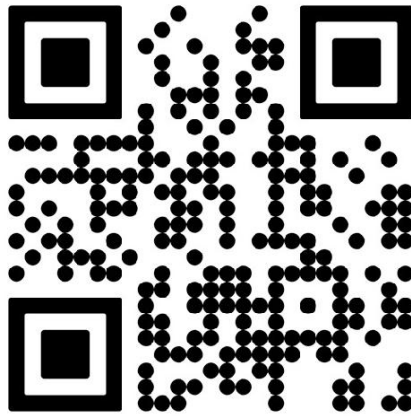
But not Samazzar. Sam is different from other Kobold pups.

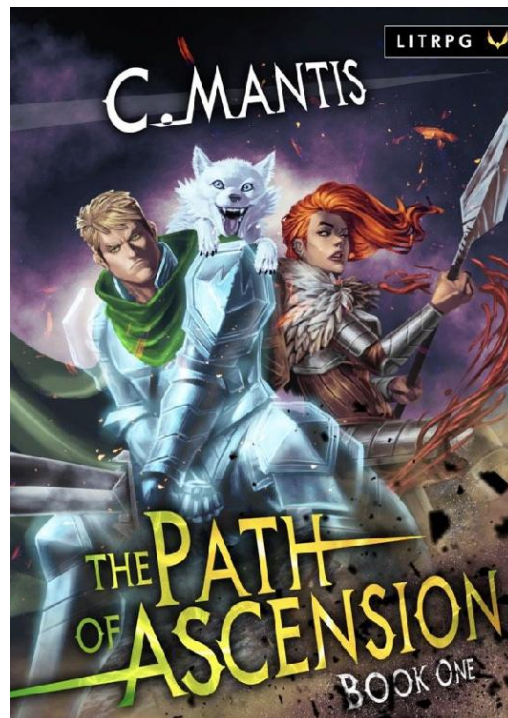
Traps and caves might keep him and his people alive, but sometimes, just living isn't enough. Dragon blood runs through him, and Sam isn't willing to settle for mere survival.

Whether by claw, magic, or cunning, one day he will soar above the plains, predator rather than prey.

And nothing—be it the mockery of his tribe, the hazards of the deep caves, or even the almost insurmountable difficulty of successfully evolving his bloodline—nothing is going to stop him.

GET A DREAM OF WINGS AND FLAME NOW!





Orphaned by Monsters, Matt must power up to save others from the same fate.

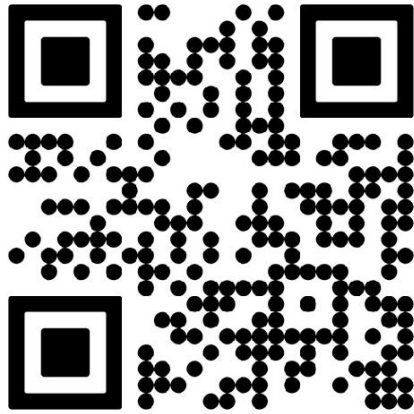
Matt plans to delve the rifts responsible for the monsters that destroyed his city and murdered his parents. But his dreams are crushed when his Tier 1 Talent is rated as detrimental and no guild or group will take him.

Working at a nearby inn, he meets a mysterious and powerful couple. They give him a chance to join the Path of Ascension, an empire-wide race to ascend the Tiers and become living legends.

With their recommendation and a stolen Skill, Matt begins his journey to the peak of power. Maybe then, he can get vengeance he seeks...

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